



Wrong Train, Right Wolf (Love Sync Mates Season Two)

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Category: LGBT+

Description: Fate has a knack for keeping you on track.

All I want is to get on my early-morning flight and take a nap before reaching my destination. It's the perfect plan until I oversleep. I miss my flight, and with no options to rebook, I race to the train station.

After I find my seat, my wolf is on high alert. He scents our mate and he's human. Suddenly the missed flight isn't so bad, only fate doesn't make it easy. The sexy omega isn't supposed to be on this train, and after playing musical seats, he wants to get off at the next stop. I can't let that happen.

So, I make him an offer.

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ONE

ADAN

“What is that noise? Turn it off.”

My assistant must’ve been busy. He always ran interference for me so there were no surprises at work. But that damned alarm on his computer was intruding on my sleep.

Hello? Hello?

As well as that beeping, there was an annoying voice in my head. I pulled the covers over myself and hunkered down.

Excuse me? Annoying?

Oh, shoot. I was conscious enough to recognize the voice as my wolf .

Sorry. I’m not really awake.

He harrumphed. You should be. The alarm is telling you to get up .

I sat upright, my body rigid, while my mind whirled. When I turned off the beeping, the phone told me it was Sunday. So why had I set the alarm?

Thoughts churned in my head, and I rubbed my brow. Thinking so early on a Sunday hurt. My gaze alighted on a wheeled, carry-on bag. It was open and packed with

layered clothes.

I prided myself on being organized.

You're not!

"Gods, I'm going to a conference."

Why did I think it was a good idea to take the earliest flight and not one at a more reasonable hour like after lunch? I could have had a leisurely breakfast and made it to the airport in plenty of time. It was only a one-hour flight. But I'd intended to get there early and settle in before scouting around for good restaurants and somewhere to shift.

Please, can we hunt?

Yes. That's the plan .

I bounded out of bed and into the shower, forgetting I was wearing PJ bottoms and they were now soaking wet. A quick soap-up and rinse and I was half into my pants with a shirt hanging over my shoulder. I'd done online check-in, had my digital boarding pass, and only had carry-on luggage, so that was a timesaver.

"Teeth!" I screeched. I couldn't sit beside a stranger, or anyone really, breathing sour breath over them.

Gross!

I bolted out the door after rinsing my mouth with mouthwash and holding my toothbrush with a squirt of toothpaste on the top. The rideshare driver told me not to make a mess, and I held up a paper cup. Brushing my teeth and spitting into the cup

was a little ewww but better than stinky breath. Maybe a lot ewww!

So gross!

Considering my wolf tore animals to pieces and devoured them, being icked out by toothpaste was weird.

I was thirty minutes behind schedule, but the traffic on Sunday shouldn't be a problem. Except we got behind a slow-moving truck in one lane and a van from an assisted living facility in the other. Almost tearing my hair out, I badgered the driver to switch from one lane to the other. No dice.

Eventually the older folks sped up a little and changed lanes, allowing us to zoom past.

“Can you go a little faster?” We were at the speed limit, but cars often sped past me when I was driving to or from work.

The driver caught my eye in the rearview mirror. “If you miss your plane, you can get another one. But I can’t work if I lose my license.”

Gods, what was wrong with me? I’d expected the guy to threaten his livelihood. I sat back, arms folded, checking the phone as the minutes ticked by.

When we arrived, I flung myself out the door, yelling I wouldn’t forget to add a tip. I raced toward the gate, thanking the universe I jogged regularly, though running with a bag was a little cumbersome. I was a shifter and had boundless energy, just not at the crack of dawn.

I freaked thinking they’d closed the gate, and they were about to. But I fell to my knees, still clutching the toothpaste cup, and begged the staff to let me in.

The gate agent peered into the cup and made a face before tapping around her mouth.
“You have a little something.”

Oh, right. Toothpaste.

Maybe she'd take pity on me, the guy with his lips smeared in foam, and let me in.

“I'm sorry, sir. The gate's closed. You'll have to take the next flight.”

“Please.” I couldn't miss this flight because I'd recalled that when I'd bought my ticket, the other flights were fully booked until late evening.

“I'm sorry.” She turned away, and I was left alone at an empty gate, still kneeling.

Staggering to my feet, I dragged the bag after me. A woman whispered to her companion and pointed to my cup. Damn, I tossed it in the trash, and when I got outside, I considered my options. A late flight arriving after midnight when I had to be up at six. The other choice was to take a train.

Trains are better . My wolf wasn't keen on being flung through the air inside a big tin box. I like keeping our feet on the ground .

I checked the train schedules. There was one in an hour, and I should be able to make it to the station. I booked my ticket while in the rideshare and checked the indicator board on arrival at the station. This was busier than the airport, with trains being changed to different platforms and trains to various destinations on the same platform.

I lugged my bag toward the turnstile, but you'd think as a shifter that my coordination would be better, but I got stuck just as I often did in revolving doors. Passengers behind me complained they'd miss their train. But my brain couldn't compute how

the turnstile or a revolving door worked, and I often stumbled or smacked my face on the glass doors.

I managed to get myself, the bag, and my briefcase through, and my train arrived. Everyone crowded in. I stayed back, not wanting to get caught in the crush. It didn't depart for another ten minutes, so there was no need to hurry.

But that was a mistake because being one of the remaining passengers, if not the last person to board, all eyes were on me as I struggled, trying not to bump people's knees that were jutting into the aisle, or bang their heads and hands, while checking the seat numbers.

The overhead racks were full, and I had to walk to the end of the carriage, searching for a space. People grumbled, and I had a disagreement with a bear shifter about not touching his bag that almost resulted in fisticuffs. I would have booked a premium-class seat but hadn't wanted to fork out the money.

I'd been lucky enough to bag a window seat, Row 21 Seat D. There were two unfilled seats, besides my own. A window in front of mine and one on the opposite side of the aisle.

I apologized to the human sitting beside my empty seat who huffed and refused to get up, instead, swerving his legs into the aisle and forcing me to clamber over him. I hated that 'cause my butt was in his face, though that was better than shoving my crotch at him. He must have been around my kind because there was a whiff of shifter on his clothes.

A human stumbled down the aisle with a small suitcase and holding up a large shopping bag. Every row he passed, he banged, bashed, or stood on someone's toes, and those people were in an uproar. He panted and mumbled, "Sorry, sorry."

The guy had a ticket in his mouth. Gross. That was worse than a cup of toothpaste. Who knew where that had been?

He found a space for his suitcase, and he made it to the row in front of me.

But he did the thing I loathed. He looked at the seat number above my head, checked his ticket and then again at the seat number.

Don't say it, do not say it, I silently begged as sweat trickled down my spine. I couldn't have made a mistake.

"I think you're in my seat. 21D"

He said it! No!

Mine must've been 20, not 21. Retrieving my phone from the seat pocket, I heaved myself up and apologized to the snarky guy who once again did not get up. He didn't bother moving his legs, so my ass was right in his face. Again.

But as I stood upright beside the human, his scent smacked me, and I grabbed a seat to prevent myself toppling over. A shifter almost falling was unheard of, but I was swaying and gripping the fabric.

"Sorry about that."

The guy nodded, his cheeks a glorious pink as beads of sweat dotted his brow. I couldn't think straight. My head was full of him, his scent, his hands clasping the shopping bag and the boarding pass with teeth indentations.

The aisle guy got up for him, while I had to struggle to reach my correct seat. I fell backward and accidentally grabbed my new seat mate's ass, earning me a glare.

The journey hadn't even started and everyone was annoyed with me.

But I didn't give a damn. The latecomer's scent which befuddled me had pushed my shifter sensibilities aside, making my lightning-quick reflexes sluggish and my head fuzzy.

He's our mate! My wolf was in no doubt.

He is! But what to do about it? If we were seated together, we could chat and maybe meet for a coffee or a meal, assuming he was staying at our destination and not heading elsewhere.

I tried peeking between the seats but headbutted my companion. He growled, not a shifter response, just an annoyed human reaction. If I pissed anyone else off, the passengers would be voting me off the train, and I'd be tossed out while it was moving.

My imagination was getting out of control, and I peered through the glass at the platform, willing the train to start.

"Excuse me. I think you're in my seat, 20D."

What?

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TWO

brAYLON

Closing my suitcase, I glanced around the room, making sure I had remembered everything. Damn, I slapped my brow and unzipped the bag. I'd forgotten the present.

I was giddy with excitement because I was surprising my aunt and uncle, the people who'd brought me up. They'd moved a couple of towns over from where I grew up and this was the first time visiting them in their new place.

But I wasn't turning up at the front door merely because I had a housewarming gift. Nope. I'd just gotten a new job, and I wanted to thank them because without their love, kindness, and generosity, I wouldn't have made it to college and been in the position I was in now.

Hmmm, I tried rearranging my clothes, but I couldn't fit the housewarming gift in the roller bag. I'd have to carry it. I'd created a time capsule with pics, cherished items, such as fridge magnets and science experiments gone wrong I'd made as a kid. Having bought a vintage cake tin to contain the items, I was very protective of it. My uncle loved to bake—he'd taught me—and I had happy memories of Sundays in winter, the kitchen warm and toasty and us making cakes, pies, and cookies.

Uncle Saul had a collection of old tins on a kitchen shelf. He said it reminded him of when he used to cook with his mom.

I placed the tin in a cloth shopping bag but worried someone would bash into it, I

wrapped it in a towel and replaced it in the bag.

Shit. Time had sprung away from me, and I had to get to the station. Having forgotten to order a ride share, I cursed when the app said it would be twenty minutes before a driver could reach my place.

Why were they so busy on a Sunday morning?

I was waiting on the sidewalk, checking the driver's location every minute, and when he pulled up, I yanked open the door and jumped in. He raised a brow but said nothing, and I reckoned he'd seen it all, not that I wanted to know what "all" was.

We arrived at the station in plenty of time, and I grabbed a coffee and sat drinking it while eating a croissant. Uncle Saul messaged saying they hadn't seen me in a while and when was I coming to stay.

We miss you , sweetheart .

Me too . I'd see them in a few hours, so I shrugged off the guilt. Maybe I can visit the week after next. I'll let you know later today . I didn't want them planning something special, thinking I was visiting in two weeks.

I was hit with the realization that Aunt Ellie and Uncle Saul might have gone away for the weekend. If I arrived and they weren't home, I'd be disappointed. Sure, I could get into the house, as they told me where the spare key was, but I'd be alone, in a place that held no memories.

What are you doing today? Working in the garden?

Aunt Ellie was the gardener, but she roped in my uncle to do the heavy lifting. My aunt had created a magical environment in their former home, and I'd spent hours

there as a kid fighting dragons and making forts.

Yes, it's a beautiful day, and this so-called garden needs a ton of work . Besides, we've got no car until tomorrow. It's in the shop.

Great, they were home, and I'd be there soon.

As I drained my coffee, I checked the departure board. No! That couldn't be right. It said my train was leaving in five minutes. How had thirty minutes passed? I squinted, and the only thing that had changed was the time. Now it was departing in four minutes!

Crap! Rolling the suitcase behind me and holding the bag with the present, I raced toward the platforms. Why were turnstiles so damned tricky? I got caught up, and it blocked me. Trying again, I got the no-go signal and yelled, "No!"

I had a choice. Try another turnstile or go to the customer service desk. But I'd miss my train if I waited to speak to someone. I might miss it no matter what. Leaping over it was an option that might get me arrested.

Trying again and this time it worked, though getting the bag, the present, and me through the turnstile was similar to being in a torture chamber. Not that I'd ever been in one.

I tore down the stairs, but as I flew over the last one, I skidded over the concrete. Was this the right platform? Yeah, it was thirteen. That was what I'd read on the departure board.

Racing into the carriage, I yelled, "I made it!" That had some of the passengers giggling. The luggage racks at the end of the carriage were full, and I fumbled for my ticket, sticking it in my mouth as I manhandled the suitcase. Of course there was little

room in the overhead racks, but my bag was small, so I made a space between two boxes and lifted mine up.

There were few seats remaining and mine was a window. I checked the number and there was a guy already sitting in my seat. He was gorgeous, and I would have gladly squished in beside him, maybe sat on his lap, but I suspected a conductor would turf me out, stop the train, and make me get off.

The guy was staring at me, a mixture of fear and something else in his gaze, something yummy. Why couldn't he have been sitting next to me instead of his seatmate, whose eyes were feasting on me? Ewww!

"I think you're in my seat. 21D"

He got up, and the man on the aisle didn't move, proving he was an asshat. Muttering an apology, the sexy one moved to the row in front. He had a nice butt, and I studied it until he plonked himself down, annoying his new neighbor. Wishing I could strike up a conversation, I waited as my seat mate got up and ushered me in with a flourish.

I'd have to pretend to sleep during the three-hour journey 'cause I suspected he was a talker. I wasn't, but I could have chatted non-stop to the sexy guy.

The train started to move. It had been a long five minutes, and according to my watch, we were ten minutes late leaving.

A latecomer struggled along the aisle as the train swayed, and he paused at the row in front of me.

"Excuse me, but I think you're in my seat, 20D."

What the ever-loving...? The smexy guy had done it twice. Gotten in the wrong seat.

I felt sorry for him as I peered through the gap in the seats at his flushed eartips.

“I’m so sorry.” He got up, holding his phone, and instead of going to another carriage to wherever his correct seat was, he leaned toward me, showing me his ticket on the phone.

“Sorry, but this is my seat.”

That couldn’t be. The computer booking system must have F-ed up. I waved my ticket at him. “There’s a mistake, but it’s not mine. This is me.” I pointed to the seat number on the ticket and to the corresponding number above me.

“Maybe you can sit there.” I pointed to the empty seat on the opposite side of the aisle. It was possible someone might be sitting there, but the first stop was an hour away, so some passengers would get off and we could all play musical seats.

“Can you show me your ticket?” He extended his hand as the train lurched and trundled over the tracks, heading through the grimy city center toward the sprawling suburbs.

“If that’s okay?” he reminded me, bringing me back to the present.

Gods, how could I have forgotten the guy with the ass that was begging to be stroked, squeezed, and maybe licked?

“Oh yes, sorry.” The conductor would be along soon and he’d clear up the confusion, but I handed the hot guy my ticket and my fingers brushed over his. My skin sizzled. I gazed around the carriage thinking people must have heard it or smelled my singed flesh. But most passengers were bored with our wrong-seat fiasco and were dozing, reading, or chatting. No one was pulling the emergency brake and yelling “Fire.”

“Ummm, there’s a slight problem.”

Yeah, there was. “We were both assigned the same seat, 21D”

“You’re going to Rosedale.”

My belly jolted, thinking some disaster had happened in the small town. I took out my phone but my trembling fingers couldn’t find my aunt and uncle’s phone number. Hurricane? Tornado? Flood? Aliens? Zombies? My mind boggled at the possibilities.

“Yes. Has something happened?”

“I’ve been to Rosedale.”

I didn’t see the problem, and why was he giving me his history? Did he think the town was his, and I wasn’t allowed there? The guy might’ve been hot but his vibe was annoying.

“We’re not stopping there.”

Rosedale was a small town. Why would he pay attention to the places the train wasn’t stopping?

While I’d never been to my aunt and uncle’s new house, the town where they were now living was on the same line as their previous one. On looking out the window, this train appeared to be taking the same route, because when I was at college, I traveled this way home every Friday.

“What? No?” He was talking silly talk, trying to confuse me, pretending I’d made a huge F-up. “I got on at platform thirteen.”

“Me too.” He tapped his phone while scrolling through a site. “This is an express train from Fairview to Springfield. The Rosedale train departed from platform thirty.”

Panic had taken over my body, and I was shaking. “I have to get off.” Picking up the housewarming present, I pushed past the asshat, but gorgeous guy took hold of me.

“What are you doing? Please tell me you’re not planning on jumping off. That won’t end well.”

“If I have to, yes!”

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THREE

ADAN

My mate, my very human mate who had no idea shifters existed or that he was my one and only, was close to losing it. He lunged for the emergency brake, but thanks to my shifter reflexes, I leaped in front of him.

He slammed onto my chest, but my feet were firmly planted on the floor and I didn't topple over. As I inhaled his unique scent, my cock engorged, and I considered dragging him to the bathroom and getting naked.

But that was how it was in the old times; alphas disregarding omegas' desires and taking what they wanted, when they wanted it.

That wasn't me.

My wolf begged me to mark the human, but if we were to mate, I had to treat him as my equal. It might never happen, but if he rejected me, I'd buy a place near him and love him from afar, or a short distance, like across the street.

Is that creepy?

My beast didn't think so, but he wasn't the best judge of human society, emotions, and expectations.

My mate lay against me, his breathing rapid and shallow, and he mumbled about

getting off the train. My grumpy seat mate insisted my omega should pay for another ticket or he'd alert the conductor.

"You might be thrown in jail." He crossed his arms, a smug, self-satisfied smile creasing his face.

Wow! What had happened to that guy to make him so mean?

The other passengers swore at him, and he cursed, but I ignored him and his sorry ass.

"Good," my mate responded to the asshat. "If that happened, the train will stop and I'll get off. Better to be in handcuffs than heading to the wrong destination."

The conductor happened along, and I explained the mishap while my mate was almost frothing at the mouth. Thankfully, the conductor was a shifter, a bear, and I mouthed, "He's my mate."

"I'll escort you off at the first stop, but you'll have to sort out the ticket fiasco yourself." He checked my mate's ticket. "Oh. It's fine. You won't be so far out of your way because this train terminates in Springfield."

"Okay, thank you."

The conductor pointed out the spare seat on the aisle, 20B, a row in front of my correct seat, opposite to where I just moved from. My mate sat there, and I persuaded the guy in 20C whose ass I'd accidentally grabbed, to move to my correct seat, 21D. The asshat complained about people being seated in their correct place. He didn't get up for the man moving into my seat, I noted.

I urged my mate to sit, and he did while continuing to clutch the shopping bag. There

must've been something precious in it because he white-knuckled the handles.

“Are you on vacation?” My mind was racing, figuring out how to stay in touch with him after he got off the train. I had three hours to come up with a plan, unless he got off at our first stop, so forty-five minutes. I had to think fast.

“Sort of.” He was between jobs and wasn't due to start his new position for another two weeks. “I'm visiting my aunt and uncle who raised me.” The shopping bag was now on his lap, and he checked his watch and phone constantly.

Taking out my phone, I studied the schedules. On arriving in Springfield, there were commuter trains that traveled the hour to Rosedale, so he could hop on one of those. But that would take him away from me, as my conference was in Springfield.

“It was a surprise.”

“I'll bet. Not many people get on the wrong train.”

He glared at me. Oops. Perhaps pointing out his mistake when he was kinda fragile wasn't the smartest move.

“You're unique. Maybe you should write a book or an article about your experience.” I was digging myself in deeper with every word.

He shrugged and kept his gaze straight ahead, until he side-eyed me, once, twice, and maybe three times.

That's a good sign he likes us . My wolf was convinced we'd be mated by day's end.

Not so fast . Our mate wasn't impressed with me trying to make light of the situation.

“I can drive you to Rosedale because I’ve rented a car.”

His head swiveled toward me. “Huh?” He leaned away, and my wolf got annoyed with me, saying I’d messed up and he hated us.

I held out my hand. “Adan. I know how this sounds.”

“I doubt that.” He hugged the shopping bag and craned his neck over the seats, probably searching for a spare one so he could escape me.

“I’m headed to a conference for five days.”

“Good for you.” He swung his body in the opposite direction, signaling he wanted nothing to do with me. and I imagined he was thinking, “How many minutes before I can get away from this guy?”

“My conference doesn’t start until tomorrow, and Rosedale is only an hour from Springfield.”

He didn’t look at me.

I had to change my approach or there’d be police waiting on the platform to arrest me for harassment. I’d be placed in handcuffs and they’d lead me off to jail.

“Why would you do that?” he huffed.

“Because I’ve been in situations where my life was F-ed up and someone stepped in and helped me. A stranger.”

He twisted his fingers in the shopping-bag handles. “I don’t know you, and we’d be together, in a car, and you’d know where my family lives.”

Creepy guy chose that moment to care about someone other than himself. He gripped my seat, leaning into the aisle. “Don’t do it. He’s probably a serial killer.”

My mate reared away from the guy, and I put out my arm, forcing the man back, “Can’t believe I’m saying this, but I accept your offer.”

“Fool. You’ll be a statistic I read about on the internet.” Snarky guy sat back and fiddled with his phone.

“Braylon.”

“Adan.”

“Yeah, you told me already.” He grinned so things were looking up. Maybe if the asshole had shut up, Braylon wouldn’t have accepted my offer.

He insisted on ground rules: he’d take a pic of my driver’s license, my face, and the car’s license plate, as well as my phone number and send those details to his family. He’d enable his phone’s location during the drive.

I was fine with that; if I hadn’t had a wolf inside me who could protect me against any scumbags who happened along, I’d have done something similar.

“It’ll ruin the surprise, but they’ll be happy to see me whether I turn up at the door or let them know I’m coming.”

Now that we’d hammered out the details, I’d have to tap dance my way into his heart.

Won’t that be painful? My wolf refused to let our mate be hurt.

It’s just an expression .

There was the possibility that Braylon may disappear into the crowd at the station and he'd been pretending to go along with my plan.

That was a chance I had to take, but I knew his name and that he had family in Rosedale, so I could track him down. I ran over those thoughts again. Definitely stalkerish, and a human would easily say I gave off serial-killer vibes.

Over the next few hours, I'd have to give the best performance since amateur theater in high school. I could do this.

Except... except... this wasn't an act. My love for Braylon was real. He didn't know it, and while he was more friendly than before, he wasn't ready to leap into my arms.

"Last chance to change your mind." Creepy guy leaned around Braylon's seat before getting his belongings from the overhead rack.

"I'm fine. Thanks."

"You don't know who he really is." The guy grabbed his bag and hovered over Braylon, but I got up and forced him back. Who was he? Not a shifter, and yet he sensed who I was.

"Once I show him, all will be well." I lowered my voice, hoping Braylon hadn't heard me.

The guy shrugged and got off the train. He stood on the platform staring at Braylon and me. But no one got to be an ass to my mate.

My friend Rhett had shifted and scared a human in order to get his mate out of an arranged marriage. He got permission from Excellency, the head of the shifter council. But I didn't have time to ask for approval.

I hovered in the doorway. It was a small station with few people on the platform, most of whom were headed to their car. No way could I do a full shift in public, but I allowed fur to ripple over my hands and my nails extended. The claws and fur, plus my wolf growling and allowing him into my gaze was enough to scare the asshat. He didn't shriek, but blood drained from his face and his knees buckled before he took off.

Okay, stand down , I told my wolf and took my skin.

"What got into him?" Braylon stared at the guy's scrawny ass wobbling out of the station.

"No idea," I fibbed, glad we'd sorted out one problem.

We bought food and chatted the rest of the way, and he told me how his aunt and uncle had taken him in after his folks died.

"It takes a special kind of person to be a parent and even more so to step in after a tragedy and raise a child. They must be pretty amazing people."

"They are." We shared a glance and something passed between us. Not love. On my part, yes, but not his. Not even lust. You better believe I was lusting, and I was trying to tamp down my arousal.

But we were past the creepy stalker stage.

Braylon tapped a message on his phone. I knew so little about him other than how his aunt and uncle were his family. What if he had a boyfriend? Or worse, a husband? He wasn't wearing a ring, but that wasn't definitive proof.

He held up his phone, showing a message to his aunt and uncle.

Expect a surprise when you least expect it. Me!

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FOUR

brAYLON

“How many wrongs make a right?”

Adan shrugged. “You misread thirteen and thirty in your haste. Not a big deal.”

I pointed out that he was supposed to get on a plane and I mistook two digits. That was a lot of wrongs that led to us meeting. And was it right? Were we destined to be friends or would we say goodbye after he delivered me to Uncle Saul and Aunt Ellie?

Adan had leaped to my defense when that guy snarked at us which could be interpreted either as kind, protective, or creepy. I had a good feeling about him, though I hadn’t initially.

Hmmm, how many hitchhikers had said that before they ended up dead and buried in a shallow grave? I couldn’t let my mind go there.

But there was something that was skewing my opinion of Adan. An animal magnetism was the best way to describe it, and it was drawing me in, making it difficult to breathe. I wanted to toss off my clothes and trail my fingers over his bare skin.

Taking a deep breath, I pondered my options.

If I didn’t trust Adan, I would have called Uncle Saul to come get me, except he

didn't have a car. So I'd put all the guardrails in place, and I'd have the location on my phone turned on. No way would my body lay undiscovered. I almost burst out laughing thinking the best option was that someone would find my remains.

"Perhaps it was meant to be." His words interrupted my bleak thoughts, but I couldn't match them to what we'd been talking about. What had we been discussing before I went on my thought tangent?

"Sorry? What?"

"Maybe the universe put us on a collision course for a reason."

I didn't like the word collision unless the universe had an F-ed sense of humor.

"The purpose may have been to tell the snarky guy to take a leap."

Something fluttered over Adan's face, just for a second before it was gone. Disappointment? Annoyance? I couldn't decide, but he'd definitely reacted when I mentioned the guy.

"Shame we didn't find out his name. Snarky guy sounds too nice."

"Nah, I'm glad we didn't. Labeling him with a name would humanize him."

He was right. He'd be snarky guy forever more. Not that I wanted to think about him again.

Aunt Ellie texted me, her smiling face in a corner of the screen.

Uncle Saul can borrow a car and collect you. I don't like the idea of someone you just met driving you home .

Home. Yeah, I'd never visited the new house but wherever they were was my home.

It's fine . I sent them Adan's photo, a pic of his license, and said I'd take a photo of the car once we picked it up. I already had the license plate, as Adan had the booking confirmation.

He must be something special. Love you xxx

What? No, she had it upside down. There was nothing special about Adan. Nope, I'd thought that wrong. Everyone was special in their own way. And Adan was a standout human because he stood up for me and offered to go out of his way to get me to my destination. Not many strangers would do that.

But Aunt Ellie had been hoping I'd find "the one" for a while. She and Uncle Saul had a long and happy marriage, and she wanted the same for me. Besides, she worried that when they were gone, I'd have no one. I'd poo-pooed that, saying they were going to be on this earth for decades to come.

We were five minutes away from Springfield. I didn't want to race out at the last minute, hoping I didn't get left on the train as it got shunted off to wherever empty trains ended up. I stood and almost fell as the carriage swung around a sharp curve.

"Keep an eye on this, please." I put the house-warming gift on my seat and struggled along the aisle, banging the seats left and right. The ride had been pretty smooth so far, but as soon as I got up, it was bumpy-bump-bump-bump.

A little voice in my ear said maybe bumpy-bump was what I wanted to do with Adan.

No. Shit, I almost blurted that out loud. I most certainly did not want Adan to pull over on the drive and get naked with me. Hmmm, but I wouldn't mind a peek at his cock 'cause I was convinced it was thick, hard, and oh so pink.

My cheeks burned and thank gods I had my back to him. But now I had to return to the seat and grab the present. I hadn't thought this through.

The train slowed, the brakes squealing, and I almost felt sorry for them. Ouch! That sounded painful.

Adan took his suitcase and briefcase, whisking the case off the luggage rack as if it weighed nothing. He picked up my gift and sashayed along the aisle toward me.

Words deserted me, my thoughts were discombobulated, and I stood, opened-mouthed, gripping the top of a seat as the carriage rocked. Adan looked good enough to eat. Yum!

Slick streamed from my hole, and I thanked the universe for guiding me to wear my black jeans this morning. If I'd chosen a lighter color, there'd be a huge tell-tale stain on my ass. It'd be like having a sign on my butt that read, "You turn me on!" Or worse, "I'm horny."

The train eased to a halt and the doors opened. We got out and strode toward the station entrance. Adan was supposed to collect the car at the airport, but after messaging them, they brought the vehicle to the station.

It was early afternoon and we had an hour's drive ahead of us. I wondered if I should invite him to stay for a meal at the house or whether he'd want to get back on the road.

We piled into the car and he punched our destination into the gps. Once out of the city, we chatted about everything and nothing. But I was intrigued about what he told the salty guy. I preferred salty to snarky because I was tired of the word snarky.

"What did you mean when you said to you-know-who that I'd understand once you

showed me something?”

“Oh, that.” He kept his eyes straight ahead even though we were the only ones on the road and he wasn’t going very fast. He was avoiding me and my question.

“Stop!” I yelled.

The car screeched to a halt, and Adan glanced at me as he white-knuckled the steering wheel.

“Are you car sick?”

“No!” I jumped out, phone in hand, and snapped a pic of the car. “I forgot to send this to Aunt Ellie.” Not that it mattered, as she had the license plate.

“Oh.” The tension in his fingers vanished, and he removed his hands from the wheel. “Good thinking.”

It occurred to me he maybe thought I was going to take off, but we were on a deserted road, so where would I go? Hightail it into the forest? I wasn’t a woodsy person.

“Tell me. Please.”

Now he drummed his fingers on the wheel. “It’s a little difficult to explain. It’s best if I show you once I know you better.”

He was going to show me his cock. I was partly pissed that he assumed I wanted to see it and have sex, partly annoyed that he’d brought it up in front of the train passengers, and partly excited that he was interested in me.

“But I might need permission first.”

What? Did he need to ask his mommy or daddy whether he could be intimate with an omega? What had I stumbled into? Perhaps it was just as well we’d be in Rosedale soon. It might be for the best if we never met again.

“That’s a little weird.” I folded my arms, trying to keep my distance.

“I’m not like you, Braylon.”

“You think?” I was a grown-up and didn’t need permission to have sex. So much for my vision of getting naked with this guy.

“It’s not what you think.”

He was making it worse. Why did people always say that? He wasn’t a mind reader. And he had no clue what I was thinking except that it didn’t put him in a good light.

I couldn’t look at him, wanting to blame him for... for what? For thinking there might be a something something between us? That wasn’t his fault. It was all me.

There was a part of me like Aunt Ellie who wanted to be one half of a couple. We didn’t have to get married, I didn’t care about a piece of paper. But a partner to grow old with, to have kids with. And whenever I met an alpha I liked, I thought ahead to how our life would be.

I might need therapy, but I’d think about that once I’d started the new job and could afford it.

“Look, I like you.”

And those four words tossed the idea of therapy out the window. I hadn't been imagining things. Once again, I pulled myself back. He said he liked me, not that he wanted to give me babies.

"You're a little odd, but I like you too."

"Good. Glad we've got that sorted."

Now what? We lived in the same town, so once we both returned, we could have dinner.

"Do you like to eat?" Wait, that came out wrong. I was thinking food. Damn!

He sniggered. "I've been known to eat on occasion."

"Are you thinking of eating something other than a meal? Because that's not what I was referring to."

He looked at me, the glare from the sun making him squint, an oh so innocent expression on his face. "What other sort of eating is there?"

My cheeks burned, and I squirmed. Thank gods he couldn't smell my slick because I was so turned on.

But he sniffed and smirked. No, his sense of smell couldn't be that good.

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FIVE

ADAN

I didn't want to get cocky but the scent of Braylon's slick was unmistakable. He was turned on by me. Or I hoped it wasn't some guy he was meeting at his family's house. That would be a bummer.

"We're almost there." I had been to Rosedale, but the GPS informed me we were close. I didn't know why I said that because Braylon could hear the GPS's tinny voice chirping instructions.

He leaned forward and clapped, so eager to see his family, or just get out of the car and not respond to my question about eating. I had put him in a spot, and if I'd been in his position, I would have reacted the same way. If I'd been a human. But when two shifter mates discussed eating, while slick was streaming from the omega's hole, we'd have been naked and in the back seat fucking.

I pulled up outside a bungalow with a huge garden, and a man and woman rushed down the path, the woman's arms outstretched. Braylon fell into her embrace, and the three hugged. I longed to have what they did, and now that I'd met Braylon, I wanted to have it with him.

I got out of the car and removed his suitcase. They were talking over one another, laughing and kissing. Braylon had forgotten I was there. Perhaps I should get back in the car and leave.

It was awkward. Should I pretend I was just the driver and take off? Or would that be rude?

You can't leave . My wolf was fed up with the hours our mate and I had sat beside one another and yet we were no closer to mating.

But as I hovered, one hand on the door, three pairs of eyes alighted on me.

"I'm so sorry. You must think us very rude." Braylon's aunt released herself from her family's tangled arms and strode toward the car. "Come in. Have something to eat."

"I..." That was kind of her, but if her nephew didn't want me to stay, I'd refuse. I hesitated and looked to Braylon for an answer. He rewarded me with a small grin.

"You do eat, right?"

Oh, Aunt Ellie, that was the wrong thing to say.

"I've been known to eat on occasion." I avoided Braylon's gaze because he'd either be glowering at me or trying to control his laughter.

Instead, he giggle-snorted, and his uncle stared at him while the corners of Aunt Ellie's mouth turned up. Oh she was in on the joke, and I gulped and studied my feet. Parents or people who acted as parents weren't allowed to be in the dick-and-ass conversations.

"Thanks. That's kind of you. Train food isn't very satisfying."

"Good thing Saul cooked up a storm." She tucked her arm in mine, and we strolled into the house.

Like any good guest, I admired the house and the garden. Both were a work-in-progress. We ate on the back deck, and Ellie and Saul peppered me with questions about my job, family, and how Braylon and I met. It didn't escape me that Ellie and Braylon kept exchanging glances, while Saul chatted about food and the raised vegetable beds he'd started for his wife.

My phone buzzed as we were eating a lemon cake Saul had baked. It was an unknown number, and I ignored it. But they called again, and I excused myself and sauntered onto the grass.

"Hello."

A deep authoritative voice boomed, "I hear you met a human."

"What?" I squawked. The three people on the deck stared at me, and Saul's fork clattered onto his plate. I waved, put a fake smile on my face, and gave a thumbs-up as if to say it was A-okay.

"You heard what I said."

I lowered my voice so the humans wouldn't pick up on the one word that might shatter their world. "Excellency." How did he know?

Our pack didn't live as a pack, but we had an Alpha, Horatio, and we were supposed to inform him when we mated. But Excellency was the head of the shifter council, and growing up, there were rumors he had spies everywhere. I'd never believed it. He didn't need to go looking for problems 'cause people brought them to him. Plenty of them, both people and problems.

"I did," I said cautiously. In my mind, I flipped through the rules for shifters mating humans, but shifters believed a true mate was a mate no matter if the other person

was a shifter dragon, a tiny worm, or a human.

“I believe you said you were going to reveal your beast.”

Shit, either Braylon was working for Excellency or someone on the train had blabbed. I thought back to the other passengers. There had been shifters but none of them paid particular attention to me. But that was the measure of a good spy. They didn't stand out but spied on their mark without letting on that they were doing it.

It had to have been the asshat. A human spy. Interesting.

“Yes. I can't live a lie.” I had my back to my hosts and Braylon in case one of them was a lip reader. If Excellency told me I could never show my wolf to my mate, I'd have to break with the pack and move to another country with my one true love.

“I'm not asking you to, but you know the rules. You can't reveal your beast until you're mated.”

Huh? Was that new, because I was certain I'd never seen or heard a reference to it.

“But Excellency, how can I ask my mate to trust me if I don't show him the real me?”

“I'm sure you'll find a way. We've had a few incidents where shifters exposed their beast to a human who was not their mate. So I've clamped down on the big reveal.” He ended the call, and I stared at the phone, expecting it to clarify my confusion.

“Everything all right?” Saul leaned over the railing. “You seem a little tense.”

That was an understatement. Up until now I'd been wondering how soon was too soon to sleep with Braylon and did I do that before or after the big shifter reveal.

But now my mind was a muddle. And I'd promised my mate I had something to show him. I'd have to come up with some weak substitute to cover up. Fuck!

"Fine. It's just some crap from work. No biggie." Instead, it was a huge-ie, but I had to downplay it or I'd be the one who'd ruined the afternoon.

"You didn't finish your dessert." Saul pushed the plate toward me.

"Could I have it to go?"

The family shared glances, and Ellie got up and placed the cake and a second slice in a paper bag.

"I'm so sorry, but I have to fix this problem."

"We were thinking of coming into town during the week." She kept her gaze on me but elbowed Braylon. If I hadn't been upset, I could have giggled and given her a hug. She was so invested in her nephew's love life. "Would you be free for dinner?"

Aunt Ellie deserved a squeeze because with me twisting and turning and inviting myself out here on the pretext of doing Braylon a favor, she'd inserted herself into our budding relationship without me having to tap dance.

You're a terrible dancer, my wolf deadpanned.

"I'd love that, but can I get back to you? I'm not sure if there are meet-and-greets in the evenings."

"Sure. We'll wait for your call."

Ellie was doing all the talking, and as much as I wanted and desired Braylon, him

allowing his aunt to steamroll him into a relationship wouldn't end well.

“Walk me to the car?” I asked my mate.

When we were alone, he apologized for Ellie. “You can make an excuse if you'd—”

I put a finger to his lips. “I love your aunt and uncle, and she did what she did because she loves you.” But I had to make certain this was what he wanted.

“I tend to fade into the background when Aunt Ellie is on a mission.” He related that she'd storm up to school if some kid bullied him, and she wouldn't accept anything less than the principal dealing with the problem, along with an apology.

“But I'm a grown-up now, and I must fight my own battles.” He nibbled a nail. “Not that this...” He waved his hand in the space between us. Too much space. “...is a battle.”

After meeting this morning, we were in a good place. Not in one another's arms place, or naked place or sex place, but we'd hurdled the I like you stage, and I'd met his family. Pretty good for less than twelve hours.

“I gotta go.” With the driver's door open, I paused. “Can we maybe chat tomorrow?”

He nodded, and he lunged toward me and we hugged. I breathed in his scent, memorizing it until we met.

“We have to meet up this week so you can show me the thing.”

Gods, please let him not be talking about my cock. It was so much more than a thing.

“The thing you promised me.”

“Right.” I’d have to figure out how to do it without him meeting my wolf.

He waved until I turned a corner and he was gone. My heart sank into my belly.

Really? I don’t see it anywhere different . My wolf was concerned.

But I had more to worry about. Not only did I hope Braylon fell in love with me, but we had to achieve that without discovering who I really was inside.

No shifter should be faced with that.

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SIX

brAYLON

My chest ached after Adan left.

And that was silly.

We met hours ago, he'd been gone five minutes, and I missed him. I scuffed the dirt and stood outside the house, not wanting to go in. My aunt would pummel me with questions, while Uncle Saul would say little but his mind'd be working overtime. And in a few hours or days, he'd ask if Adan was the one. Or something similar.

Glancing up, I caught the curtains twitching. Aunt Ellie wasn't a gossip, but she was overly interested in my love life. Shit, I'd come here to surprise them and that was a fail. Now I was on the sidewalk and distancing myself from them instead of sharing my news.

And gods damn it, I'd forgotten to give them the present.

I froze, thinking about when I'd gotten out of the car. Adan had my suitcase and the present was... still in the car. Without considering what I was doing, I raced along the street and around the corner, yelling, "Come back. You have the housewarming gift."

It was too late. His car was long gone or five minutes gone.

I did have his number and so did Aunt Ellie, but when I patted my back pocket, the

phone wasn't there. Dashing into the house without removing my boots, I rushed past my aunt and uncle and grabbed the phone.

"What's wrong? Are you missing Adan already?" Aunt Ellie was wringing her hands, but there was a trace of a smile on her lips.

"Yes. No." That was oversharing. "He has something of mine."

My uncle and aunt put their arms around one another. "Ahhh. He has your heart." Aunt Ellie put a hand to her chest.

I ignored that comment. Too soon! Adan was driving, so I should message him, but he might not hear it, and if he didn't check the texts until he was at the hotel, a message was pointless.

"It's a gift."

Uncle Saul nodded. "True love is the greatest gift of all."

We three were on two different tangents. "No, I made a present for you, but I left it in the car."

"Oh. Is it like the pics you made when you were little?" There were tears in my aunt's eyes. I guess my collages with straws and bits of wrapping paper touched her heart. She used to keep them on the fridge, but that was a long time ago.

I laughed. "No. Much better."

I hesitated about calling or messaging Adan. "I need him to drive back."

But Aunt Ellie snatched the phone from my hand. "We're going into town to meet

Adan one night. He can return the gift then.”

“The anticipation will build during the week, and we’ll be excited when we get our hands on it.” Uncle Saul gathered the dirty dishes from the deck.

My mind went to Adan’s dick and me wrapping my fingers around it. I blushed and busied myself removing my shoes before taking my phone back. If my family could see where my thoughts were, they’d be... not shocked. Knowing them, they’d giggle.

You have my housewarming present, but we’ll collect it when we see you .

Adan replied seconds later. Did you want me to turn back?

How did he hear the text? Oh, maybe his text messages were displayed on the car’s dashboard.

No, but keep it safe, please .

I will .

My aunt and uncle wouldn’t allow me to clear the leftovers or stack the dishwasher. After showing me to my room, I unpacked and lay down. So much had happened since I woke up, and this was the first moment to myself.

I thought back to how much of a disaster my day would have been had Adan not helped me. Not just with the driving but his kindness.

Putting aside his generosity, I allowed my mind to wander to his engaging smile, how one corner of his mouth lifted, the dimple in his cheek and his enticing cologne. I concentrated on his face, expression, and aroma, but I wanted to go lower, much much lower, and imagine if he wore boxers or briefs, and if briefs, were they skimpy?

Did he wear bright colors or boring black and gray?

Convinced Adan didn't wear tighty whities, my breathing sped up as I pictured peeling his underwear down to reveal his huge cock. Sweat dotted my brow as my hand unbuttoned my pants and slid into my briefs. My length hardened. I gripped the shaft as it stiffened further and slid my palm from the base to the tip.

Arching my back, I pumped hard, wishing it was Adan who was jerking me off. Or had his mouth on me. My thoughts went to his cock and him flipping me over, me shoving my bare ass high in the air, offering him my hole. He'd probe it with a finger, maybe two, insert it up to the first knuckle, and I'd beg for more while pushing back and urging him to go deeper.

He'd finger-fuck me and then pull out, and I'd whimper and protest at the loss. But with his hands pressing into the soft flesh on my hips, Adan would ease my legs further apart and slide the tip of his dick inside me.

We'd both gasp, and I'd pant as I adjusted to his girth before he plowed into me. I'd groan as he filled me, and Adan would murmur how tight I was.

"Yes!" With my eyes closed, I tugged my cock as slick streamed onto my jeans.

"Braylon?"

Adan was murmuring my name as he fucked me hard, and I welcomed every thrust and joust.

"Are you okay?"

Why wouldn't I be? I was going to come with Adan's length inside me.

My breathing was coming in spurts and starts, and sweat mingled with slick.

“I heard you shout.”

Cum spurted from the slit as my body tremored, but the voice wasn't Adan's telling me how much he loved being inside me. With my hand still wrapped around my length, I yelled, “I'm-I'm... fine. Just streaming an episode of...”

My mind went blank.

“Okay. Come into the kitchen when you're ready. I've made tea.”

Damn. Aunt Ellie had lived with pubescent me, and she was no fool. She'd be aware of exactly what I'd been doing. Embarrassing.

Thank gods this house had two bathrooms, and I scampered into mine and showered. I'd pretend I was grimy from the trip, which was true, and neither my aunt nor uncle would mention that I'd been jerking off.

We enjoyed the last few hours of daylight in the garden, weeding and planting shrubs. My phone was inside. I'd deliberately left it there, not wanting to check if Adan had messaged. But why would he? We'd agreed he'd keep the gift until we saw one another, and he'd let us know when that would be.

But damn it, I wanted to message him, but maybe that was too much, too soon. So he had to contact me, and I couldn't hear my phone. I made one excuse, saying I had to pee. I refused to glance at my aunt and uncle in case they were sharing knowing looks. Or worse, smirking.

The second excuse was I needed water, but Uncle Saul thwarted that when he produced a water bottle. I counted the minutes in my head until I could be alone in

my room with a naked imaginary Adan.

But I stopped myself because I was here to spend time with my family, the people who'd helped me be the person I was. I refused to ruin my stay by daydreaming about a guy I'd just met.

There were no messages when we came inside and nothing after I'd showered off the garden dirt. But as we finished dinner, the phone beeped. Two pairs of eyes were on me.

"It's him!"

"It's him," they chorused.

"What does he say?" There was no pretense from my aunt, and her body was almost shimmering in anticipation.

"He says that it was serendipity how we met today."

"Serendipity," Uncle Saul repeated. "I've always loved that word. It sounds like its meaning."

I repeated it and he was right. It didn't roll off the tongue so much as glide.

"Anything else?"

"He has commitments Monday through Wednesday and Friday night after the conference has finished. But he can meet for dinner Thursday."

Aunt Ellie clapped. "I can't wait." She slid a glance at her husband, and he gave a tiny shake of his head. "To get our present."

“Nice save.” I laughed. “I know what you’re up to. I have marks on my back from your hands pushing me.”

She took my hands in hers. “I just want you to be happy, darling.”

“We both do,” my uncle chimed in.

Another text arrived. Can you talk? I’m eating in my room .

I hoped he was referring to dinner. Eating had now become a loaded word.

What are you eating? He might respond with a pic of his food. I’d prefer a photo of something else.

I can show you .

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SEVEN

ADAN

The conference had been much the same as most other conferences; the sessions during the day ranged from boring, to interesting, to valuable for work, and to me hanging on every word.

But as usual, the most useful time was in the evening when attendees mingled and networked. But Thursday, everyone was going to the movies, and I was skipping it to see Braylon and family. Maybe the conference attendees would go for a drink afterward and deals might be made, friendships forged, but I'd discovered from previous week-long events that people were fatigued by Thursday and needed downtime.

Perfect for me to meet up with my mate. And while I was happy to be sharing him with his family, I looked forward to getting back home when we could date like a regular human couple.

You're not human .

Thanks for pointing that out .

I was waiting in the hotel lobby, and once they arrived, we'd decide where to eat, hoping that if we were driving somewhere, Braylon might accompany me rather than go in his family's car.

Checking my watch for the hundredth time, I sensed movement from the corner of my eye and a scent. Shifter! That wasn't surprising. Many of the people at the conference were shifters.

But this particular scent had a whiff of regal, and I swung around.

Shit, not here, not when I was meeting Braylon.

"Excellency." I kept my voice low. If the crowd in the lobby thought a VIP was amongst them, they'd be snapping pics even though most wouldn't have a clue who he was. "What a pleasant surprise."

The older man strolled up to me, his suit impeccable, his tie knotted just so.

"Adan, I happened to be in the neighborhood and thought I'd catch up."

Excellency never happened anywhere. He was checking on me.

"Have you marked your mate?"

"We're a long way from that, Excellency." I explained how we'd met.

He studied me, his eyes boring into me as if retrieving all the information from my brain. "Remember, no shifting before you mate."

I'd hoped he'd changed his mind. "May I ask a question, sir?"

"Go ahead. I might not answer it."

"How did you know I'd met Braylon?"

He tapped his nose. "I'll never tell."

Spying was a sordid business, and I wanted a shower, thinking someone might be watching us when Braylon's family and I went for dinner. I'd not seen or scented the snarky guy, so it'd be someone else.

"About the mating?—"

I caught Braylon's scent and hoped my conversation with Excellency was at an end. But he stayed at my side while I welcomed my mate and his family. Aunt Ellie, Uncle Saul, and Braylon looked from me to Excellency. I assumed they were waiting for an introduction and wondering why I hadn't done the honors.

I couldn't say who he was and how I knew him. But he was more suave and experienced at dealing with both humans and shifters, and he turned on the charm.

"Adan seems to have forgotten his manners."

Of course he had to get a dig in at me.

"I'm Dexter, an old friend of Adan's family."

Names were exchanged, and Saul asked if he was accompanying us to dinner. But Excellency said he had other plans. Phew! He addressed Braylon and told him he'd see him in a few weeks. "Maybe sooner if Adan is a fast worker."

Grrr. He was doing this deliberately, needling and pushing me to mate.

And then he was gone, leaving a whiff of his powerful scent lingering in the air.

"What an intriguing man," Ellie noted.

I didn't want to discuss Excellency and turned the conversation to what they wanted to eat. They were more familiar with the town than I was, and Saul suggested we eat Indian.

"The spicier the better." He grinned and patted his tummy. "I love the burn."

"Me too." I was glad we could bond over yummy spicy food.

There was a little awkwardness when we got outside as to who was going in whose car, but I dove straight in and asked Braylon if he'd like to go with me.

"Of course." He grinned, the smile stretching from ear to ear. "You might be lonely by yourself."

I followed Saul's car, my mate's cloying scent clinging to my skin.

"You and your family are so close. I envy you." I braked at a red light and swiveled my head toward him.

"Are you related to Dexter? You share some of the same mannerisms."

Hardly. My folks and I didn't get along, and they had moved overseas to be closer to my brother and his kids. My current pack was not the one I was born into, and my parents didn't agree with me being part of a pack who didn't live as a group.

We might not live on pack lands or eat in a communal kitchen, but we celebrated festivals together and had regular meetups.

"No. He's an old family friend."

He's not. That's a lie .

For the moment, I explained. When I marked Braylon and he met my wolf, he'd understand why I hadn't been able to tell the truth.

"I'm surprised. You have the same eyes."

I didn't respond and the conversation ended there.

As we shared dishes and caught up on what we'd been doing all week, Braylon put a hand on either side of his face. "We did it again."

How I wished we had, but we hadn't gotten to the naked bit yet or even kissed.

"The housewarming gift. I assume it's at the hotel."

Shit. I blamed Excellency, because without him appearing and throwing me off my game, I might have remembered. Maybe. If I looked into my motives, I may have deliberately forgotten it.

I could have reminded you, but I didn't. My wolf sniggered.

Seemed we were both thinking alike in wanting an excuse to see our mate again.

"We can swing by on the way home." That was Saul, and Ellie glowered at him.

"But it'll be too late, and we have to drive home." Ellie was determined to get her nephew and me together.

I was supposed to fly home Saturday, but I'd taken leave Monday and Tuesday. That was four days that I could hang around, maybe see Braylon. I'd have to stay at an Airbnb because the hotel was too expensive if I was paying the accommodation myself.

“If it’s okay with you, I can drive out Saturday and bring it.”

Ellie shot Braylon a look. He cleared his throat. “When do you have to get home?”

“Not until Tuesday evening.”

Ellie couldn’t contain herself. “Perfect,” she gushed. “You could stay a night or two or three with us... if you’d like to.”

I sent Braylon a glance, and he smiled, a small cautious one that broadened when I accepted the invitation.

I insisted on paying for the meal, as they had driven into town and I was to be their guest for three nights. Now I had to buy them a present. A housewarming gift would be appropriate, but I’d have to confirm with Braylon what to buy. I anticipated more texts flying back and forth.

I hugged my mate and his family before they left and promised I’d arrive before lunch Saturday. Changing my flight wouldn’t be a problem. I’d probably be up at the crack of dawn wanting to see Braylon, but I couldn’t turn up at their place before breakfast. Or could I?

Back in my room, I stared out at the city lights. My wolf hadn’t shifted since Saturday and was itching to take his fur. But I was tired. We could spend the hours hunting before meeting Braylon on Saturday.

I had little opportunity to message my mate on Friday, and there was a huge end of conference dinner and drinks in the evening. It was late when I returned to my room, but I sent a quick text.

See you tomorrow .

Looking forward to it .

My wolf woke me while it was still dark, and not being able to get back to sleep, I packed my things and showered before heading to breakfast. Rather than shifting just outside of town, I decided to give my beast his fur not far from Rosedale. I could lose myself in my thoughts while he hunted, rather than looking at my watch and wishing the time away.

Rosedale was surrounded by woods, and I pulled off the road and walked into the forest. Removing my clothes, I stared upward at the snippets of blue sky showing between the towering trees. There had been few cars on the road, and the only sounds were the wind, the birds, and the forest animals.

You should find a deer or a fox to hunt .

A number of things happened at once.

A twig crackled as a foot snapped it.

A man appeared in the clearing.

His mouth formed a scream as he caught a glance of my nakedness. Shit, shit, shit. What was I supposed to do now?

I hauled my wolf back as he was about to take his fur. Please don't shift. It might ruin everything.

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EIGHT

brAYLON

Before going to bed, Uncle Saul suggested I explore the woods behind the house.

“There are plenty of walking trails, and if you’re lucky, you might spy a deer.”

I told him I would, but I was fixated on Adan’s arrival in the morning. Despite him promising to be here before lunch, I hoped he wouldn’t be delayed and not arrive until close to dinner. His conference had finished, and he and the other attendees were having a night out this evening. What could possibly keep him in town tomorrow?

While I hadn’t specifically asked if he had a life partner, I guessed he didn’t. And if he did, he was on track to break my heart. But I sensed he was a good guy—look at how he’d helped me on the train—and wouldn’t delude me into thinking we might date.

I was making huge leaps forward, while Adan was still on the starting block. We hadn’t talked about life and love and all the important stuff. On the train, every word was overheard by the other passengers, though we’d had alone time in the car. But I couldn’t base a relationship on a guy offering to drive me home and saying he liked me.

I woke before dawn and studied the sky. Maybe Adan was awake and looking up at the clouds too. Hauling on jogging pants and a T-shirt, I headed outside and through the gate at the back of the property.

Uncle was right. It was beautiful, and I got lost in the sights and sounds of the forest and trailed my fingers over the bushes until I remembered there could be poison ivy and snatched my hand away.

Twigs crackled under my feet. I'd never be able to sneak up on anyone, tramping over the ground and making a huge racket. But as the trees parted and I happened upon a clearing, a figure stood in the middle of the path, removing the last shred of his clothing. Briefs. He was getting his cock out.

Naked guy was bending over. Nice ass. Why did I think that? He could be a serial killer or poacher. And why was he naked in the woods? Was that a thing? There was no stream or lake close by.

He turned around, but instead of being fixated on his face, I stared at his dick. Yikes. I'd never seen anything so big and so beautiful. But my gaze drifted to the guy's face. Shit! Shit! It was Adan. Gods, I froze, wishing a hole would appear and swallow me. I couldn't move forward or back, and I had no weapon. My phone didn't count.

But this was Adan, the guy I'd been daydreaming about, pining and lusting over. He wouldn't hurt me. But he was buck naked in the middle of the woods.

I did what anyone would when encountering a naked guy in the middle of the forest. I shrieked. My legs wouldn't move no matter how many instructions I sent them. But my arms got the message and they flailed, flapping in the air and achieving nothing, probably looking as though I was trying to fly and failing. I was flailing and failing!

“Ahhh!”

He sprinted toward me, and my legs moved a tad backward, and I toppled into a puddle left by last night's rain.

“Braylon!”

I lay on the forest floor, dirty water soaking my ass, an earthy aroma filling my nostrils until a head appeared, blocking out the light.

“What are you d-doing?” It didn’t escape me that his cock was dangling dangerously close to my bent knee.

“Ummm... I’m a CFA.”

I must have bumped my head ‘cause his speech was garbled. Or I understood the words but they didn’t make sense. “You’re an accountant? I thought you were in marketing.”

“Clothes Free Advocate.” He seemed so pleased with himself, as though he’d just come up with the name. “CFA.”

“Help me up, please.” I needed to be standing for this conversation. Mud trickled down my spine and into my briefs. My shoes were filled with sludge, and as I brushed hair from my brow, dead leaves fluttered to the ground.

“I need a shower and clean clothes.” I took a step and yelped. “Must have twisted my ankle.” I winced. It wasn’t broken and probably not sprained, but I didn’t fancy walking back to the house on it while avoiding Adan’s length as my mind whirled about him being a CFA.

“Let me help.”

Catching more than a glimpse of Adan’s cock had been on my wish list but not like this. And not while I was covered in mud, and he didn’t have a smidgen of dirt on him.

“You’ll get dirty.”

If this had been in the before time—like five minutes ago before I’d seen him—we could have joked about getting dirty as we had done about eating. But now the word emphasized that I was covered in mud while fully dressed and he had no clothes on.

He shrugged. “That’s nothing to a CFA.” He draped my arm over his shoulder and scooped me up. My butt brushed over his dick and my own length hardened.

“Are your clothes nearby?”

He jerked his head to a pile of fabric on the grass. “Maybe put them on before taking me home?” My aunt and uncle were far from prudish, but a naked guy arriving at the house might raise brows from the neighbors.

He sat me down and my ankle twinged. I tried not to look while he pulled on his briefs—bright blue ones with wolves emblazoned on them—and concealed his length.

“Do you do this often?” I thought nudists gathered together, but Adan was communing with nature by himself until I interrupted him.

“Not as much as I’d like to.” He hadn’t been embarrassed at me staring at his naked butt or his cock, but I got the impression he didn’t want to talk about his hobby. Maybe that was the wrong word. Lifestyle would be better.

He carried me along the trail, not panting or wheezing. It was as though I weighed nothing. I could have walked, but I didn’t protest at being in his arms.

“What happened?” My aunt and uncle were in their PJs and enjoying coffee on the deck when Adan opened the gate and strode over the lawn.

“I tripped.” As I wasn’t an outdoorsy person, they understood.

Uncle Saul said he’d get the icepacks, while my aunt helped remove my muddy clothes. Adan was already backing away. Shit, had our little encounter ruined our relationship?

“Gotta get the car. Back soon.”

His car! Of course he didn’t jog from town. I was worried he might drive off and never return.

“I don’t mind you being naked.”

He acknowledged me with a small wave before blending in with the trees.

“It’s none of my business what you were both doing in the woods, but wouldn’t you prefer a comfortable bed?” Aunt Ellie said as she hosed my clothes

After I stripped down to my underwear, I hosed the mud off myself. “We weren’t having sex. It’s just playful banter. Long story.”

“Ahhh.” She told me to shower and she’d wash my clothes. Uncle Saul asked if Adan would be here for breakfast, and I nodded, hoping he wasn’t driving in the opposite direction.

“Do you need help?” my uncle asked as I limped into the living room

“No. I can manage.”

When I emerged from the shower, there were a pair of crutches in the bedroom, and Adan was in the kitchen drinking coffee. I didn’t need the crutches but got an elastic

bandage from the medicine cabinet.

“Adan explained what happened.” Aunt Ellie filled up his cup. “That must have been quite startling.” She smirked, and I took a mug and held it out, not wanting to look at the laughter in her eyes.

“While I’ve never gone au naturel in the woods, I get it.” Uncle Saul leaned against the sink. “The urge to be just you, nothing between you and the rest of the world, allowing the breeze to wash over your body and the sun to kiss it.”

Aunt Ellie patted her husband’s shoulder. “If you become a CFA, make sure there are no unsuspecting people around.”

I caught Adan’s eye and couldn’t hold in my laughter. He chortled and that set off my aunt and uncle.

“I brought this.” Adan held up the shopping bag with my housewarming present.

“You remembered.”

Aunt Ellie hugged me, and my uncle kissed my head as they examined the contents. “I love everything in this.” My aunt peered into the cake tin. “Thank you, my darling, but don’t hate me. I don’t want to bury it.” She hugged it to her chest. “I’ll put it in the bedroom so I can look at it whenever I want.”

Uncle Saul pointed to Adan's housewarming gifts, a photo he’d taken of the three of us on Thursday and a second of me and Adan. Aunt Ellie slipped one pic into my time capsule and winked at me.

“Let’s eat.” Uncle put platters of food on the table.

Every word was connected to a tripwire. Eat and dirty, and now when I thought of an accountant, I'd picture them naked running around the woods sniffing flowers.

After breakfast, my aunt and uncle retreated to the garden, saying they'd spend the morning there. But not before pointing out the snacks and also leftovers in the fridge.

"Another coffee?" I held up the pot, and Adan nodded.

"I'm sorry about this morning." He wrapped both hands around the mug. "I usually check if there are any hu... people about."

"No need to apologize. I'm glad it was you and not a stranger. I'm not really a woodsy person."

"Maybe later we can take a walk fully clothed, and I can point out my favorite things about being in the forest."

"Oh, you're an expert?"

"Part of me is."

That was odd. Part of him? My mind went to my favorite place—his cock. And I couldn't resist smirking.

"Which part?"

A blush spread over his cheeks, reminding me of sunset.

"I asked for that, didn't I?"

"Yeah, you kinda stepped right in it." We clinked coffee cups.

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NINE

ADAN

He doesn't know about me! My wolf was impatient to get on with the business of mating.

If Braylon had caught me in my fur, that wouldn't have broken the rules of not showing him my beast before mating. He'd stumbled upon us. How was I to know he was there?

But the answer to that question was, as a shifter, I could scent him. Excellency wouldn't accept that it was an accident. And while my shifter senses were intact and my reflexes were sharp, my mate's scent had affected them. I didn't pick up his scent fast enough in the forest, and on the train, I'd wobbled and fumbled as his aroma befuddled my brain.

After dinner, I made an excuse, saying I'd left something in the car, and phoned Horatio, my Alpha. He didn't take any shit and would give me a straight answer. Maybe one I didn't want to hear.

"Yes." He expected callers to get straight to the point and not waste his time with greetings.

"Alpha, it's Adan. I have a problem."

"If it's a rash, get some cream."

I rushed on, explaining how I met my mate and what Excellency had said.

“I don’t see the dilemma. Do as he says.”

“But—”

Alpha sighed. “No buts, Adan. You’re a smart guy. I’m sure you can find a way to let him know who you really are without breaking your word to Excellency.”

I told him about the mishap in the woods.

“Sharpen your senses.”

How was I supposed to do that? They wobbled a little when Braylon was near.

“It sounds as though he is your true mate. Only that person can affect your senses.”
He ended the call.

That didn’t help. My heart, my head, and my wolf told me he was my one and only. There were no whetstones for sharpening my smell and hearing.

I strolled into the house, passing the den where Braylon’s aunt and uncle were watching TV. My mate was on the deck, and there was a teapot and plate of cookies on the table and two mugs

“Are you sleepy?”

I perked up. He was asking if I wanted to go to bed. With him, I assumed. There was no one else I wanted to sleep with.

“Not at all.”

“Let’s go for a walk.” He shoved the rest of the cookie in his mouth and pocketed a second. “Not in the woods, though.”

Rosedale was a small town, so wandering at night wasn’t a big deal. And my wolf would scare any bad guys away.

We wandered along the road and headed for Main Street.

“You said you’d been here before when we were on the train.”

I explained that my college roommate came from here. We’d lost touch, and as he was a squirrel shifter, he wasn’t part of my pack.

People were out walking their dogs and first one, then a second, and a third raced toward me, barking. Braylon took a step back, and I pushed him behind me.

“It’s okay. They’re just curious.” The dogs surrounded me, sniffing my feet and legs as their human owners came puffing up, apologizing. I allowed my beast to shine in my eyes and each of the animals lay down, resting their head on my feet.

“That’s weird. Jumbo has never done that before,” one of the owners noted. The others agreed.

“Are you what they call a dog whisperer?” one of the humans asked.

“No, not really, but dogs like me.” I shrugged. “What can I say?”

Though I couldn’t expect my human mate who knew nothing of shifters to put me being naked in the woods plus being good with dogs and having it equal me being a shifter. But if little by little I gave him hints, perhaps it wouldn’t be so much of a shock when I revealed my beast.

The owners took their respective dogs and continued their walk.

“That was cool, though a little scary at first. Do you have a dog of your own?”

“No.” If I had a mate and kids, a dog would complete the family, but being out of the house all day and having to shift at night didn’t leave much time for a pet.

“Adan!” a familiar voice shouted from the other side of the street.

“Joey?” It was my college roommate. He grabbed me in a bear hug and asked what I was doing here.

“Visiting friends.” I introduced him to Braylon.

“Friend? Are you sure?” He shoulder-bumped me and smirked. He sent me a look because he must have scented Braylon was human. “Oh. Ohhhh. He doesn’t... right. Got it.” He saluted and asked how long I was here and said that we had to have lunch or dinner before I left.

Wanting to spend my time with my mate, I hesitated, and he must have understood because he said he’d be in Fairview next month.

“Sounds good.”

“Are you a CFA too?” my mate asked Joey

“Too? No, I’m a teacher.” He turned to me. “I didn’t pick you as a numbers guy.”

“No, he’s a Clothes Free Advocate.” My mate grinned, perhaps proud he’d remembered the term.

“A what now?” Joey rubbed his jaw. “Clothes free... is that what I think it is?”

“Braylon caught me with my pants down in the woods this morning.”

Joey doubled over with laughter. “You do have a problem, and I’m happy to be your wingman anytime you need me.” He took off with thumb up and little finger extended signifying “Call me.”

“Fancy a piece of pie?” I was eager to move on from this morning’s adventure and Joey being my possible sidekick, and we were standing outside a café with a sign saying they made the best pies.

“Sure. Don’t tell Uncle Saul because he fancies himself as the best pie maker in the state.”

We sat at a table in the corner and scanned the menu. I was babbling about which pie I wanted and hoping Braylon was going to overlook what Joey had said. We agreed to share a slice of strawberry rhubarb pie, and I braced myself for an inquisition.

“Joey was your roommate?”

“Yeah. I didn’t know he was back here. Pure coincidence.”

Braylon glanced at the other diners. “Is everything all right?” He leaned forward. “Tell me to shut up if I’m being too nosy?—”

I cut him off. “I want you to know everything about me because the connection we have is special.”

Was I trying to get him warm and gooey inside so he’d stop asking questions and perhaps play footsie under the table? I was.

“Awww. Me too.” He didn’t play with my foot, but he took my hand and we sat not speaking until the server brought our pie.

“Mmmm.” Braylon licked ice cream from around his mouth. “This is so good. We should have ordered a slice each.”

He should be licking me, not food, though if he dribbled ice cream on my chest and lapped it up, I’d be into that.

“But...” He stabbed his fork in the air. “You didn’t answer me.”

I’d forgotten the question but was certain it had to do with Joey.

“Remind me again. This pie is pure bliss, it’s pushed all other thoughts out of my head.”

“I get the feeling you’re avoiding my question.”

He was right, but if I agreed, he’d be hurt and rightfully so. If I fibbed, he’d be upset because it was obvious that I was lying. Neither option was palatable.

“I don’t want to.” Leaving it at that was the best I could do. It was an honest statement. Adding excuse after excuse would make the situation worse.

“But there’s a reason you can’t.”

Another statement.

I had to set his mind at rest about one thing. “I’m not in a relationship, and there is no ex threatening to tell all my secrets or stalking me.”

He raised a brow and stabbed the pie with his fork. “You have secrets?”

“Doesn’t everyone?” I shrugged. “I’m not hiding from the police, I’m not part of the mafia, and I think I’m an okay guy.”

Braylon pushed the plate away. “Will you tell me eventually?”

“Absolutely. I want to.” I wished I could waltz him out the door and shift. Excellency wouldn’t know. But he’d proven he had eyes everywhere.

Hmmm, what if I put my beast at the forefront of my gaze? Excellency had told me not to shift. That wasn’t shifting.

Let me. I can do this .

I gave my sight to my wolf, and Braylon studied me.

“In this light your eyes are darker. They’re really beautiful. There’s something wild in them.”

“Hold that thought.”

“For how long?”

“A few days. Until I leave Tuesday?” In a human dating timeline, three days was nothing. But I couldn’t return home without having mated Braylon.

“I’ll hold you to that.”

TEN

brAYLON

I couldn't sleep knowing Adan was in the room beside me. Having already seen him naked, there were no surprises in that department, but he was keeping a lot to himself, not revealing some deep dark secret. Maybe not dark. He said as much. But what he thought of as dark might not be how I defined it.

My phone said sunrise would be in thirty minutes. I contemplated getting up and making tea, but snuggled under the covers instead. A creak alerted me to a door opening. Not being familiar with the house, I couldn't be certain which it was, but my aunt and uncle's door hadn't made a noise when they closed it during the week.

Hardly daring to breathe, I stayed still, thinking it might be Adan. I expected a knock on my door, but the house was silent, and I gingerly tossed off the covers and stood at the window.

The solar lights at the end of the garden illuminated a figure leaping over the gate and striding into the woods. Not being a woodsy guy, being surrounded by trees in the dark with someone else creeping about, investigating and following the person was the furthest thing from my mind.

But certain that it was Adan, I pulled on a dark sweater over my PJs and at the back door, slipped my feet into a pair of Aunt Ellie's boots. Clutching my phone, I studied the gate but decided I couldn't hurdle it and opened it, hoping it didn't make a noise.

The phone flashlight was kind of weak, and I shivered as shadows lay ahead and beside the path. I dared not look back, fearing I'd be swallowed by the darkness. I kept to the path 'cause no way was I venturing off. Besides, I caught a whiff of Adan's cologne. Did he wear it to bed? Weird.

I was close to the clearing where I'd caught him before, and I tread slowly, hoping I didn't step on a twig and alert him. But what was I doing? I was crazy for this guy, and yet I didn't trust him, though I said I did. My actions said otherwise.

Light prickled into the forest, crawling along the ground and through the treetops. I squatted behind a bush, hoping an unknown hand wouldn't clamp my shoulder. Peering between the leaves, I spotted Adan, stripping off his clothes. Oh, so he was just doing his naked thing again. No problemo.

But now I couldn't sneak away, worried he'd hear me or see me. And when he returned to the house, he'd walk past me and I'd have to fess up I was a creepy stalker.

I glanced around for something to cover myself with. Maybe a deep hole I could fall into while telling myself not to follow people into the woods. Nothing good ever happened in the forest just as dawn broke.

But when I looked up, Adan had vanished and a... dog... oh gods, no, a wolf was in the clearing. Shit. Uncle Saul said there were few wolves in the area. Lucky me having stumbled on one of the few.

Wild animals didn't like people, and I was definitely people. I gulped as the wolf looked straight at me. Gods, wild animals could scent prey and humans. I slapped a hand on my mouth to stifle a scream but grabbed a stick. It wouldn't deter a wolf wanting to ravage my flesh with its fangs, but maybe... I don't know... something. I had to defend myself.

I squinted in the dim light. Could it be a dog? I blinked and rubbed my eyes but now my vision was blurry. And when I looked again, the wolf was gone. My body went into shock, struck by uncontrollable shivering. My teeth chattered, and I wrapped my arms around myself. Adan was running toward me. He was an outdoorsy person, so he'd know how to get rid of a wolf.

I found my voice. "Adan, watch out, there's a wolf."

"What?" He pulled me to my feet and held me close. His heart was hammering, probably echoing mine, and he was clutching a feather.

"A wolf," I blabbered. "There's a wolf." I pulled away and shoved my hand toward the place where the wolf had been. "Or maybe a big dog."

He stroked my cheek and his touch banished the fear.

"I think I saw a wolf or a dog or something."

"How about we go home, I'll make tea and something to eat and we can talk about what you saw."

We turned and beckoned me along the path. But I paused, wanting to know about the feather.

"I found it. It's so beautiful, and I thought you might like it."

I would never have noticed a feather on the forest floor, especially not in the early morning light.

"You must have keen eyesight."

“Ahhh yes. I’ve been told that before.”

But I wanted to know more about him and his CFA. “Is this something you do every day?” It didn’t bother me. Or maybe it did because I’d followed him.

“I try to. I love the sense of freedom.”

As we walked, Adan draped a hand over my shoulder, and I thought about his qualities. He loved nature and running around without clothes, dogs adored him and he could “talk” to them, he was very protective, like a bodyguard, always thinking of me and herding me away from uncomfortable situations. And he liked bringing me trinkets, souvenirs from his naked wanderings, and unlike me, when he walked in the forest, he didn’t make a sound though a creaky door did give him away

“I understand why you’re at one with the forest. It’s almost as though you belong here.” How did he live in a city?

“You’re very perceptive.”

“Only with people I care about.”

Adan cupped my face. “I’m so pleased you said that because I care about you too. More than anyone else in the world.”

Heat rushed through my veins and my cheeks flushed. My heart, which had slowed when Adan grabbed me, speeded up again. He’d put into words what I’d been keeping prisoner inside me, not wanting to admit it to anyone, not even myself.

“I don’t know what to say.”

There was a flash of something on his face, but he covered it up and put on a smile.

He held up his hands. “I know. I know it’s too soon. I don’t expect anything other than friendship.”

“No.” I squeezed his cheeks. “That’s not what I want.” Adan’s face fell. “I want more. All of you.” Running my hands through my hair, I stepped away and twisted around so the trees and Adan blended together in one huge blur.

“But your secrets or one big secret troubles me.” I didn’t expect to know every tiny detail about him, but whatever he was hiding, it was something significant, and he suspected it would bother me or change my opinion of him.

“It’s a chicken-and-egg situation.”

“Are you telling me you want to be a farmer?” I peered around, expecting a hen being trailed by chicks, all of them devoted to Adan. “Or are you a chicken whisperer too?”

“Nah, birds are not my biggest fans.”

I’d add that to his list of qualities: birds were turned off by him, unlike dogs.

“There is something I want to reveal, and you almost stumbled upon my secret this morning.”

If it was his cock he was talking about, that was no secret. I was still in shock at his girth, wondering how it would fit inside me.

“But I’m thinking of an alternative so we can avoid a sticky situation.”

I was lost, having no clue what he was going on about.

“How do you feel about a tattoo? With my name on it?”

Shoot, I'd always felt sorry for people who got their boyfriend or husband's name tattooed in a visible place 'cause when they broke up, they had to cover it. Or add their new partner's name.

But I'd fallen for Adan big time, and love or lust or perhaps a combination had me agreeing. Who was I? I always put a lot of thought into big decisions and this one was pretty huge.

"Let's do it."

Rosedale didn't have a tattoo parlor, so we showered and after a bite to eat we headed back to Springfield. I researched tattoo places, thinking anyone who had a vacancy would be shit. But Adan texted Joey who recommended a place.

We weren't original, both of us getting a heart with both our initials inside. Adan suggested that we add a wolf because it was the wolf who'd made me admit what was in my heart. Cool, I was giddy for Adan and longing for private time, so I agreed.

My hand was a little owie when we were done, and we snapped pics of our matching tats. I suggested we get a hotel room, but Adan said he had to show someone what we'd done.

More weird.

He sent the pics, and we waited.

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ELEVEN

ADAN

The seconds ticked by and became minutes, each one stretching into a future with no end. If Excellency didn't approve, I'd have to tell Braylon I had a pet wolf and somehow twist that into talking about shifters.

"I'm curious about who you texted. Your folks?"

I shook my head, not trusting myself to speak. My wolf was itching to take his fur and end the shenanigans. He wasn't a fan of the tats, saying the wolf looked nothing like him.

"Just tell me you're not part of a cult." He grabbed my face and our eyes locked on one another.

The phone rang, and I avoided answering Braylon. A pack was nothing like a cult. Though looking at it from the outside, especially the ones that adhered to rules formed centuries ago, it might look that way, with shifters having to obey their Alpha, with no questions allowed.

Excellency's face appeared on the screen and Braylon yelled, "I knew you were related. Is this your grandfather?"

Excellency scowled, and Braylon muttered, "Favorite uncle, perhaps? Much too young to be a grandfather unless you had kids when you were ten." He gulped, his

face reddened, and he continued to talk. “Not that you would have because that would be bad. So bad.”

He ran a hand over his face. “Gods, I’m digging myself in deeper.” But he didn’t stop. “I’m so glad you’re not a cult. Adan said you weren’t, and I don’t think I could marry into a cult. Maybe.”

He finally took a breath. “Okay, I’ll stop talking now.”

Apart from my mate’s ragged breathing, silence filled the car.

“Did you?—?”

I’d never cut off Excellency before, and I probably never would again, but the tension was excruciating. I was wobbling on a tightrope with hundreds of feet of empty space below, and the man on the screen was standing opposite me on that tightrope, refusing to let me pass to Braylon who was waiting on the other side.

“No. I did everything you asked.”

I dared not look at my mate because we were sounding more like a cult every second, or a dysfunctional family. Instead, I squeezed his hand, the one without the tattoo because that was hurty.

“Braylon, tell me about Adan. His good and bad qualities.”

I couldn’t avoid my mate’s gaze, and I gave him the phone.

“He embraces nature and all the creatures of the forest. He’s curious and notices things I would ignore. Dogs love him, he’s not ashamed of his own body, and he’s very protective of me.”

“Sounds like the perfect mate.”

Braylon drew in a sharp breath. “Not a mate, no. Yes, he’s my friend, but he’s also so much more. He’s my life partner.” He gulped. “I can’t believe I said that but it’s what’s in here.” He patted his chest.

Excellency turned his attention to me. “You did well, Adan. You may not have marked him but he has your mark. I give you permission to show him all of you.”

“I’ve already seen his cock, and I have to say it is impressive!” Braylon blurted out.

“And on that note, I’ll say goodbye. I’d look forward to seeing you soon.” Shifters weren’t weirded out by nudity, but Excellency’s face suggested he wasn’t interested in hearing my dimensions.

“Can we please have sex now?” Braylon groped me, and my dick engorged. “And afterward you can explain the secret.” He giggled. “Unless this was it.” He stroked my jeans covering my bulge. “The very big secret.”

My hands resting on the steering wheel were telling me to drive straight to a hotel. But I owed Braylon an explanation first. If he knew just how big the reveal was, he would agree. Though how he was stroking me and attempting to lower my zipper, he might disagree.

“I’ll tell you my secret.”

He paused his fondling. “Now? Here?”

“Just outside of town.” On the Rosedale road, there was some wooded land a couple of miles outside the city. I could shift there. My beast wouldn’t be hunting. He’d take his fur, Braylon might faint, I’d be me again and catch him. I couldn’t predict any

more than that.

“I’m going to be blunt, Adan. I’m offering you my heart and my hole and you want to galavant in the great outdoors?”

“There’ll be no roaming. It’ll be quick, I promise.” He might run and never look back, but if I couldn’t be honest, there was no point in us mating. “Trust me?”

He hesitated and took my hand. “Okay,” he sighed.

I put my foot down, needing to get the shift over. Yes, I wanted to have sex, but my mate had to know he was my mate and we’d be bound together until one of us went to the goddess.

“You might want to stay in the car.” I leaned in the car window.

“No way. You have built this up for days. I want the full show. Do you provide popcorn?”

He wasn’t taking this seriously, but he had nothing similar to compare it to. And joking was often used as a barrier to hide behind.

“Remember all the qualities you listed: protective, dog whisperer, at one with nature.”

He folded his arms. “I’m considering adding to the list: prankster.”

Time was ticking on and my belly roiled. The moment was now, and I was terrified of his reaction. No shifter could imagine how a human would react to seeing his beast. Nothing that I came up with could be as drastic and possibly traumatic. I just had to push through and help my mate deal with whatever came next.

I undressed quickly and stood away from Braylon. “Remember, no matter what you see, I will always be me.” The last word was almost lost in the wind as my beast took his fur.

I told him to not make any sudden moves but to stay still, allowing Braylon to see and smell me. Perhaps if he gathered his courage, he might run his fingertips over my wolf’s fur.

Like my wolf, Braylon didn’t move. He blinked, so he wasn’t in a trance. His hands curled and fisted, even the owie one with the tat. His staccato breathing reminded me of a high-pitched tune played on a violin. He gulped and bit down hard on his bottom lip.

And when his mouth parted, he uttered one word: “Adan.”

That was my signal to return as me. Taking him in my arms, he rested his head on my bare shoulder but pulled away and ran his hands over my face, as a blind person would do, feeling the dips and curves of my mouth, nose, cheeks, and chin.

He sagged against me, and I carried him to the car and offered him water before I pulled on my pants. He didn’t say anything, just sipped the water and studied the tat on his hand.

“Tell me what I just saw.”

Kneeling on the grass in front of him, I explained the history of shifters and how we kept our beasts hidden from humans but that shifters had lived on earth for centuries.

“And the guy you spoke to earlier? Is he the big boss?”

“Basically.” I added that shifters were not allowed to reveal their beasts to humans

unless they were their one true mate.

Braylon stood up, his lips trembling. “And I’m not your... m-mate?”

“You are, but Excellency changed the rules because some people fucked up, and he wouldn’t let me reveal my wolf. I had to get creative.”

He leaped up and flung his arms around me. “You could have taken me to bed and promised me the world.” He placed a hand on my heart. “But you refused, wanting me to see all of you.” He stifled a giggle. “Did I interrupt you... changing into a wolf in the woods yesterday?”

“Yeah.” It would have been simpler if I’d shifted, and I could have explained to Excellency it was a mistake.

“I love you, Adan.” We kissed, and he mumbled into my mouth. “I have so many questions, but they can wait.” He leaned back, his eyes studying mine. “Unless you have something else to show me.”

“My cock is eager to escape my pants, but that’s it.”

“Let’s get a room.”

“Wait. I need to mark you properly or my wolf does. And once we bond, it’s for life. There are no take-backsies.”

“Do what you gotta do. Not on the hand, though.”

My wolf extended his claws and scratched Braylon’s shoulder. He pressed his lips together and squeezed his eyes shut but didn’t whimper or cry. I mopped the trickle of blood with my shirt.

“Can I mark you too?”

He could have chosen any part of me, but he used his nails to break the skin on my chest, over my heart. A tiny scar would form, a permanent reminder that I was his.

“Now put your foot on the accelerator and get us to a hotel.” He tapped a message on his phone. “Telling my aunt and uncle not to expect us until tomorrow.”

The phone beeped.

“What did they say?”

He turned the phone around, revealing a big red heart emoji.

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Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 9:30 am

TWELVE

brAYLON

“This is nice.” More than nice. The room was luxurious, with a balcony and a great view toward Rosedale.

I opened the sliding doors and took a step outside, watching the world go by beneath us.

“Can we afford this?”

Adan pressed his body into mine and wrapped his arms around my hips. “I love how you said ‘we’ and yes, we can.”

I’d gone from only being a me, to a me but also a we. It was a little strange, but I’d get used to it.

My mate nuzzled the skin on my neck and pulled the shirt away before kissing my shoulder, the unmarked one. I was now walking wounded with a mating mark on one shoulder and a tat on the opposite hand. Thank gods my “sprained” ankle had been a fleeting problem, though I still wore the elastic bandage.

My mate’s hands slid from my hips to my crotch, and I gasped while he cradled and fondled my arousal that swelled under his touch.

“You were so eager to make love and now you’re admiring the view.” He nibbled my

skin which resulted in me quivering as tremors racked my body.

“I think you’re admiring the view.” My voice was barely above a whisper, and I concentrated on not coming in my pants.

Adan gave my cock a gentle squeeze. “You mean this?”

“Mmmm.” I squirmed under his touch.

“Maybe I should take a closer look.” His fingers undid the button, and he slid a hand inside my briefs. Warm flesh on heated skin was a powerful combination, and I rested my head on his shoulder as he pressed, fondled, and pumped my length.

But without warning, he yanked me into the room and closed the glass door. “People in the next room were getting curious about what we were doing.”

“I thank your shifter hearing for that, otherwise a video of us might have ended up on social media.”

“Can’t have that.” He scooped me up and carried me to the bed. “I’m greedy and don’t like sharing.” His eyes smoldered, and I bit my bottom lip while trying to keep the impending orgasm at bay.

“It’s a shame you got dressed after shifting.” I extended my foot and fixed it to his crotch. His eyes grew wide, and there was a sharp intake of breath from my mate. Or it might have been from me. Lust was affecting my senses.

“The hotel staff wouldn’t have minded you strutting in naked, your cock leading the way.”

Adan raised a brow. “Perhaps. I would have gotten plenty of attention.”

I growled and wondered if I'd done a good wolf impression. "Then I'm glad you didn't." I beckoned him closer. "I don't like sharing either."

Adan started to undo my belt, but I pushed him away, wanting to gaze on his body again. I'd seen him butt naked in the woods, more than once, but none of those instances were us preparing to have sex.

"Show me what you've got." Adan opened his mouth, but I shushed him. "Those other times when I glimpsed your dick don't count." I clapped and yelled, "Get them off. Get them off."

My mate's shirt blurred as he tossed it away. Then came the pants and the tight briefs. He stood before me, his cock jutting out from the patch of dark curly hair. I reached out and ran a finger over the slit, capturing a droplet of pre-cum.

"Is your hand sore?" I studied the tattoo that matched my own.

He shook his head. "Shifters heal fast." He held my tattooed hand. "I'm sorry yours will be painful for a few days."

Maybe it was lust or just my giddiness but the ache from the tat had vanished. Not that I wanted to test the theory by Adan squeezing it.

"I'll be careful." Adan gently pulled off my pants and the elastic bandage and then undid my shirt, revealing my mating mark. He stood up while biting his lip. "Perhaps we should wait."

"No way." I yanked off my briefs and now both Adan's brows shot up. "Wow! You are... your cock is... it's magnificent."

I enjoyed the boost to my ego. "It'll be best if I get on all fours." That would protect

the mating mark and the tattoo.

I made to turn over but Adan stopped me. “I need to look at you and ravish you first.” My body tingled in anticipation as he kissed a trail from my foot, behind my knee and to my inner thigh. He mumbled against my skin, saying how soft it was.

My chest rose and fell as I did my best to calm my breathing, relishing Adan’s attention, wallowing in it and savoring the anticipation of what was to come. His warm breath billowed over my length, and I whimpered. My body was on fire, but his dick was nowhere near my hole.

Slick was streaming out onto the bed, its distinct aroma floating around us.

Adan glanced up before sticking out his tongue. I gripped the soft bedding as the tip slid over the head of my dick. I groaned. The warmth and softness pressed against my cock had me closing my eyes, enjoying the waves of pleasure rolling over my body.

He swallowed the head while licking the tip and my hands went to his hair, encircling them in my fingers and pulling hard. His grunt echoed my own, and I gave myself over to absolute pleasure.

Adan sucked, licked, and deep-throated my cock while I dug my nails into his scalp. His fingers slid over my balls, and I adjusted my legs, allowing him to reach my hole. He probed it and patted around the puckered entrance as my voice grew ragged and my movements more jerky.

A finger slid inside me, and I raised my hips, my head flopping to one side as I pictured him finger fucking me.

“More.”

He slid in another finger and they matched the rhythm of his mouth. He was blowing me and blowing my mind at the same time.

My toes curled, and I arched my back as cum shot into Adan's mouth. It was as though I was drowning in pleasure and I'd never come up for breath again. But instead, I floated, and when my breathing returned to normal, I opened my eyes.

"Ready for more?" Adan winked and licked cum from around his mouth.

Part of me wanted to savor the afterglow, but yeah, I wanted his cock in me. I sat up and kissed his cum-covered lips.

"Since we met." That wasn't quite true but maybe an hour after we first spoke to one another.

I flipped over and shoved my ass high, offering it to my mate, needing him to plunge into me.

Adan parted my cheeks and the head of his cock pressed gently on my hole. But I wanted our sex to be fast and furious, and I pushed back, taking him halfway in.

"What the? Braylon..." But a moan cut off his words as I twisted my hips, taking him in a little deeper but not all the way. My mate's fingers dug into the soft flesh on my hips as he stilled. "Give me a moment."

His harsh breathing punctuated the air, and when it quietened, he licked from my ass crack up my spine. My fingers curled around the bedding as tendrils of pleasure stroked and spread over my skin, spiking with goosebumps.

I turned my head as Adan plunged in, filling me with his huge cock. He was right where he was supposed to be, and I took deep breaths while enjoying the sensations

racking my body.

“You’re tight.” He ran his thumb over my butt.

“But just right?” I quipped.

“Always and forever.”

Adan pulled out, leaving only the tip remaining, a tantalizing reminder of what was to come. I stared between my legs under my balls hanging low at his length coated in my slick. He made no attempt to plow back in, and the seconds ticked by while the suspense built.

“Adan, my love, I need you.”

He leaned over, molding his body against mine, only sweat and slick separating us as his dick claimed my channel. We both groaned, and I squeezed around him, resulting in a high-pitched squeak from my mate.

“You like that, huh?” I giggled, and he smacked my ass.

“Braylon, you laugh again and I’ll come.”

“Oops, sorry.” I wasn’t, and I was tempted to do it again because the combination of pleasure and pain aroused me further.

“Do you like fast?” Adan pumped in three times and paused before easing inside me so slowly I wanted to scream at him to hurry up. “Or slow.”

His husky voice kindled heat in my belly and blurred my thoughts, and I mumbled I liked both.

“What about this?” Adan took hold of my cock and slid his palm over the shaft. He ignited a fire in my belly, and I wrapped my non-tattooed hand around his and tugged while bucking my hips, urging him to thrust inside me.

We moved in tandem, his cock plunging into my channel and our hands pumping my dick. Double the fucking and double the pleasure. The air was laced with my mate’s scent, mingling with the pungent aromas of sweat and slick.

Memories swirled in my head of a few days previously when we met and tears pricked at my eyes, thinking what my life would have been like if we had never met.

“I love you so much.”

My mate peppered kisses over my skin, mumbling that he loved me back.

I couldn’t focus on anything except his dick in me and our hands clasped over my cock. The rest of the world fell away and pleasure was all that remained.

Tiny mewls, deep grunts, and shuddering sighs formed a background, blocking out all other sounds. My climax was hurtling toward me and each thrust of Adan’s length brought me closer to the edge. And I so wanted to topple over with my mate’s name on my lips.

A surge of desire swept over me, and I came, Adan at the same time, both of us yelling each other’s names. And while his knot swelled and filled me, we lay together not saying anything. I was comforted by his breathing, knowing we’d be together forever.

THIRTEEN

ADAN

“I’m going to be fired!” my mate whisper-hissed with a dash of sobbing into the phone.

“No!” He’d been in the position less than three months, and I’d heard nothing but glowing reports. Shit, was there a review-after-ninety-days clause in his contract? He was nearing that deadline, and if the boss wasn’t pleased with his work, he might lose his job.

But that didn’t mesh with what Braylon had been saying. He had been working long hours, and we often ate dinner at our respective desks, our phones propped up on our computers. Many of those nights I could have gone home, but the house was empty, so I stayed at work, getting a start on projects and pissing off my colleagues because I was so far ahead of them.

They had lives and families, and while I had a mate, we didn’t see much of one another. But I got it. Starting a new job, you had to impress your boss and not just do the minimum but do more than expected, while keeping a smile on your face.

As Braylon had been living in a temporary sublet, and I had a house—with a mortgage—he moved in with me one Sunday morning. After borrowing a friend’s pickup, we were officially roomies.

“The boss has scheduled a meeting with me at nine tomorrow.” Braylon sniffed and

pushed away the food he'd ordered.

"Come home." I was thinking furiously, wondering if me and my wolf could scare Braylon's boss into keeping my mate on at the company. But Excellency would be on my ass if I did. Some shifter at the office would hear or scent me, and I'd have to haul my butt to Excellency's fancy home or maybe the park where he walked most mornings and I'd be "fired" from the pack.

"But I should finish this report."

If he was being let go in the morning, he could forget about that damned paperwork, but pointing that out seemed kinda cruel.

"You're distraught and you can't do a good job in that frame of mind. Sleep and tomorrow you'll see a way to finishing it.

Or not. If he loses his job he can maybe get pregnant. My wolf wanted a little wolf running around the house. But I didn't need to point out that any child of ours might be human. There was anecdotal evidence that in shifter/human unions, most of the offspring were shifter, but there was no guarantee.

We both wanted kids, but our relationship was so new, we were enjoying what little time we had just the two of us.

I picked Braylon up, telling him to leave his car at the office and I'd take him to work tomorrow. He was in no state to be behind the wheel. When he got in the car, he was pale and a little shaky, and he fell asleep during the drive home.

My mate was too exhausted for a shower or to brush his teeth, so he rinsed with mouthwash and collapsed into bed partly clothed.

In the morning, I considered having him call in sick because he crawled out of bed at the last moment and stood under the shower swaying. Dropping him off at 8:50 I waited until he made it through the revolving door and drove off. A smile crept over my lips because those doors confused both of us. We were meant to find one another.

I was in the elevator with eight others when my phone buzzed. Before I could say hello, my mate asked if I could talk. I got off at my floor and went into the stairwell.

“Guess what?” He didn’t sound upset, but maybe he wanted to be fired and he was ecstatic.

“Tell me!”

“My boss is a shifter.”

“Okay.” Braylon couldn’t yet identify shifters by their scent. His company could be majority shifters for all he knew. There were shifter scents wafting about in the street outside, but that was the same for most places.

“And he told me something.”

“Go on.” He was stretching this out when I’d expected him to yell, “I still have a job,” or “I’ve been fired.”

“He asked me questions about my health which I thought was inappropriate, and I was ready to contact HR.”

I let out my wolf’s growl and was about to race over there and shift. Excellency and his rules be damned if all the humans witnessed my fur.

“He asked if I was mated because he scented a wolf.”

Now I really wanted to tear the guy apart. Braylon was my mate and his boss needed to keep his claws away from him.

“Whoa, I’m coming to get you.”

“No,” he screeched, and I held the phone away from my head. My wolf complained about the ringing in his ear.

“He suggested I might be pregnant if I was newly mated because, you know…”

You know what? My wolf mustn’t have heard the pregnant part and was curious about the unfinished bit.

“What if I am?” he gushed. “It would explain my lack of appetite and my exhaustion.”

“That would be amazing.” I was squeeing at maybe becoming a dad.

But my wolf was demanding an answer to “You know what.”

When an alpha and omega are newly mated, they have a lot of sex .

Oh, that . He always hunkered down and slept during sexy times and said he wished they had noise-cancelling headphones for shifter wolves.

“He’s impressed with my work, especially as I’m so tired, and has given me the day off. I have a job I love, and I might have a little one inside me.”

Racing into my boss’s office, I explained my husband might be pregnant, and she told me to go home as I’d been working long hours.

“Home?” I asked my mate as he slumped into the front seat.

“Shouldn’t we get a test or something? Or does your wolf have to sniff me?”

I pulled over, my hands on the wheel trembling. Shifters’ beasts were able to suss out a pregnancy, so how come mine hadn’t?

My wolf harrumphed and reminded me Braylon had affected my scenting ability when we met. But I hadn’t noticed a deficiency since then.

I have to be in my fur.

“You are so smart,” I told my mate as I pulled into traffic.

“That’s old news.” He giggled and rested his hands on his belly. “I mated you, right?”

I stopped at a red light and leaned over and kissed him.

“It’s a shame we can’t be in the woods where I first saw you naked. That would be cool to find out I was pregnant in that place.”

If he wanted that, I could drive to the airport and catch the first flight to Springfield. But when I suggested it, he put a hand on my arm.

“I’m tired, so our woods are fine.”

Not that we owned them, but we’d been there when we could snatch an hour of free time. Braylon admitted he would never be outdoorsy, but he was content to spread a blanket on the grass and wait while my beast hunted.

“Maybe if I am pregnant, and we introduce the little one to Aunt Ellie and Uncle

Saul, we can take the baby to that place where you got naked. It's special."

Trains were also special and missed planes, a housewarming gift that Braylon's aunt opened and placed a pic of us inside. Even the snarky guy on the train who I suspected warned Excellency about us. But that no longer mattered.

I parked the car, and we walked into the forest. Most people were at work or school, so I hoped we weren't going to be disturbed. Taking Braylon's hand, we traipsed off the trail, and when we were hidden in the trees, I stripped down.

My beast took his fur and approached my mate. He sniffed his belly and circled him. He was biding his time, and I begged him to tell me. But he was enjoying the moment.

Take your skin , he ordered.

I did and pulled on my clothes, wanting to be dressed when he made the announcement.

"Well?" I said out loud.

He is, you are .

"You are," I yelled. My mate and I held hands and leaped up and down.

"We have to tell Aunt Ellie and Uncle Saul." He took the phone from his pocket.

"Wait. On the phone or in person?" Today was Friday, so we could catch a flight and return Sunday.

"Really? Or a train trip like the first time?"

I convinced him a plane was quicker, as we had two and a half days, and I drove to the airport.

“I can’t wait to see their faces, and we can show the baby our clearing.”

“But no mention of bare butts and swinging dicks.”

As we waited to board the flight, one of the staff at the gate said, “I remember you. The toothpaste guy. Did you get where you wanted to go?”

“I did and more.”

FOURTEEN

brAYLON

“Do you want to go out for dinner, cook, or order in?” Adan was flicking through TV stations while lying on the couch. He didn’t give off a “let’s get dressed up and go out on the town” vibe.

But I was itching to do something that we wouldn’t be able to do once the baby arrived.

“One of my favorite horror films is showing at the drive-in.”

Adan sat up and leaned on the back of the sofa. His face was blanched of color. He wasn’t a huge fan of being frightened. By a shifter or someone threatening me? He was a warrior. But watching a scary movie? That was a big nope.

“A drive-in? I wasn’t aware Fairview had a drive-in.”

“It brings back memories.”

He growled, a playful one but a sign that he was experiencing a pang of jealousy.

“Not sure I want to hear them.”

I plonked myself on the couch beside him. While I refused to hide my history, I wasn’t going to shove it in his face. Besides, we’d discussed previous relationships

and agreed neither of us had ever had a serious one.

“You’re so funny when you put your wolf at the forefront of your gaze.”

Adan harrumphed. Though he was pleased I loved his wolf, he’d expected me to be a teeny bit frightened because I was human. But his beast was a softie with me, though I’d seen the other side of him, tearing a rabbit to shreds.

I checked the drive-in schedule and what was sold in the concession stand.

“They have pretzels.” I flipped the phone around and showed him the pic of someone dipping a pretzel into cheese sauce.

“I’m in.” He grabbed a coat and put on his shoes. “It’s not too too scary, is it?”

I giggled at my big brave alpha shifter being frightened by a movie with monsters or vampires.

“I’ll protect you, babe.” I rubbed my tiny belly. “Me and the baby.” I flexed my arm, showing him my bicep, and I imagined the baby doing the same, though at this stage our little one wasn’t recognizable as a baby. Not really.

“I’ll have to alpha up.” He kissed the back of my neck, making me tingly. “Can’t have me cowering in the back seat while you’re in front eating my pretzel.”

“Nah. You can keep your pretzel. Nachos and a slushy all the way.”

We piled into the car and my mate drove. I related a story my aunt and uncle told me of when they were at college and how some of their friends used to sneak into the drive-in theater in the trunk of their friend’s car. They assured me they’d never done that and had always paid.

“When I last went to a drive-in, we paid by the car. People were jammed in the back seat.”

I explained that some places charged by the person and others by the vehicle. My guess was the ones near college campuses charged by the car, except the one near the university Aunt Ellis and Uncle Saul attended.

“I wish they still had the window speakers.” The sound was crackly, but it was part of the drive-in experience.

“This is much better.” Adan adjusted the car radio to the correct station, allowing us to hear the movie previews and the advertisements.

I gave him my food order and tucked a pillow behind my back. I was in the early stages of pregnancy, so sitting in a car for a few hours wasn’t a problem. Snuggling under the blanket we’d brought, I chatted to my baby, telling them to sleep while the movie was playing.

Adan brought the food, and I shared my blanket, putting my feet in his lap.

The movie began, and Adan squeaked, “Not monsters but zombies.” He put his hands to his mouth, reminding me of a squirrel nibbling nuts.

We had a joke about zombies. When my mate was being silly, he’d often imitate that stilted zombie walk with arms outstretched and the glazed expression, and I’d try to escape his clutches.

“Their faces, their twisted mouths.” He yanked the blanket over his head, and I rubbed the soles of my feet on his thigh, hoping that might calm him.

He flipped the blanket off so only one eye was showing. “You’re giving me a hard-

on.”

Much as I adored my mate, I wasn't giving him a blow job or a hand job at the drive-in. No way.

“You're missing the best part.” I nibbled my nachos, eyes on the screen. There was something about watching a beloved film or re-reading a book. It was comforting, even though there were no surprises.

Anticipating when the zombies killed one of the main characters's sidekicks, I tensed. But poor Adan was distraught.

“I liked him. Why did he have to become a zombie.”

“How's your wolf enjoying the film?” If my mate was scared, did that emotion transmit to his beast? There were plenty of times when Adan said his wolf disagreed with him, so maybe not.

“He loves it and is complaining when he can't see.”

“Maybe I should bring him next time,” I joked. Perhaps there were shifter events where I could take his wolf. I'd have to investigate.

“Oh, how can they escape?” Adan's body quivered, and the zombie army marched on the humans.

“I'm not telling.”

“Is this good for the baby? Maybe we should leave? Our little one might never come out if they think zombies rule the world.”

“We can go if you want.”

He glanced at me and grinned. “No way. Besides, there’s something thrilling about being scared but knowing you’re safe.”

His words resonated. I’d been not frightened but uncomfortable that day on the train when the asshole was being mean and Adan shielded me from his words. And when he revealed his wolf, I’d been bewildered and on the verge of a meltdown, even though I froze. But knowing Adan was in there somewhere, I trusted he’d keep me safe.

And like any pregnant omega, I couldn’t wait to meet our child, but coupled with that was fear of the birth and not being a good dad. But with Adan at my side, I was confident we’d do great.

“Oh my gods, yes. I didn’t expect that. Mow those zombies down.” Adan was yelling, and people in the next car stared at him shaking his fist and slamming the steering wheel.

“Adan, I feel something.” I gripped my belly.

“Yeah, the zombies are getting their ass kicked.”

“No.” I took his hand and placed it on my small bump. We waited and the baby kicked. “Our little one likes zombies.”

“How do you know? Maybe they’re scared.”

“Nah, that was an ‘I love horror films’ kick.” I patted my bump, confident I was right.

“I’m outnumbered. You, my wolf and the baby cheering and me hiding under the covers.”

“Don’t worry. Look.”

We watched the final battle, and I wondered if centuries ago, shifters had fought battles. Had they been considered the bad guys and that was what forced them to be secretive?

“Happy the good guys won?” I tossed the blanket in the back seat and gathered the trash.

“I kinda feel sad for some of the zombies. It wasn’t their fault they were turned. And my favorite standing on the hill, watching his comrades be killed and knowing his best friend would kill him.” He clutched his chest. “That was horrible.”

“Life, huh. It’s rarely black and white.”

I gave Adan the trash, and he got out of the car.

“Enjoy the film?” a voice boomed out of the darkness.

“Holy shit, what the...?”

Adan dropped the trash as Excellency appeared. “Sorry. Did I spook you?”

“N-N-No. I’m a little rattled after the zombie attacks.”

Excellency rubbed his hands. “I love them.” He did the Adan move, putting his hands out and weaving around the space between the cars while my mate was on his knees picking up garbage.

“Want any help?” I asked.

“Nah.”

Excellency paused his zombie impression to congratulate us on the baby. “I look forward to welcoming the little one into the shifter community, and you also, Braylon.” He studied Adan on the ground. “You need to be more careful. You never know when a zombie might appear.”

He vanished into the night.

Adan returned to the car after dumping the trash in the garbage.

“Excellency has a sense of humor.” I suppressed a snigger.

He harrumphed and started the car. “Maybe. He likes you though, so I’m pleased about that.”

“Why do you think he doesn’t like you?”

“He made life difficult when it would have been so easy to show you my wolf.”

I placed a hand on his shoulder. “Maybe he wanted you to work for it. And you did.”

Him taking me into the woods and shifting was too easy. I had to fall in love even though our “courtship” was condensed compared to most human relationships.

I giggled, thinking of naked Adan in the woods that day and him fibbing he was a CFA.

“Hey, babe. Wanna play zombie and humans when we get home?”

“Huh?” He pulled into the driveway.

“In bed.”

FIFTEEN

ADAN

“You want to do what?” Aunt Ellie’s face loomed large on the laptop.

“Deliver the baby in the woods.” Braylon shared a glance with me before looking at the screen.

“Why not in a hospital? What if something goes wrong?” I wished I could reach through the screen and give Ellie a hug. She wanted what was best for the nephew she’d parented.

“I’ll have a midwife and...” Braylon hesitated, but we’d discussed this and I’d assured him I’d be in human form and so would the midwife and the baby, “...and if you’d like to be there.”

Ellie burst into tears, wiping them away with the back of her hand until Saul appeared with a box of tissues.

“I’d love to, darling. Thank you.”

My mate hadn’t issued an invitation to Saul, as his uncle was squeamish about blood and bodily functions.

“I’ll man the fort here with food for after the baby arrives.” Saul poked his head over his wife’s shoulder.

We said our goodbyes and signed off.

“I’ve asked you this a thousand times, but your wolf won’t take his fur just before or after the baby arrives, will he?” Braylon rubbed his bump as he walked into the kitchen and grabbed a snack.

“No. He knows the deal.”

“Okay.” My mate nibbled a cereal bar and wandered into the nursery.

Is it musical furniture time? My wolf was curious about the concept of nesting because in the wild, wolves made a den before they gave birth. In our house, nesting required me to move furniture from one place to another until Braylon was satisfied. He would then take all the baby clothes from the drawers and refold them before putting them back.

Not sure . But I pulled up my sleeves, ready to get sweaty.

“Something isn’t quite right.” My mate sat in the rocking chair and peered around the room we’d decorated.

I had the laptop and phone ready to order whatever he wanted. Living in the city allowed our purchases to be delivered the following day. We were still a few weeks from the delivery date, so we had time to get whatever Braylon insisted we’d forgotten.

“Adan, the nursery’s in the wrong place.”

Oh, that was more than I expected. I’d be moving the furniture to what was now our home office. It’d take all day, but it was the weekend, so I had time.

“I’ll get everything out of the office and you can show me where to put the nursery furniture.”

He grabbed my hand. “Don’t take this the wrong way.”

I hugged him and kissed the top of his head. “You want professionals to do it? That’s fine.” My ego would survive my mate thinking my skills were not up to his standard.

“Wrong house, wrong city. Right mate, right wolf, right baby.”

My mate had the ability to surprise, even shock me, and my mouth hung open. We could afford a bigger house and mortgage, but bigger wasn’t necessarily better. I wasn’t the kinda guy that gathered more stuff just to have... more stuff.

But he was suggesting we move to a different town. Oh, it dawned on me what he was saying as he stroked the tattoo on his hand. While the mark my wolf made was our mating mark, the tat was more visible, and Braylon was very attached to it because he had taken a leap of faith and agreed to be my partner before I’d shown him my beast.

Taking both his hands, I said, “You want to be closer to Ellie and Saul.”

He sniffed and nodded. “I’m sorry. The bond you and I have is unbreakable. And while the connection I have with my aunt and uncle is different, it’s also indestructible.”

I pulled him onto the nursery daybed. “This will take some planning.” I’d have to find a job in Springfield, though Adan’s boss had agreed he could work from home after his paternity leave.

“I don’t expect it to happen before the baby’s born, but I’d like us to think about it.”

There was nothing tying me here. Our pack was based in town and the surrounding areas, but I doubted Alpha would refuse to let me leave.

The move made sense, because whenever we had a free weekend we flew to Springfield, and Ellie and Saul would collect us and drive to Rosedale. If the distance between the small town and Springfield were shorter, we could have lived in Rosedale. But I didn't want to make that commute every day.

Braylon got up and paced round the room. "I feel a little weird."

"The baby?" I shot up. We'd planned the birth in Rosedale. "Contractions?"

"No. But something is different."

Is the birth imminent? I asked my wolf. He wasn't familiar with the word "imminent" but said it was sooner than it had been. Not being a hundred percent certain what that meant, I decided we should catch a flight today. Braylon would be upset if he couldn't deliver in the woods.

It was four weeks before his due date! That worried me a little, though all the literature said the baby was considered full-term at thirty-seven weeks. One week to go. But Braylon might not hold on until then.

We'd planned to take the train two weeks before his due date because the domestic airlines wouldn't let a pregnant omega fly after thirty-six weeks. My mate's bump was very small, and he was thirty-six weeks today. We'd have to go now or take the train or drive. No heavily pregnant omega wanted to be cooped up in a car for five hours.

I grabbed our two roll-on suitcases from the closet and tossed my clothes in one. My mate already has his bag packed and another for the baby. On the way to the airport,

my mate booked our flights. Not wanting to alert Ellie and Saul the baby might be early, we'd rent a car from the airport.

"You again." Gods, it was the same woman. Was she on duty permanently? Knowing we might fly in the weeks before the birth, Braylon had a certificate from a shifter doctor just in case.

They let us on after counting the days until his due date.

"You just squeaked in," she noted. "Don't go into labor on the flight."

Yikes, I wasn't superstitious, but saying that was a huge red flag to the universe. The flight was only one hour, so if the contractions started, my mate would still be laboring when the plane landed. Not that I wanted the baby to be born on a plane or an airport arrival lounge. My mate deserved a soft, peaceful environment to bring our child into the world.

Braylon grunted as he put on his seatbelt, and while the doors closed and we taxied onto the runway, he shifted his butt, saying he couldn't get comfortable. No one would call seats in economy comfortable.

"One hour and we'll be off the plane."

We rose into the air, and I counted the minutes. Once the seatbelt sign was off, Braylon went to the bathroom, saying needed to move. He insisted he could go alone, but I walked in front in case he fell.

"You okay, love?" I rapped on the door. I hated plane bathrooms, they were so tiny and claustrophobic. My mate and his big belly might get wedged in there.

"Yeah."

But when Braylon opened the door, his face was paler than when he'd entered. I took his arm and checked my watch. Thirty minutes remaining.

"My water broke." Though Braylon had spoken in a whisper, shifters in the economy section leaped up, some turned around, and others yelled, "A man is in labor."

Humans, who didn't have shifters' supersonic hearing, glanced around. Flight attendants raced down the aisle, and one alerted the captain, but as we were about to start our descent, there was no turning around.

We got my mate into business class which was almost empty. The baby wouldn't be born on the plane. Labor was long and... and...

"I want to push." My mate grunted and gripped his bump.

"Now?" I blurted out and wished I could take it back when he glared at me. "Sorry." Shit, I was about to become a father and already F-ing it up. I grabbed the carry-on bag with the baby's things.

The staff moved the business-class passengers and drew the curtains. They bought water and blankets, and a shifter doctor offered to stay close. The contractions were close together, and Braylon yelled again that he had to push. I pushed the seat back so it was almost flat and got his pants and underwear off.

He parted his legs, and I kneeled on the carpet. With both hands on his knees, he bore down and groaned before falling back panting.

"Again," he moaned.

I'd watched vids of omegas giving birth, but this was my mate and our child. Tears streamed down my cheeks, and I stifled my sobs, not wanting Braylon to misinterpret

my tears as fear or sadness.

The baby's head crowned, which was the only part that was familiar from the classes we'd attended. Everything was so fast, as though someone had sped up the video twice or four times.

I held the baby blanket as Braylon delivered our daughter. Making sure she had her fingers and toes, I wrapped her and placed her on my mate's chest.

"It's a girl," one of the flight attendants yelled, and a huge cheer erupted from the economy section.

"Do you think she'll get a lifetime of free flights?" Braylon asked as he kissed our daughter's brow.

SIXTEEN

brAYLON

“Night, night,” I crooned as Adan and I stood beside Alora’s crib.

“She’s asleep,” he mouthed, and we tiptoed toward the nursery door, leaving the nightlight on.

Our little girl was going through a stage of not sleeping. She’d been a trouper since birth, but the past week, we’d been up countless times, and both Adan and I trudged through our days with dark circles under our eyes while mainlining caffeine.

We crept outside and closed the door. I hardly dared to breathe, thinking she’d wake. We were convinced she was a shifter because the tiniest noise disturbed her.

“Tea?” Adan yawned and headed toward the kitchen.

“Too tired, babe.” I trudged into the bathroom, brushed my teeth and washed my face, before tumbling headfirst into bed. Ahhh, the soft pillow, firm mattress, and the clean sheets I’d put on the bed earlier, one of the only things I’d accomplished today other than looking after, playing with, and loving our daughter.

But as I drifted off, Alora’s cry rang out from the baby monitor. Stuffing the pillow over my head, I counted the seconds, hoping she’d put herself back to sleep.

“I’ll get her.” Adan stuck his head in the door before disappearing to the nursery.

I should have drifted off, but he was singing to our little girl and pacing the floor. Since being mated to a shifter, my hearing had improved, and I picked up voices and sounds I hadn't been able to before Adan and I moved in together.

Alora continued to cry, and I heaved myself up and stumbled into the nursery.

"Let me try." Cuddling our little girl, I swayed and hummed while begging the universe to soothe her to sleep.

But she continued to howl with her eyes open. Adan reached over and stroked her cheek.

"Let me try something."

While he didn't give his wolf his fur, he allowed him to manifest in his gaze.

Alora's cries quietened, though her chest shuddered with the occasional sob, while she studied the wolf in her alpha father's eyes.

"She likes my beast."

I put our baby in my mate's arms and she lay, her eyes open wide as he held her close. But though Adan wandered around the room, singing a lullaby, and Alora was no longer crying, she also wasn't going to sleep. And she showed no sign of being tired.

"I have a suggestion." I asked Adan if I held the baby while he shifted and his beast could lie on the rug. I'd put Alora beside him and maybe the warmth of his body, his breath, and scent would help her to sleep.

He agreed and told me his wolf was honored to help with the baby. I hoped it would

work because even Adan's beast was lacking sleep after listening to Alora cry every night.

I nestled the baby beside the wolf and covered her with a blanket before I got on the beanbag beside them. No way was I getting on the hard floor.

With a hand resting on my mate's beast and Alora, their breathing in tandem, I was alert, anticipating our baby's cry. Not wanting to disturb her by moving and having the beanbag heave and crumble, I counted backward from a hundred, but never made it.

When I opened my eyes, the sun was streaming in the window and I had a quilt over me. Adan wasn't in sight, and both the wolf and Alora were gone.

Flinging the quilt off me, I tore into the living room to find Alora in her high chair and Adan feeding our daughter rice cereal.

"Was she okay?" If the baby had been awake all night and Adan had let me sleep, I owed him big time.

"Yes." His wide grin assured me he wasn't peeved I'd left him on all-night duty.

"And you?"

"Both my wolf and I caught up on much-needed rest."

I kissed the top of Alora's head and fell into Adan's arms. "Thank you."

"It was your idea." We smooched, and Alora gurgled.

After pouring coffee, I asked, "Are you as well rested when you're in wolf form as in

human?”

“Absolutely. Better because I don’t have to think about whether I need a drink of water, if the alarm is on, or if the phone buzzes. Those distractions are not present when my beast has his fur.”

His reasoning didn’t reassure me that he was in touch with what our daughter was doing. I formed a sentence in my head, needing an answer, but not wanting to upset my mate because he was the best dad and partner.

“But—”

Adan cut me off. “My wolf would have alerted me if the baby needed a diaper change or was crying. He would have woken the second she was distressed.”

I patted his chest, feeling guilty that I’d doubted him. “Sorry.”

“No need to apologize. Your first priority is Alora, as is mine.”

Despite being mated to a shifter, there was still a lot I had to learn about their world.

“I can shift again tonight if she won’t settle.”

And that brought up another question. “What if sleeping with your wolf becomes a crutch and she expects to do that every night?”

Adan shrugged. “I don’t see the problem.” He peppered kisses on my lips. “You can sleep in our bed.” He chortled. “We all can.”

“We’d need a bigger bed,” I deadpanned.

But our daughter would need to put herself to sleep as she grew older. Also, she'd have human friends and might have sleepovers. She'd go to college and have a boyfriend or find a mate if she was a shifter.

"Alora can't rely on your wolf forever."

"He says it's no problem."

Yikes. Thinking of our baby growing up and leaving home brought tears to my eyes, and my chest constricted, making it hard to breathe. But how did I explain to a shifter wolf, nestled inside my mate that the little one he adored would grow up and leave home.

"Tell him thank you."

But regarding Alora's sleeping patterns, we'd have to decide if we were willing to have a short-term gain in return for long-term pain. I didn't have an answer, and it was something my mate and I would have to agree on.

Adan interrupted my thoughts. "What if my wolf played with Alora before bedtime, maybe tiring her out, and she might be willing to go to sleep by herself?"

Hmmm, the hour before bedtime should be about winding down, not overstimulating a child. And Alora was only just sitting up. She couldn't walk or crawl, so I wasn't sure how much playing she'd do. Observing? Yes. Squealing? Okay. But making her sleepy? I wasn't certain.

A yawn crept up on me because one good night's rest didn't make up for the week of no sleep.

As Alora's bedtime drew near, we bathed her and dressed her in her wolfie sleep suit.

Adan disappeared into our room to shift while I settled into the beanbag with our daughter on my lap.

“Who’s that, Alora?” I whispered as the beast padded into the room.

She shook her hands and giggled while raising her tiny fists in the air. The wolf picked up a ball in his mouth and rolled it over the floor. It hit the beanbag and Alora kicked her legs against me.

I placed the ball on my daughter’s palm and covering her hand with mine, we tossed the ball to the wolf.

When Alora got bored with the ball game, the wolf hid behind the door. Our daughter sat still, something she rarely did, and when the beast pounced out, she shrieked. Worried she was scared, I cuddled her, but she craned her neck toward Adan’s beast.

Ten minutes later after the wolf hid a number of times, our daughter yawned. Taking the hint and hoping she wouldn’t complain, I placed her in the crib, and Adan shifted. We wished her good night and crept out of the room.

Not taking her sleepiness for granted, I stood outside the door, braced for her to cry, and when I checked the monitor, she was asleep.

“I was wrong,” I told my mate as I slid under the comforter.

“How so? Seemed as though it went pretty well.”

“One size doesn’t fit all.” Just because some babies needed a bedtime story and a calm environment didn’t mean our child did. And Alora had shifter blood in her veins, whether she was a shifter or not. I couldn’t compare our child with the human baby across the street.

“So what’s the verdict?” Adan put his arm around me, and I rested my head on his chest. “I vote for letting my wolf help with bedtime, and we can wean her off that routine as she gets older.”

“Yes.” It might not be right for other shifters, but my mate and I needed to function in the real world. We couldn’t do that if we were zombie-like. I opened my mouth to continue, but Adan put a finger to my lips.

“I love you, but no more talking, babe. Let’s sleep.”

“I like the way you think.”

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 9:30 am

“I’ve been looking forward to this for so long, but now I’m sad.”

Braylon walked through the almost empty house while I followed with Alora on my hip. What remained near the front door were our personal belongings, trash, and some items to donate.

“There are memories here. The first night I joined you here. Being pregnant and Alora’s first few months and those sleepless nights.”

Maybe he doesn’t want to move . My wolf was concerned Braylon wanted to back out of us moving to Springfield to be closer to Ellie and Saul.

It would take too long to explain, so I told him the house contained special memories.

Take your memories with you . My wolf was one smart cookie.

“Remember the time capsule you took to Ellie and Saul’s?” I phrased the sentence oddly because he would always remember it. He created it, and we kept forgetting about it. I plowed on. “What if we made a time capsule for our time in this house and took it to our new one?”

He flung his arms around me and our daughter. “You’re so smart. Why didn’t I think of that?”

With most of our stuff gone, we’d have to get creative. We were giving our old printer to a friend, but it was still here, so I hooked it up and chose pics to print.

Braylon took my hand. “Outside. We can get pics of us with Alora. We don’t have many with her in the garden.” The weather had been lousy since her birth.

My mate stuck flowers between his teeth and posed for the camera. We made a crown of daisies for the baby, and she giggled as we danced in a circle while I videoed. Dex, the puppy we’d adopted and named after Excellency, barked and raced around the yard, unaware this was the last time he’d be here.

We collected flowers and pressed them between the pages of a book. My mate found the medical certificate he’d taken on the plane. He still had it tucked into his backpack. We included a sock Alora had outgrown, the one she’d worn when only a few hours old, and a pebble from the garden.

We sat and wrote letters to each other and to our daughter. Putting my emotions into words was so hard, and I puzzled over what to write. But when we dug up the capsule in twenty years, I hoped she would pore over them and keep them close even after my mate and I went to the goddess.

“Maybe we can get one of Uncle Saul’s cake tins to put the things in.” Braylon collected the items and placed them in a paper bag.

I ordered food because we wouldn’t get anything on the plane, maybe a bag of stale nuts if I paid for them.

“Last meal.” Braylon accepted the food delivery and tipped generously. He’d gotten to know the delivery guy well over the last year and was sad to say goodbye. We all took a photo, and Braylon sent it to him.

“Another one for the time capsule.” Braylon printed it and stuffed the photo in the bag.

I took out the trash, and our next-door neighbor who volunteered at a charity shop,

collected the donation bags and the printer for our friend.

“That’s it.” I checked every room and placed our suitcases and all baby paraphernalia near the door. Dex reluctantly went into his doggie crate, and my friend Jason collected him. We’d pick up our fur baby in the morning.

A reminder on my phone beeped. “We’d better get going. Don’t want to be late.” That was a joke in our house because we’d met because I was late and missed my flight.

But we were spending our last evening in a hotel because we had a special function to attend at Excellency’s home. It was to welcome the newly mated into the pack, whether they were human or shifter. Braylon and I should have attended before Alora’s birth, but he wasn’t well and was busy with his new job, and I’d made excuses to Alpha and Excellency.

“Let’s hope Alora doesn’t spit up and we have to bathe her at the hotel before leaving.”

We probably should have allowed more time at the hotel other than dumping our bags, a diaper change—for our daughter, though maybe that was in our future when we were older—and out the door.

But as we were getting into the taxi, Jason called. He’d had a family emergency and couldn’t look after Dex tonight. “I’ll wait outside with him.”

Shit. What to do with our very energetic puppy? He couldn’t stay at the hotel, but maybe our soon-to-be ex next door neighbor could take him.

Nope. Their little boy was allergic to dogs, Braylon reminded me.

We had RSVP’d Excellency, and despite the large number of people invited, he

would know if we weren't there.

"We have to take him. To Excellency's."

"What?" my mate screeched. He lowered his voice as the driver gave him a hard stare in the rearview mirror. "We can't smuggle him in."

That wasn't happening, because all the shifters would scent Dex. "We need to contain him."

Thinking of our puppy racing around Excellency's pristine home, peeing, pooping, chewing furniture, and stealing food, I wondered if we should cancel and brave Excellency's displeasure. But this occasion wasn't just for me. It was for Braylon and Alora.

"You carry Alora, and I'll put Dex in the sling." We couldn't hide him, but he wouldn't cause any mischief lying against my chest. He might pee on me, but better that than on Excellency's expensive rugs.

We made it on time after collecting Dex, and like others before him, my mate was impressed by Excellency's home.

"I don't want to know how he can afford this place." We strolled along the sidewalk toward the house, surrounded by countless other couples, some with babies, others with large families, and some couples where the omega was pregnant.

"It belongs to us too. All shifters."

Braylon side-eyed me. "So instead of paying for the hotel tonight, we could have bunked down here?" His cheeky grin suggested he wasn't being serious.

"Best not to mention that to Excellency." He could get defensive when people

commented on the size of the house.

Kids came up to me wanting to pet Dex, and I squatted while they patted his head. He lapped up the attention, wiggling and whining to get down, but that wasn't happening.

"Do all shifters have babies?" Braylon asked as he twisted his head and inspected the omegas' bellies.

"No." Just like humans, there were couples who didn't want children or sadly couldn't have them. "But the instinct to produce offspring is strong, and shifters are very family-oriented."

My mate shot me a look. "Hmmm, okay, except yours." Though that was partly true. They adored my brother, me not so much. But I shook those thoughts away because not only did I have a mate and daughter, but de facto parents in Ellie and Saul.

"This is stunning." Braylon gazed upward at the intricate ceiling, now festooned with lights and garlands of flowers.

"My friend Rhett probably did the flowers."

We nodded and greeted Alpha as we passed by. He acknowledged us with a tilt of his chin, which was more than I expected. But he caught a whiff of Dex and his expression changed. He strode toward us, and Braylon, my brave human mate, got between Alpha and me.

"Alpha, it was unavoidable. The dog sitter cancelled."

"You misunderstand my intentions, Braylon." Alpha put his face close to Dex and kissed his head.

Wow! I'd never witnessed Alpha exhibiting such warmth to any of our wolf shifters. Or anyone, really.

"Horatio!" Excellency's booming voice was unmistakable.

If we got thrown out, we could lounge by the hotel pool for the afternoon.

No. You have the dog.

Oh, shit. How could I forget? He was nestled against my chest.

"And who is this?" Excellency elbowed Alpha out of the way and patted Dex.

I introduced him and cringed when I said we'd named the dog after him. But Excellency exhibited a broad smile and asked to hold Dex, saying it had been a long time since there'd been a dog in the house. He whisked Dex away and held onto him while he gave a speech and fed him dog snacks.

Alora fell asleep, and Braylon and I circulated while I introduced him to shifters and their mates, including Rhett, Morgan, and their twins.

"So that's how you get on Excellency's good side?" Rhett noted and gave me a wry smile.

"Who knew?" I replied.

As people were enjoying the buffet, Excellency brought Dex back.

"I hope you won't be strangers and you'll visit us every so often."

I assured him we would, as my head office was here in Fairview.

But when he discovered we were in a hotel for one night, his eyes lit up.

“Dex can stay with me.” It wasn’t a question.

Braylon and I shared a glance. “That’s so kind of you. But he’s a puppy and...”

“He is going to do what puppies do. Come by in the morning and you can have him back.”

“Sounded like he wanted to keep Dex,” Braylon whispered.

“Maybe. But that’s just Excellency’s way.”

“Now if Alora sleeps early and doesn’t need your wolf, maybe we can enjoy that huge hotel bed and room service.”

Braylon tucked his arm in mine, and we strolled out of the building and headed toward our new life.

THANK YOU FOR READING.