



# LENNY AND HIS JACKRABBIT



*Winterjack*



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LENNY AND HIS  
JACKRABBIT  
LUMBERJACK

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AN MM SHIFTER MPREG ROMANCE

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SURRENDERED PRESS

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**LENNY AND HIS JACKRABBIT LUMBERJACK**

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## LENNY

“Why did I agree to a job interview in this weather, and so close to the holidays?”

I spoke out loud but it wasn't as though the voice in my head—that often told me I was a fool—was going to answer. And I didn't have an invisible friend who accompanied me everywhere who could warn me before I made a bad decision. Wonder what that would be like? Peering into the back seat, I discovered it as empty as I expected. Only my overnight bag and an empty water bottle—that wasn't going to help me.

“So this is on me?” My voice echoed around the car, confirming my solitude. I'd been on my own for a few years, my parents having passed away in a car accident, so I was used to figuring things out for myself. Didn't make me miss them less, especially when my friends were going home to their folks for weekends.

The job interview itself wasn't a bad idea. I was perfect for the position. Everything on my resumé was relevant and was almost a stepping stone leading and pointing to the marketing manager vacancy that I hoped would eventually be mine.

The head of HR had offered to conduct the interview after the holidays, but I suspected other candidates would take earlier slots, before the company closed between Christmas and New Year. They wouldn't have been put off by a crowded plane or snow on the roads in order to get to the interview. They were hungry for the position, and I had to be too. So, instead of sitting in front of a fire sipping a hot drink, my car was plowing through snow on a pretty much deserted highway.



There were occasional pinpricks of light on either side of the road, indicating a building with people inside who were probably warm and toasty. People with families that included parents, a significant other, and maybe kids.

I sighed and concentrated on driving. Not for the first time, I raged at the company refusing to do remote interviews, especially at this time of year, when planes were crowded and hotel bookings were scarce, and the rooms themselves were either expensive or gross.

My headlights picked up a road sign showing the distance to my destination: one hundred miles. On a fine day or even a summer's night, that last stretch would have been a breeze. Pleasant even. I would have arrived in the city in time to check in to my hotel, grab dinner, and head to bed early so I'd be well-rested for the interview.

Instead, I was hunched over the steering wheel, squinting through the windshield as I crawled along while watching for black ice on the road. I had both my headlights and the hazard lights on, and I hoped that the few vehicles on the road would be driving slowly and be as visible as mine.

I contemplated pulling onto the shoulder or getting off at the next exit, but the car made the decision for me. An abrasive grinding coming from the engine yanked me out of my "must get through this storm" mindset. Having preferred fishing and playing soccer to tinkering under the hood of a car when I was growing up, I had no clue what the grating sound meant but the goose bumps skittering over my skin were my subconscious issuing a warning. The red lights on the dashboard were probably not a good sign, either.

The engine died, and I managed to steer the car off the road. Shit. If roadside assistance didn't come straight away, I wouldn't make it to the city tonight and would miss my 9:00 a.m. interview.

"Damn!" I pummeled the steering wheel with clenched fists, my cheeks bathed in frustrated tears as the job and the life I wanted vanished in the white landscape.

After a few moments, I sniffed and wiped my wet cheeks with the back of my hand. There was still a chance I'd get there on time, but I had to make a call. As I took the phone from the passenger seat, my slightly numb fingers dropped it on the floor. With the engine dead, there was no heat. As I groped on the floor for my phone, I realized missing the interview was the least of my problems.

I pictured the highway patrol finding me in the morning, snow up past the windows and my body a solid block of ice. I shuddered at the thought of them chipping away at me with an ice pick. Okay that was my overactive imagination. They'd use a hair dryer instead. Gods, I had to stop watching really bad late night TV.

Jabbing at the phone, I squinted, because it wasn't responding. I shook it. Did I damage it when I dropped it? Didn't seem likely. Holding it in my palm, I studied the display. Everything appeared the same as—damn, there was no signal.

How much bad luck could one person expect in the space of a few hours? First the shitty weather, then the car, and now being out of contact with the rest of the world. I turned it off and on, my usual solution to technical problems. It usually worked.

Nope, not this time.

The vision of being discovered with icicles hanging from my chin didn't seem so far-fetched now, and missing my interview was now at the bottom of my "bad things currently happening to me" list.

The hazard lights were still working, but even with my scant knowledge of mechanics, I was aware they would eventually drain the battery. No one would see me on the side of the road. The car was white—same color as the world around me.

My breathing sped up while dizzying thoughts ricocheted around my head. I pursed my lips and did my best to slow my breathing to prevent hyperventilating.

*Think, Lenny.* A surge of adrenaline pumped through my veins. No way was I going to sit here hoping someone would

come along before I died of hypothermia. I had to do something.



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## CONALL

“Two whole weeks without us! Whatever are you going to do?” Perry grabbed his keys from the counter. “I vote you go someplace warm instead of sticking around here.”

Perry was going to be one of those move-straight-to-Florida-the-second-he-retired kinds of people, and good for him if that’s what he wanted. That wasn’t in my future plans, though. I’d take the four seasons any day of the week.

“I hope your flight isn’t cancelled.” He and his family were heading to an amusement park down south and were beyond excited. I just hoped their trip went off as planned. The snow was already starting to fly, and if the news was right, it was going to be a pretty hefty amount by the time it was all done.

“Ain’t leavin’ until next week.” He shrugged. “Kids got a few more days of school, and they are at the age where you just can’t miss without falling behind.”

“That’s the worst,” David commiserated.

I was the only one out of our five-man crew that didn’t have a significant other or a child. Brooks was a single father, and Vito had a long-term boyfriend.

None of my current crew were shifters, and they didn’t have the bond a mating would, but they were happy, and that was all that mattered.

We said our goodbyes and headed out. In a weird way, they were my fluffle, or what most shifters called a pack. I was the only non-human in the crew, but other than the not shifting together bit, we were close as a fluffle. Our weeks apart were

great for me to reconnect with my jackrabbit, but I was always counting down the days to get back to them and our work.

The snow was deeper than I'd thought, and I was glad that I already put the chains on my tires in preparation. There was a lot to love about the little community I called home, but their snow removal was not one of them. They were slow as mud, and because everyone planned for that, they didn't work at changing it.

My plan was to run in to the small grocer, grab a bunch of junk food, and run out. As I circled the lot to find a spot to park, I saw how that was very much not going to be the case. The place was packed like I'd never seen it before.

I walked inside and grabbed the last cart. I knew before I even took it that it was Bertha. Why the cart was named Bertha, I had no idea, but everyone knew her because she thudded as you pushed her. You only took Bertha if there was no other choice. And today I was the lucky one.

*Thud. Thud. Thud. Thud.* The noise was already driving me to distraction, and I counted up the things I thought I was going to get just to be sure I needed the cart. I did.

I'd seen the news stories showing bare shelves in stores when we'd had storms, but this was the first time I had witnessed it in real life. It was bad. People were buying far more than they'd need in a week, which was the longest they had ever taken to plow the roads since I lived here. But if that made them comfortable, who was I to argue?

My groceries ended up looking a lot different than I originally envisioned, but they would do.

"You having company?" the older man behind me asked, making small talk as we stood in a line that wove through two aisles.

"No." I half wished I was. I had invited my brother Lexor, but he had to work. Unlike me, he took his love of the forest and turned it into a day job helping make public policy to preserve lands. Whereas I practiced sustainable logging. Both of us were doing our part—it just looked different. "But it's

shutdown for Mapleton Lumber, so I figure I might as well hunker down and enjoy the peace and quiet. How about you? Company coming?"

"All fifteen of my grandkids and their parents." He puffed out with pride and then began telling me all about each and every one of them. I leaned against the cart and listened. It made the wait a thousand times more enjoyable.

It also made me a little bit sad. I'd grown up thinking that I'd have a mate and at least a couple of children by now. I wasn't old by any means—no one called thirty over the hill—but for my fluffle, I was ancient.

"You go ahead of me." I moved to the side and indicated he cut in line. We both had a ton of things, but unlike me, he had people waiting at home for him.

"You sure? My cart isn't even close to express lane worthy."

"I'm sure. You helped make the time move much more quickly for me, and this is my way of saying thanks."

He smiled and pushed his cart up to the conveyor belt, thanking me a few times as he loaded his goods.

It was a good thing I let him ahead of me, because the power flickered a couple of times during my order, and they had to reboot the register and begin all over again. It was far better that happened to me with my chain-wheeled 4X4 than whatever he was driving.

The snow was well past my ankle as I stepped out of the store, and that was in an area where they had already cleared the path before I had arrived. The snow did not aid in Bertha's ability to drive, but I did manage to get her to the truck and back into the store, so that was good.

The snow was getting deep and accumulating far faster than they predicted. At least I only had to drive a handful of miles. I had a feeling even the short distance was going to take a long time.

My feeling was right.





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## LENNY

Every part of me was bone-chillingly cold.

Luckily, I'd put my overnight bag on the back seat rather than in the trunk, along with an overcoat. And I always kept a travel blanket in the car. My friends used to laugh at me, and one of them said I reminded him of his grandpa.

"You never know when you'll need it," he'd rasped in a grandpa voice, while wagging a finger at me.

I'd ignored their teasing, and tonight, stuck on the side of the road, the car rapidly disappearing in the drifting snow, and with no phone reception and a dead engine, I was glad of that trusty blanket.

I wrapped my arms around me, my hands clad in gloves, and stamped my feet on the floor. It was early evening and not one car had passed in the hour or so since I'd been stranded. That didn't bode well for me being rescued, because if no one was venturing out now, it was even less likely a vehicle would come by in the middle of the night.

"Cereal bar!" I yelled. There were two in the glove compartment. Not in case I got stuck in a snow storm, but if I was hungry on the drive home from work. One was slightly stale, but as the chocolate softened on my tongue, it might as well have been ambrosia.

To pass the time, I hummed a favorite tune and belted out the words, followed by reciting the lines of the one poem I remembered from grade school. Funny how back then the words had made no sense, yet now I got what the poet was

expressing about love and loss, and tears crept over my cheeks. But in the universe's quirky way, the tiny bit of warmth on my skin signaled I was still alive and gave me hope I'd get out of this situation.

It wasn't enough. Not the stamping of my feet, or distracting my gloomy thoughts with silly melodies and childish rhymes from happier times. I trawled through my memories of before the car had broken down. Had there been a hill on the left side? One I could hike up to get a signal? The reality was I'd been staring so intently at the road in front of me, looking neither left nor right, so even if there had been, I wouldn't have seen it.

And getting out of the car and heading up an unknown hill—in the dark, during a snow storm—was a recipe for being found frozen solid when spring arrived in a few months.

Rubbing the condensation from the glass, I peered through the snow accumulating on the hood and windshield. That was another potential problem: even if I wanted to get out of the car, my vehicle was quickly becoming snowed in. In frustration, I slammed a fist on the horn. It honked loudly and I jumped in my seat. I had a vague idea the horn was powered by the battery, so with the hazard lights draining power, the horn might not work much longer.

I closed my eyes, because the sea of white rimmed by the dark of night was a dismal sight. As I slowed my breathing, I figured I could stay alive until morning when the storm would hopefully stop and someone could dig me out of this mess—literally.

But when my eyes snapped open, something was different. I blinked, focusing into the distance. There was a dot of light that hadn't been there before. Or maybe it had and I hadn't been paying attention. But that tiny pinprick represented a house with electricity and someone inside, sitting by the fire, maybe enjoying a hot meal with his kids.

*Stop it*, I insisted to my imagination and yanked it back—but not before it went completely overboard and summoned an

image that included a handsome alpha, a cat curled on a mat, and a puppy chewing on the guy's slippers.

That light was a sign of hope. My only one. I made a mental list of what I'd need if I traipsed in that direction. Phone. Not only might I get a signal on the way, but it had a flashlight. More clothing. Layers were always better, so I crawled into the back seat and upended my bag.

It was too cold to remove what I was wearing, so I put two tees, a button up shirt, a sweater, and a coat over the top of what I had on. I exchanged my shoes for boots with additional socks. I already had on my cap, scarf and gloves. Adding my overcoat and the travel blanket over my head and shoulders, I put my wallet in a pocket, along with the car fob.

Part of me wanted to stay where I was. That was the sensible decision, because I was probably safer inside the car than wandering over an unknown landscape. If I had to guess, the light was only a hundred or so yards away. But that was a wild estimate. Any further, and I would freeze to death. One stumble or getting disoriented and moving in the wrong direction would be catastrophic.

But if I stayed in the vehicle and slept while the remaining warmth in the car seeped out, I probably wouldn't wake up. I steeled myself for the drop in temperature and the chill when I exited the car. The snow was amassing against the car but opening the door shouldn't be a problem if I left now.

With my fingers gripping the door handle, my courage deserted me, and I let go. What was I doing? This wasn't a scavenger hunt organized by my soccer buddies, where we fumbled around with torches in the middle of the night and spent most of the time giggling. This was real life. My life.

Taking a deep breath, I cracked open the door. Gods, the wind blew right through me. While I was prepared to shove the door open with my feet, the snow wasn't as high as I predicted, and I got it open enough to squeeze out with a heavy shove from my shoulder.

Huddled over, the wind nearly stealing my breath away, I set off toward that tiny spark of light.



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## CONALL

Even with the chains, getting home took forever and a day. By the time I reached the dirt road I lived on, I'd had to remove the snow out from under my tires twice. Thank goodness I kept sand and a spare shovel in the cab of my truck. This storm was going to be a doozy, certainly more than they said on the radio.

Getting up the hill to my house was easier than I thought it would be thanks to the abundance of trees blocking the snow a bit. It wouldn't stay that way long, but for now it was good. I loved living away from everything and everyone. It gave me the freedom to just be me while I was home.

Technically, I didn't own all of the land surrounding me. My house was sort of wedged in between some protected lands on one side and a farm on the other, which was good. It meant that no one was going to up and build an overpriced summer home or factory up here. Not that there was a big worry about the latter.

I only drove halfway up the driveway when I gave up. It was best to snow blow it away than to pack it down and have to scrape it later. It would have to wait until I put the groceries away. Not everything I picked up would benefit from the freezing cold.

Bags in hand, I trudged through the snow, admiring the beauty of it all. I truly did love it up here and was grateful that I managed to snag this place when it came on the market. It might not have all the conveniences of living in town, but it had everything I needed, including a place to run.

The house was warmer than outside, but not what anyone would consider toasty. I mostly heated by pellets, with an electric backup for when I was gone too long. I'd meant to fill it in the morning but had forgotten. It was an easy fix.

Pellet stove filled and groceries put away, I was ready to run. Only once I got outside, I second guessed myself.

"Stupid snow." I grabbed my winter gear and went out to the garage to grab the snow blower. This was going to be a multiple-snow-removal kind of storm, and it was better to get it done with so I could enjoy my time in my fur.

I did the bare minimum, not wanting to waste too much time but also not wanting to be mad at myself later. It was one of the frustrating snows where it still looked like you needed to shovel in the spots you cleared first.

"Looks like I'll be back for you soon." I tapped the top of my snowblower and then shut it inside the garage.

I took off my snow gear and clothing. I took my fur, landing on the floor with a little thud. It felt amazing to let loose. I hopped over to the doggie door and pushed through it, the cold slapping into me as I landed on the porch.

If my fluffle saw me now, using a doggie door so that I didn't have to step on the cold ground, they'd have rolled their eyes. I figured it was there when I bought the place, so why not use it? There was no glory in being cold.

*That's better.* It took a few seconds to get used to the frigid air, but once I did I enjoyed it. Unlike my human skin, my beast kept me cozy warm while at the same time allowing me to enjoy breathing in the cool air.

*Run.*

*Run.*

*Run.*

*Fine. We'll run. But we're staying close to the house.* I hated to block him in, but there had been sightings of some hunters on the connected properties, and we didn't have time for that. I

doubted they would be out in this weather, and I was pretty good at sniffing them out in order to avoid them, but still...

Strictly speaking, hunting wasn't allowed in the protected lands, but the state never bothered to post it and that made enforcement challenging. Not that the locals bothered to try.

*Run.*

*Far.*

*Fun.*

*Go.*

He was being stubborn.

*We'll run far, just not far away.*

I was stubborn too.

We hopped off the porch and lifted his head, inhaling deeply and listening intently. The wind echoed through the trees, and in the far-off distance some vehicles could be heard—not much traffic, but some. Other than that, the land was quiet.

The natural animals in the area tended to search our shelter during storms like this, some in caves or burrows and others along the side of a boulder or in some brush. They weren't going to be out and about the way I was. And while I loved being in nature, it was nice not having to worry about predators as much. Let them sleep where they may as I enjoyed the winter's night.

The snow was heavy enough—and I was light enough—that traveling in it was easy. I even stopped to nibble on a bit of it, loving the cool refreshing water that rolled down my throat as it melted in my mouth. It was the perfect night for this, and I was going to enjoy every single second of it, the moon guiding my path through the densely falling snow.

It was the stuff of postcards and paintings, almost too beautiful to be real, and I loved it. Moving here and away from my fluffle had been the best decision of my life so far. Sure, it was lonely not being around my family and friends, but I'd made new ones and adored my job. Yes, this was where I was meant to be, and I couldn't be happier.





---

## LENNY

The white landscape made it impossible to get my bearings, while the bitter cold reminded me—as if I’d forgotten—that humans were at the mercy of nature.

How far had I walked? Trudged was more like it, my back bowed so low I struggled to pick my feet up to clear the snow. For once I was grateful for my notorious forgetfulness—my ski goggles had still been in the car from last winter, when a friend convinced me to take skiing lessons. He couldn’t believe I’d never learned. I could, because I was kinda hopeless at it.

Maybe not taking them out of the car was a reminder that while it was good to learn new skills, it was also smart to know when to quit.

But I wasn’t quitting now. No way. If I wanted to survive, I didn’t have a choice.

I peered behind me, but couldn’t make out the car. It was lost in blinding snow. There truly was no turning back now.

*Keep your eyes on the light.* I repeated the words, which reminded me of an ancient prophesy, until it became a kind of mantra—something to keep me going until I reached safety.

Keeping to the road, because going cross-country could be fatal, I counted my steps. When I reached a hundred, I’d begin again. I’d interspersed the counting with, “Keep your eyes on the light.” It convinced me I was going somewhere and not just spinning on a hamster wheel, as well as being reassured that I wasn’t losing my mind. I remembered my numbers and a

silly expression. The cold wasn't making me delusional. Nope. *One, two, three.*

The violent shivering also reminded me I was alive as I gripped the blanket draped over my head.

The light was getting closer, right? It wasn't a...what was it? My brain scrambled to come up with the word. A mirage was when a person was hallucinating in the desert—or did that apply to extreme cold as well? I imagined plodding over burning sand, a fierce sun blistering through a white shirt and big hat, and puddles of sweat sloshing in my shoes.

The depth of my loneliness crept into my head, and I stopped counting. What if I was the only person alive, and me reaching that building with the tiny flickering light would save humanity? *No*, I told myself. *Concentrate*. Letting my mind wander into science fiction/conspiracy territory could lead to my death. *One, two, three.*

But with each step, my legs became heavier, and my back complained about my awkward posture. But pain was a sign I was alive. I tried wriggling my toes, but they were numb. My clawed fingers moved slightly, but what little optimism I'd had earlier was evaporating.

I told myself the light was closer than when I'd started out, but it appeared and disappeared from sight. Perhaps it was trees in between and the branches were being tossed in different directions by the wind. Or maybe there was no light at all. The sci-fi books I'd read as a kid would have said it was a flying saucer luring me forward, ready to capture me and take me to the home planet. As long as it was warm and they fed me in between conducting experiments on my mind and body, I was all in.

“Come and get me,” I yelled and instantly regretted it. What little strength I had left, I needed to conserve.

Peering into the distance, my step faltered, because the light was closer, much closer than when I'd last looked. Though it was hard to see, I'd say it was a house at the end of a long driveway. A farm house, perhaps? That made sense based on the location, as the area surrounding the road was farmland

interspersed with dense woodlands. I'd driven this way once before when going to a wedding, but it was the summer, when the fields were golden and lush, with stalks of wheat reaching for the sky, and the forest, while dark, wasn't forbidding.

The entrance to the driveway was still a ways away—maybe at what appeared to be a curve in the road. But if I cut across the patch of land, I could perhaps save myself an additional fifteen minutes of having my extremities frozen. Thawing out in front of a fire with a bowl of hot soup was preferable to finding the proper entrance. If there was a fence between the land and the house, I'd crawl over it and yell, hoping the person inside would hear me above the storm.

*Am I doing this?* I asked myself. *Yes.*

There was a slight dip beside the road, and I almost fell on my ass, but my hand landed on a stick in the process and I used that to feel my way. While the road was hard and monotonous, wandering under trees laden with snow and stumbling over large rocks had me wondering if I'd made a mistake, but the house—because I was close enough to identify it as a house—was so close I could almost touch it. Or at least smell it, because there was smoke wafting from the chimney.

I outstretched an arm, forgetting I was holding the stick, and it dropped from my grasp as the light from the windows outlined my gloved hand. Only a few more steps and I'd be there. One, two, three—

There was a sharp snap which divided my life into before and after.

My brain, which had been conserving energy, woke up as pain spiked through my body like a bolt of lightning. Not a "I kicked a rock" pain but one that took control of mind and body. The snow and the cold were burned away, and there was only agony.

"Help me!" I sent my screech into the darkness, wishing the agony I was experiencing could go with it. Something had hold of my foot and had wrapped its mouth around me, digging needle-sharp teeth deep into my flesh.

In the back of my mind, I wondered if the light had been luring me to this place. Had someone in that house wanted me here? But the pain seeped into even that part of my mind, and I was lost to the suffering.



---

## CONALL

“Help me!”

The blood curdling scream came from close by. It didn't make any sense. No one should be here, especially not in this weather. Without thinking, I took off in the direction of the scream, hoping for them to do it again so I could find them. Between the wind and the trees, sound traveled oddly, and that one screech might not be enough.

Had I been in my skin, I'd have called to them. But once I shifted, the cold would run through me, and even after shifting back, it would slow me down. I had a feeling they couldn't wait for me to warm up enough to be useful. Why were they out here?

At least we weren't far from my place. Once I found them, I'd get the right kind of help. Or at least try to.

The man called out again, this time not as loud. At first I thought it was because I accidentally headed in the wrong direction, but it wasn't. The scream was straight ahead; he was just weaker, or giving up. Neither was good.

I hopped faster, needing to get to him, and when he came in sight, the scent of blood hit me. He was hurt. It wasn't until I reached him that I saw how—a *fucking trap*. Trapping was illegal in my county, but even if it was allowed on your own property, this was protected land. There was no hunting here of any kind. A random person accidentally crossing over with their guns or bows was one thing—but setting an actual trap? That was intentional.

“Bunny—go find a human.” His words were so quiet that had I not been a shifter, I might’ve easily missed them. “Please?”

He was talking out of desperation. There was no other explanation for it. Nobody expected a wild animal to act like the collie dog from the old television shows. That was just silly.

“Please.” This time it was a plea, and I did something I knew instantly could come back and bite me in the ass: I shifted, right then and there. This man needed help, and I was the only one who could save him before it was too late.

As my bare feet sunk into the cold snow, I bit back a cuss. Shoes would be so much better, but shifting to go home and get clothing might take longer than this man had. Between the bleeding and the cold, he needed saving now.

“Cold...human...what?” The man was incoherent, and I crossed my fingers it was because of what he’d just seen and not that the cold was causing his speech pattern to be off.

“I got you.” Gods, I hoped I was telling the truth.

I knelt down by his leg, the adrenaline and my jackrabbit keeping me from being impacted by the cold.

“You’re caught in a trap.” I wanted to take it off him, but I wasn’t sure if that would make it worse or better, given I had nothing to put pressure on the wounds. “I’m going to leave it there until we get inside. I can’t tell you how sorry I am about that.”

I half rose.

“Don’t leave me.”

“I couldn’t if I wanted to.” I scooped him up and carried him home. All those years of logging had built up the strength I needed to hold him with ease, but the snow was deep and had I been human, I would’ve collapsed before we reached my front step.

“I know you,” the man said and then closed his eyes. At least I hoped he did it intentionally rather than passing out—I didn’t

have time to check. He needed to be in the warmth immediately.

*Thank you.* My jackrabbit needed to know I appreciated the warmth he was giving me. Without it, the stranger and I would both be dead or close to it.

*Mate.*

*Protect.*

*Ours.*

*Home.*

*Warm.*

It was the first my beast had spoken since we heard the scream and boy did he have a lot to say. The cold was clearly getting to him too.

*Yes, home. Thank you.* I couldn't focus on him, not when the house was still a few hundred feet away. He'd figure things out once we were inside, safe, and warm.

Once at the door, I had to put the guy down to get back inside. I hated it. But it was the only way.

"I'm just going to open the door," I promised as I set him down. I took my fur, hopped through the doggie door, shifted again, and unlocked the door.

"See? I'm back." I picked him back up and carried him straight to the bed, where I gently placed him on top of the quilt. "I'll be right back."

I ran into the bathroom to get the minimal first aid supplies that I had and grabbed a T-shirt and scissors on my way back.

It took a bit to get the trap open. Had I not been familiar with them, it might've been impossible. His leg looked horrible and would need a doctor, but I cleaned and bandaged it as best I could.

Next I needed to get the man warm. His clothing was wet and had to go. "I need to take your clothes off to warm you up. Okay?" It didn't feel right doing so without consent, but it



would need to be done, regardless. At this point his life depended on it.

“Okay.” His eyes were fluttering shut. I didn’t have much time to warm him if he couldn’t stay awake. He had lost blood but not enough for that to be the issue. He needed to get his temperature regulated.

I ended up cutting off his clothes with the scissors I used to make the makeshift T-shirt bandage. Not once did he make any noise about it. Not one single peep.

Under the covers he went, and I turned up the heat. I’d have climbed in bed with him had my own body temperature not been questionable. Instead I dug out all the blankets I could find, filled two hot water bottles, and put them under the covers with him. Every couple of minutes I checked his breathing.

When I finally thought he was warm enough, I jumped in the shower to make sure I was, as well. The warm water did me well, and when I came out, I threw on some pajamas and waited for my guest to wake up, hoping I did enough for him. He really needed a doctor, but that wasn’t going to be possible until the snow stopped. I would have to do.

Please let me be enough.



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## LENNY

### *Chicken soup.*

The aroma of chicken soup was taunting me. I'd never made the stuff, but my uncles swore it cured a number of ailments. Was that where I was? At my uncles' place? I had no memory of getting on a plane, or of my alpha uncle giving me seconds at dinner like he used to when I was growing up. He was the chef in the family, whereas my omega uncle couldn't boil an egg.

It'd been a while since I'd seen them, so I was glad I came home for the weekend. But even with my eyes closed, the room didn't seem like mine. The mattress didn't sag in the middle, and there was a fresh pine scent hovering in the background, while the soup aroma was front and center, demanding my attention. Uncle Evan, my alpha uncle, wasn't watching the news as he would normally be at this time of day.

But what day was it? My memories had been wiped since the snow storm. Snippets of that night flickered in front of me, similar to a silent film where all the actions were jerky. How did I get from the car stuck in the snow to my uncles?

There was a comforting warmth heaped on top of me, the kind that had you wanting to stay in bed. I shifted slightly, and pain boomeranged around my body. I clenched my teeth, willing it to go away, but a pounding in my head paired up with the excruciating pain, and they worked in tandem until tears slid from my eyes that were still clamped shut over my cheeks. The sensation reminded me of a similar incident during the storm.

My eyes snapped open, as if I couldn't contain the agony, and there was a guy standing beside the bed, his brow furrowed with concern. I gasped, causing me more distress as pain snatched up my body in its vise-like grip. Memories came tumbling back of a man—or an animal?—saving me and removing the trap. Nah, couldn't have been an animal. That only happened in the movies.

“Who the fuck are you?” I panted. “You're not him.” I clasped the bedding, not only because I was in agony but also because I was in a strange room with a man I'd never met.

“Sorry, I didn't mean to frighten you.”

The door opened, and this time it was the guy—the one who'd rescued me. I was experiencing flashbacks and hadn't yet put all the puzzle pieces together. I did recall a rabbit and wasn't sure how that fit into the scenario at all.

He had a dishcloth over one shoulder, and with the door open, the smell of chicken soup was overpowering. But there was another, more delectable scent, one that had my cock perking up, even while pain had my teeth chattering. It was irresistible. and if the first guy hadn't been there, I might have whipped off the covers and invited him to share my bed.

Except that was ridiculous. I was severely injured, and now I was presumably in his home, maybe in his bed. No one wanted to see cock. Well, okay maybe I did. His.

“Glad you're awake. I'm Conall.”

“Lenny.”

“Not sure if you remember me from last night, but you're safe now.” He clamped a hand on the other guy's shoulder and a wave of jealousy slammed into me. I had to stop myself from baring my teeth and hissing at him. If he noticed a change in my expression, he didn't show it.

“This is Stedman.”

I nodded, unable to come up with something pleasant to say.

“I called him to help because of the extent of your injuries. We used to work together.”

Damn, now I had to be nice to Stedman. “Are you a doctor?”

The pair shared a glance, and I recalled my fear last night that I’d been ensnared, not only by a trap, but by some cult or serial killer.

“Not exactly. But as a retired lumberjack, you need to know... ummm—first aid, and I’m the guy that patched up the injuries in camp.”

I was a little less wary, as he sounded genuine—and I wasn’t tied up or gagged or been experimented on. Not that I was certain about the latter; I’d need to sneak a look under the covers.

“You’re pretty badly banged up,” Stedman told me.

*Tell me something I don’t know*, was what I wanted to say, but instead I asked, “Have you called an ambulance?” It was fine having an amateur attend to me, but I needed to be in hospital, and might need surgery.

I wasn’t unfamiliar with people administering first aid and more. Because my uncle worked from home, he was the unofficial neighborhood medic. When my friends suffered bumps and scrapes, he was the one who bandaged them up. He got a reputation as a sort of healer, and friends consulted him before they went to the doctor.

Conall grimaced. “They can’t get here.” He gestured toward the window, and I shuddered when catching sight of a familiar white landscape. “Your leg’s broken.”

I’d definitely need a stint at the hospital, and maybe surgery.

“How did you get here?” Conall asked. He was doing most of the talking, and I was glad. Stedman may have examined my leg and made me comfortable, but other than being grateful, I was interested in the alpha.

“It was snowing heavily.” That much was obvious. These two guys spent their working life outside in the forest. They would probably never have ventured over unfamiliar territory in a snow storm as I did, and I was a little embarrassed to admit it. If I told them, and they shared a look again, I’d be peeved.

“And?” Stedman asked.

“Ummm. Well.” I fiddled with the blanket, keeping my gaze on my hands and not Conall’s face. “The car broke down.”

There was a sharp intake of breath from Stedman.

*Here it comes.* They were going to tell me how foolish I was. “I saw the light from your house, so I walked.”



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## CONALL

Things could've been so much worse for Lenny. Based on where my house was located, you could see my lights for miles. Not that he'd have fared any better in his car. He was so lucky.

"I what?" The poor guy looked up at the trap I held up. "How did I not lose my foot?"

According to Stedman, he almost did, but I was going to leave that unspoken. Apparently my decision to leave it on him until we arrived had been a good one. Thank gods. If I had been the reason he lost it, I'd never be able to forgive myself.

"You are quite lucky," Stedman said and then went on to explain all he needed to do to recover safely.

What Lenny didn't know was that the man standing before him was actually a bear shifter healer, and an amazing one at that. He'd been part of my crew when I first took the job with my current logging company. He taught me so much and helped me transition from my fluffle to the human world. I was sad when he retired, but he lived not far from me as the crow flies, and we saw each other from time to time. I owed him for coming out today.

Stedman gave Lenny something to help him sleep and heal, and we stepped out to give the man rest.

*Stay.*

*Ours.*

*Mate.*



My jackrabbit wasn't liking that. Not one single bit. Too bad. I needed to deal with Stedman, who I already knew from a few side comments had a bucketful of questions for me, and none I was going to like answering.

We stepped out into the front room, and I offered him a seat and a meal before he left. He was going to trek back home in beast form. The weather was only getting worse, not better.

"You let him see you shift."

I didn't know why he was telling me that. We both knew it to be true, although from the conversations we'd had with Lenny, I wasn't sure he remembered. And as much as that should flood me with relief, it didn't. It made me sad. Like him knowing my secret was important.

*Ours.*

*Mate.*

*Stay.*

My beast sure thought he knew why. And maybe he was right. The man's scent did call to me, even with the staleness that came from being injured. But he was human. In all the history of my fluffle, a human-slash-jackrabbit shifter mating hadn't ever been recorded. I didn't know this because I was a history buff or anything. No. I knew it because I was reminded very firmly when I decided to move away that if I wanted to be mated, I was expected to come back to the fluffle to choose a mate.

My brother got the same lecture, only unlike me, he was pissed about it at the time. Lexor had his eyes on moving to the city, finding a mate, and living happily ever after, and the city was not a hotbed of shifter life. Me? I figured life would throw at me what it did. And apparently it decided to toss a human omega my way.

"I had no choice but to let him see me shift. It was that or chance his death." Which I was fairly confident was a good enough reason for my birth fluffle elders, if they should complain. Because as much as the bear was the only shifter I saw on a regular basis, he was a bear, and bears deal with bear

issues the way jackrabbits took care of jackrabbit issues. Dens and fluffles and packs and hoards kept to themselves. It was the way of things.

“And besides,” I continued, “he remembers shit all about it.”

If Stedman only knew that I had shifted in front of him not once, but twice, and that Lenny told me he knew me the first time I did... As complicated as this conversation was going to be, it could be a ton worse. That was for sure.

“You better hope he doesn’t. If he does—”

“If he does I need to report it to my birth fluffle immediately, and proper actions will need to be taken.” Those proper actions would not be good, and I planned to avoid them at all costs. I wasn’t going to tell Stedman that, though.

“As long as we are in agreement.” He rose from his seat and started to get undressed. “Call me if he gets a fever or starts to have any hallucinations. I might be miffed at this situation, but you did the right thing—the only thing you could’ve done.”

“I know. And for the record, I did try to think of another way at the time, but I couldn’t, and my jackrabbit insisted that we help him to the point of making it impossible to think.”

The bear tossed my clothing he had borrowed onto the couch. “Is that so?” Stedman’s eye’s softened as I nodded. “Does he think the omega is yours?”

I nodded again.

“Well, then you have a whole lot to think about and deal with, don’t you?”

Only once mated were humans allowed to know of our kind. And if my beast was right, and Lenny was mine and Lenny wanted me to be his, we were looking at an entirely different situation.

“You think my beast could be right? Because I don’t fully scent him.”

“Conall, have I ever shit you?”

“No.”

“Then why did you think I would now? Trust your beast and call me if you need more help. I swear, you youngins complicate shit so much. Look at all the time we wasted talking in circles.” He rolled his eyes, grabbed his pack, put it on, went outside, and shifted.

Somehow the man had created the perfect backpack to shift in. It had been far too loose, but as soon as he took his fur it sat there perfectly.

For someone who was worried about me exposing our kind, he sure didn't practice what he preached.

I waved to him from the front door and watched as he lumbered away, relieved that Lenny was going to be okay.



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## LENNY

Even with my eyes closed, I was aware of where I was. In Conall's spare bedroom.

Would I have preferred to have been in his bed? Oh yeah. With him tending and ministering to my injuries? That was also a yes. But what would make me feel much better and speed my recovery process was to have him swallow my cock and make mmmm-ing noises as his saliva mingled with my pre-cum.

Coming might prove to be a problem, because my leg would hurt, godsdamn it, but I'd suffer if the prize was a Conall-induced orgasm.

But as I daydreamed of the alpha bent over my dick, the excruciating pain from my leg and foot was a tad less agonizing than before. No way could I walk or hop around. My thought process slammed to a halt. Hop. Had I been hallucinating that night—and which night was that, yesterday? The day before? I'd lost count—and had that bunny with the huge ears transformed into a human? Or was Conall—the guy who made my cock swell, my hole drip with slick, and sweat ooze from every pore—a freaking rabbit in his spare time?

Now it was my head's turn to pound with me overthinking. If I could go back in time to my childhood, I'd pay more attention to the tropes in the books and movies I'd read and watched. Was it sci-fi? Fantasy? Horror? All three? If Conall didn't belong on Earth, I'd be the first one to volunteer to join him on his spaceship.

“Take me with you,” I mumbled.

“What was that? I’m not going anywhere.”

Now my eyes were open, and they were fixed on Conall in his red and blue checked shirt. His hair hadn’t been brushed, and it was so adorable sticking up in the air. He looked and smelled so very human; me fantasizing about him being anything else were just that. Fantasies.

I yawned and stretched my arms, pretending I’d just woken up. “Hmmm? Oh, sorry, I was dreaming about... my... interview.” Shit, fuck bum! “My interview. I missed the interview for my dream job.” Tears were streaming over my cheeks, and I licked the saltiness from my lips. “I so wanted that position.”

Conall sat on the bed. He didn’t plonk himself but lowered his butt—his rounded, gorgeous butt—gently onto the mattress. “Good thing I answered your phone the morning after your accident.”

“What?”

“Sorry if that was the wrong thing to do but it rang once, twice, three times, and I thought it might be your family.”

“Oh,” I squeaked, hardly daring to breathe. “What did they say?”

“First I told them you’d been in an accident during the storm, and they were sympathetic, but then I mentioned the trap. City folk don’t have much knowledge of such things, and they were horrified. Said they could arrange an interview by video conference when you’re up to it, though they’d prefer to see you in person.”

“Wow! All I had to do to get them to agree to a long-distance interview was get my foot and leg mangled. Way to go, Lenny!”

One of Conall’s bushy brows shot up. He obviously wasn’t used to my dark humor. “I’m not serious, just scoffing at the ridiculousness of the situation.” The alpha nodded, though his expression was wary. “But thank you. You saved my butt.” Conall’s head jerked up at the last word, which I enjoyed, so I went with it. “My ass thanks you, as well as my leg and foot.”

I wriggled my behind so he got the message about which part of me I was talking about, and a spot of pink appeared on each of his cheeks. Cute!

“You were so lucky I heard you. If you’d been out in the storm any longer, neither Stedman nor I could have saved your life, much less your leg.”

“How long must I stay in bed?” My voice wavered as my thoughts drifted from the interview to me being in the alpha’s home. Once I’d recovered or could get to a hospital, it’d be “Goodbye, Conall” forever.

“While Stedman’s not a trained doctor, he’s a miracle worker. In his years in the camp, he learned how to use wild herbs, flowers, and shrubs on a poultice to cure injuries and ward off infections.”

I furrowed my brow. “But if I walk on it too soon, that would be bad, right?” Was my voice as hopeful as I imagined?

“Mmmm.”

I planned on parking my butt on this bed for as long as possible. With Stedman gone, I viewed him more favorably and thanked him again in my head for administering first aid and for leaving...especially the last one.

“Can I ask you something?” Conall asked.

While I had a ton of rabbit-related questions for him, I was happy to put those off. “Sure.” Maybe he wanted to find out if I was in a relationship? *Please let that be it.*

“When I rescued you... in the snow...” He was studying his lap rather than looking at me, so whatever the question was, it was awkward for him at least. “You said, ‘I know you.’”

“Did I?” My voice was an octave higher than usual.

Now the alpha’s gaze was fixed on me. “What did you mean by that?”

My mouth hung open. Of all the things he could have asked, including, “Can I suck your dick?”, “You’re hot”, “Do you mind me being able to transform into a rabbit?”, and “Would you like to be in a threesome with Stedman and me?”—no, not

the last one—he wanted an explanation regarding what I'd said when I was practically delirious?

“Ummm... Well, I could... but aren't we avoiding the obvious question?” I said.

Now it was his turn to furrow his brow. “What's that? We've already discussed how foolhardy it was to leave your car.”

We had? I thought he and his friend had avoided it and skimmed over any criticism. “So we're skipping over you turning into a bunny? I liked the ears. Bigger than the rabbits I've seen in my local park.”





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## CONALL

Well, fuck it all. So much for him not remembering. But I'd be lying if I said that I wasn't relieved that he knew. Explaining it to someone who calmly asked about it was a thousand times less unnerving than having to bring it up. And I would've had to bring it up if my jackrabbit was right and he was my mate.

*Mate.*

*Ours.*

*Claim.*

Yeah, my beast was sure, and the longer I was around Lenny, the more I was as well. His scent was already getting strong and more—alluring wasn't the right word, but it was as close as I could come.

"You saw that, did you?" I dragged a chair closer to the bed and sat in it. It didn't feel right having the conversation any other way. "I wasn't really supposed to do that in front of you...there are rules."

"I'm glad you did. Stedman thinks I'll be fine but also said I was very lucky, which is weird to say given that dangerous metal contraption was clamped around me." He started to roll onto his side, the pain flashing across his face before he gave up. "But for real—are you a wererabbit?"

I couldn't help the chuckle that escaped my lips. Lenny was going to keep me on my toes, that was for sure. I loved it.

"No. As far as I know there is no such thing as a wererabbit." Not even in horror movies. "I'm a jackrabbit shifter."

“Why are you living up here? Aren’t you like a desert creature?”

“Me being able to change from one form to another is no biggie for you, but being out of my natural habitat is?”

“Yes?”

“First of all, I’m a white-tailed jackrabbit and they can be where there’s snow. And second of all, how did you know that about jackrabbits?” This conversation was going nothing like I had thought it would. Nothing.

“Get my phone?”

I did, and when I gave it to him, he tapped away and scrolled through, finally turning it to face me. “I’m glad you get reception up here because this is an old picture—like embarrassingly old. I figure if you can trust me with your morphing abilities, I can trust you with my middle school awkward years.”

On the screen was a preteen boy standing next to a rabbit cage with a big blue ribbon on it. “I was in 4H and showed rabbits at the county fair until eighth grade and we moved to the city. I did more than my share of science fair displays on *Leporidae*.” *Leporidae* being the scientific family that rabbits and hares such as jackrabbits fell under.

He put the phone down on the bed. “So yeah, that kind of thing is cool to me. Also, the shifter thing feels big and scary so if I ignore it, maybe it isn’t there.”

I hated that he was uneasy. “I mean, I won’t say it isn’t big, because learning something you never knew existed was real is big. But I promise you—it’s not scary.” Not in the way he was implying, anyway. Scary as in mates was a huge deal—it absolutely was. But one big reveal at a time.

“But you said it broke the rules.”

“It does, but—”

“But I know how it is; I’ve watched enough movies with vampires and werewolves and witches. A human finds out something they aren’t supposed to and some council or alpha

or coven decides they need to die or be turned in order to protect their kind.”

At first I thought maybe he was joking, poking fun at all the cheesiness that went along with that kind of campy movie. But then I saw him tremble slightly. He was scared—and not a frightened but a flashlight will make it all better kind of scared, either—he was terrified.

Instinctively I scootched closer and took his hand in mine.

*Mine.*

*Ours.*

*Mark.*

*Not now! Pipe down already. Our mate needs us,* I scolded, and to my relief, my beast did as he was told.

“I promise you that is only in movies,” And possibly in some wolf packs, but I wasn’t going to be the one to bring that up since it had nothing to do with anything here. “All that will happen is that my fluffle will tell me to be more careful.” Or so I hoped.

“Fluffle—I didn’t think of that. Of course you have a fluffle.” He turned his hand around and intertwined his fingers with mine. “Is it weird I did that?” He looked down at our joined hands.

“Not at all.”

We chatted back and forth about what it meant to be a shifter. He listened intently and with utter fascination. His fear had exclusively been about the consequences of the secret and not that I was less than human, much to my relief. I could help him not be afraid of fluffle arrest much more easily than to not be afraid of who I was.

“When I said ‘I know you’ in the woods it was because it felt like I did—like somehow you were part of my life already, even though obviously you weren’t.” He squeezed his eyes shut.

*Mine.*

*Ours.*

*Claim.*

My jackrabbit loved hearing that as much as I did. It meant that he sensed we were his mate, too, even if he had no idea what that was or what it meant. It wasn't everything, but it sure was a start.

"It was probably just because I was hurt and going into shock," he backpedaled, but unlike when he said that he felt like I was his in not so many words, this time it felt more like he was trying to convince himself than that he actually believed it. "Do you think I could get a cup of tea or cocoa?"

He pulled his hand away, the spell lost for a second. The human in me was sad at the small rejection, but the shifter in me knew better. He was just trying to figure all of this out. He needed time. Time and hot cocoa.

I stood up and pushed the chair back. "Are you a marshmallow or a whipped cream kind of guy?"

Lenny opened his eyes and turned his head to face me. "Is both an option? Because I feel like a nearly broken off foot kind of deserves both."

"Yeah, both is definitely an option. And if you're willing to wait ten minutes, I can even throw some slice and bake cookies in the oven to go with it."

"The kind with the snowman in the middle?" His eyes lit up when I nodded. "Those are the best. I'd even wait eleven minutes for them."



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## LENNY

“I have a surprise for you.”

I was sitting up in bed eating the breakfast Conall had made. Toast, cereal, eggs, coffee, juice and fruit were on the tray, and I had just taken a bite of toast. I stopped chewing, hoping it was a small surprise. After him revealing the existence of shifters, I was done with being shocked. Something like him finding a different type of jam in his pantry was what I was hoping for.

“Great.” I pretended to be enthusiastic.

“Lennnny?” The way he dragged my name out, accompanied by his narrowed eyes, suggested he’d seen through me, because he kneeled beside the bed and took the hand that wasn’t holding the toast. “You don’t like surprises?”

“I like them fine.” My tongue curled over my lip, capturing a dollop of lime marmalade in the corner of my mouth.

Conall gasped and poked his tongue between his lips and mimicked me as he insisted, “Stop that right now.” Those words, accompanied by a cheesy grin, had me stuffing the rest of the toast in my mouth.

“What are you talking about?” I licked around my mouth, capturing the last remnants of marmalade. His nostrils flared, and he growled. “You can’t frighten me with your fake snarl,” I told him. “Besides, I’m pretty sure bunnies don’t growl. Sorry—hares, not rabbits.”

“You’re doing that on purpose. It’s distracting and hot.”

“Good.” I’d enjoyed teasing him. One point to me. “Now what was the surprise?”

“Oh, right. It almost slipped my mind.” He raced out the door and returned pushing a wheelchair.

“Are we going somewhere?” A pain not associated with my injury stabbed at my head and I bit my lower lip so hard, I experienced a different type of agony. Was Conall planning on getting rid of me?

“You are.”

I was right and his words were similar to a punch in the gut.

But before I could ask why or burst into tears, he pointed to the window. “I thought you might like to look outside, and this”—he patted the wheelchair—“will get you there.”

I exhaled, and my eyes blurred with unshed tears. “Thanks,” I managed to get out. He was being kind, not tossing me out.

Conall sat on the mattress while I ate. “Hey!” I slapped his hand that had stolen a piece of toast. *My* toast.

His eyes grew wide before he took a bite and ripped off a huge piece. “You referring to this?” I wasn’t taken in by the innocent expression or the *I have no idea what you’re talking about* tone.

In my imagination, I beckoned him closer and when his face was an inch from mine, I kissed him. His unique taste mingled with the sweet flavor of the marmalade combined with a hint of sourness from the limes. It was a peck more than a kiss, but it was more than nice. The reality was a little different.

“Maybe,” I replied, as I smirked, wishing his lips were on mine.

“I can’t get myself into the chair, so are you going to help me or not?” I sassed.

He snuck another kiss and saluted. “Yes, sir.”

I draped my arms around his neck as he placed me in the chair and wheeled me to the window. Despite not being a fan of snow after the night the car got stuck, there was a distinct



beauty beyond the window as a weak sun danced over the snow, the sparkling slivery light making magic.

“It’s beautiful.”

“That’s what I thought. Now, don’t move.” He raced out the door.

“Is that supposed to be a joke?” I yelled after him. Like I was going anywhere.

A banging on the window had me look up. Conall had his outdoor clothes on and an adorable red cap with a big white pompom on the top. He jumped off the porch, doing a forward roll and then jumping up and celebrating with his arms outstretched and a huge grin, as though he’d just completed a complicated gymnastics routine. He bowed and did another roll.

I clapped and gave him a thumbs up.

When he leaped up, he was covered in snow, but he grabbed a handful, and for a moment I thought he was going to toss it at the window. I ducked my head, but when I looked up, he was rolling the snow on the ground until it was four times the size. He placed the huge snowball close to the porch.

He made a second and a third and placed them on the first. A hat followed, and he added a pair of sunglasses, cookies for a mouth, and a scarf wrapped around the snowman’s neck. When he was done, he slung an arm around the snowman and snapped a selfie with his phone.

Conall ran to the window and blew me a kiss against the glass and drew a heart shape in the condensation. And just like a lovesick teen, he wrote “C loves L” in the middle.

“Awww.” I blew him a kiss in return. I clasped my fingers in my lap, tamping down the thrill that had my belly churning. He loved me! Maybe not really. He was messing around, but I wanted it to be real.

When Conall strode into the room, his cheeks were pink, and he was blowing on his hands. “Though I had my fill of snow the other night, I wish I could have joined you.”

“You will. Not today, but we’ll make snowmen together.”

I yawned, which was silly because I’d done nothing except eat breakfast. But my body was healing, and I had little energy.

“It occurred to me that you missed out on my famous chicken soup the other night.”

That took me back to waking up the first morning. “I only ate an hour ago.”

He shrugged. “It’s always the perfect time to eat chicken soup,” he told me as he placed me back in bed.

Much as I’d enjoyed sitting at the window, I was glad to be lying down with the covers tucked around me. “How did you just happen to have a wheelchair in the house?”

Some of the pink on Conall’s cheeks faded and pulled his bottom lip in with his teeth. “An elderly couple lived here. This was originally their house. They made memories in this place, and I plan on making my own.”

There was a story there, but I didn’t pry. He’d tell me if and when he wanted to.

“Rest,” he told me. “And I’ll heat up some soup.”

My lids were heavy and much as I wanted that soup, I couldn’t stay awake. I was surrounded by warmth and affection...no—it was love. And there was no better way to fall asleep than knowing you’re protected.



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## CONALL

While Lenny was doing so much better, it didn't take much to wear him out. I offered to help him get ready for bed, but he insisted that he was still wide awake and wanted to stay up, suggesting that we watch a movie. It took a bit of doing to get the furniture arranged so that I could elevate his foot enough while allowing him to still be comfortable, but we managed.

“What should we watch?” he asked once he was settled in. “I don't love horror that is gore based, but anything else is on the table.”

I loved that he was feeling comfortable enough to let me know what he wanted and needed. With him still needing assistance with basic things like moving, it helped a lot—plus it made my jackrabbit happy. He liked to provide, even if providing meant moving the pillow to the left.

“Let's see if we are getting any reception before deciding.” I flicked on the television, still not yet taking my seat beside Lenny, though I wanted to. I longed to snuggle up next to him, put my arm around his shoulders, and inhale his scent with each breath I took.

The television worked fine, the reception, not so much. “It looks like internet isn't playing well tonight.” Which was no surprise. Good thing I had a backup plan.

“After you went through all the trouble to set things up for me.” Lenny let out a long sigh. “I guess I can go to bed now if you don't mind helping me up.”

“I never mind helping you, but not having movies to stream doesn’t mean we don’t have movies.” I opened the bottom of the television cabinet to reveal a VCR circa 1985. “I have one of these and a box of tapes.”

His jaw dropped open. “You have a VCR? Like a real VCR. Are jackrabbits like vampires?”

I had zero clues what he was talking about and wasn’t sure how to respond. Thankfully he filled me in.

“With having an immortality gene?”

“Ohhh.” Of course, because my VCR was older than me. “No. This was in the house when I bought it. The old owners left a bunch of stuff in the overhang of the garage, and I decided to use it instead of letting it just take up space.”

They’d left so many useful things, including my cast iron pot, a post digger, and even a box of old picture frames.

“And it works?”

I nodded.

“I vote we do this thing.” He leaned forward to look inside the storage box I’d pulled out.

We went through all of the options and in the end opted to watch a film that was sort of a fairytale but more modern and a lot happier. We watched side by side on the couch. At first we were a bit apart, but as the movie progressed, my guest started to get cold, and I grabbed a throw blanket for him, which morphed into us sitting so that we were barely touching as we shared said blanket, and somehow that turned into him falling asleep with his head pressed against me.

I planned on letting him sleep until he was ready to wake up. The old school technology had other plans. Unlike with a live stream, the end of the movie didn’t end with it starting over again. No. It had to turn to loud static startling my mate awake.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t think to turn it off.” I felt awful for waking him up.

“I missed the end. Did they fall in love and live happily ever after?”

“They had to storm the castle first after nearly dying, but yeah, they did.” I scooched over and stood up. “Let me get you to bed.”

“Or...maybe you could help me to the bathroom first?” He’s started to hobble around a bit, but after being this long on the couch, I could see how he would need the help. Lenny was hesitant in his speech, and I felt badly that he was embarrassed in front of me. At least that was what I assumed was happening.

“Absolutely.” I’d have offered to draw him a bath or figure out a shower, but until Stedman saw him again, I didn’t think it was the best idea to have his injury wet. Sometimes sponge baths just weren’t enough. “Let me go get towels and things ready for you and I’ll be right back.”

I raced into the bathroom, set a spare toothbrush, a washcloth, and a towel on the counter, and rushed back. If he was asking, chances were that he needed to be in there sooner rather than later.

“All set up.” I removed the pillows under his foot one at a time, giving him a few seconds to adjust each time and then eased his foot to the floor.

It took a bit to get him standing, the couch sat a bit low, but once I did, he had his arm around me and I had mine around him like old pros. Getting him up and to the small room was so much easier than the first time I helped him up. I didn’t know if it was that he trusted me more or if it was that we were already starting to work well together, but I was glad.

“Just let me know when you need me again.” I left him standing at the counter. “Seriously...even if you need help in here.”

I worried that I might have overstepped, but then Lenny smiled brightly, and I knew I’d said the right thing. “Thanks. I might.”

He didn't need me and that was good, but knowing that if he did that he would be willing to ask for help was huge to me. It meant that my confession of turning into a wild creature truly was fine with him.

*Mate.*

*Ours.*

*Provide.*

*Yes, we will do all of that.* But first I needed to break the news to Lenny that my jackrabbit claimed him as ours and what that all meant. But that could wait for later. Tonight my mate needed help back to his bed so he could get some sleep.





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## LENNY

“There’s someone to see you,” Conall singsonged.

I squinted at the floor in the doorway, expecting a bouncing bunny. Damn, I kept forgetting he was a hare. I was hoping to see a hare wiggle his tail and flap his big ears before bounding onto my bed. But it was Stedman who strode through the door. I was a little disappointed, as Conall’s jackrabbit fascinated me, and I was also a tad embarrassed at not being more friendly and appreciative of Stedman the first time.

“How are you?” he asked as he lifted the covers and examined my wounds.

“Feeling much better, thanks to you.” I hoped my tone and huge smile expressed my gratitude. When we’d first met, the green-eyed monster had infected my thoughts, and I was kinda short with him. In my defense, I was in a lot of pain, but yeah, I’d been shitty. “Sorry if I was an asshat the other day.”

He grunted as he put balm on my injuries, the same one Conall had been using, which he said Stedman had developed. And while it was soothing, I wanted to discover more about shifters after Conall had hinted Stedman was a shifter, too.

“So, it’s been an interesting few days,” I said, hoping he’d spill the deets. While Conall said it was a huge no-no to share information about shifters, now that I was in the know, perhaps Stedman would fill me in.

“I guess,” was his noncommittal reply.

That wasn’t helpful, and I’d have to dig a little further. “Conall has been telling me about himself.”

“Oh, yeah. I guess with all the snow, he’s had a lot of spare time.”

Damn it, Stedman wasn’t budging. “And what about you? What do you enjoy doing in the winter months now you’re retired?”

“Much the same as everyone else. Life winds down and slows to a crawl when it’s cold.”

He could have been talking about an animal or anyone who lived in the countryside.

Conall arrived carrying a tray with three mugs. “Anyone for hot cocoa?”

“Mmmm, that’d be perfect.” Stedman left to wash his hands.

“You two seem to be getting along.” Conall handed me a steaming mug, and when I took the first sip, the sugary sweetness washed away my frustration at Stedman ignoring my probing.

“Yeah.” I took another sip.

“How’s the patient?” Conall asked when Stedman returned.

“Much better,” he replied.

“Soon I’ll be bopping and hopping about.” Neither of the two alphas said anything, and my words dangled in the air between us. Awkward. If I wasn’t holding a mug, I’d have thrown the covers over my head and said I wasn’t feeling well.

“I’d best be getting home.” Stedman drained his cup and said he’d be back the day after tomorrow. On his way out the door he added, “The snow’s stopped. Might be able to dig your car out.”

Gods, I’d forgotten about the car. I’d been wearing Conall’s robe, and he’d change it every day and give me a fresh one as I couldn’t get underwear over my injured leg without hurting it. That had given him a good look at my dick, though he’d been so professional when giving me a bed bath.

I’d wanted him to be unprofessional and say, “What a big dick you have!” and I could have replied, “All the better for you to

suck.” And he could have taken me in his mouth.

“Maybe I should take a look,” Conall said as he studied me, as if waiting for my approval.

Yes, he’d heard my thoughts. This was going to happen. My hand was on the bedding, ready to toss it off and have him wrap his lips around my already swollen length. “I’ve been waiting to hear you say that since the night we met.”

He made a face. “Really? You have? Is there something valuable there?”

That had me pause. Some guys I’d met referred to their cock and balls as their crown jewels. Conall didn’t seem the type to use cutesy names, but I didn’t know him well.

“Ummm...”

“I doubt anyone’s discovered it, ’cause it’ll be buried under a ton of snow.”

Now it was my turn to be confused. “You’re talking about—” I paused, hoping he’d complete my sentence.

“The car?” It came out as a question.

Shit. Me and my vivid imagination. “Oh yes, my car. Of course. I’ve been missing it.” The tips of my ears and my cheeks were burning.

“Okay.” He bustled around, putting water, a book, as well as cheese and crackers on the night stand. “As long as you’re okay staying by yourself. I won’t be more than a couple of hours.”

That seemed like a lifetime, and I was tempted to reach out and grab his hand while telling him not to go. There was a knot of despair in the pit of my belly—not the good kind of knot in my ass—but I was being silly and nodded. “I’ll be fine.”

Conall put a finger under my chin and lifted my head so we were staring at one another. “Just say the word and I’ll put it off until Stedman comes again.”

“No. Go. Don’t worry about me.”

“But I do. You took your life in your hands leaving the car that night. My beast won’t let me forget how we nearly lost you.”

Beast? I had to ask. “Is that how you refer to your cock?”

“Huh?” He stood up so said cock cloaked in denim was almost level with my face.

“Your beast,” I hissed.

He chuckled and then he bent over as he snorted and his body shook with laughter. “No, that’s what shifters call their animal—their beast.”

More embarrassment. I’d put my foot in it again. Well, I’d literally stuck my foot in a trap a few days ago, but now I was deep in shit thinking Conall was talking about his length.

“Oh.” What else was there to say?

He stroked my cheek and his voice softened. “It’s okay. You can talk about my dick any time.”

“Really? I might take you up on that offer.”

“I hope you will.”



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## CONALL

Lenny talking about my cock had me not wanting to leave. Who was I kidding? Lenny had me not wanting to leave full stop. I wanted to hang out with Lenny, scent him, feel his warmth, and when he was finally able to move without pain, I wanted to fuck him into the mattress. And from the hints he left, he did too.

Lenny might not know what the pull is, but he felt it. Of that I had no doubt.

The temperature had plummeted since the snow dropped, and I was relieved the truck started right up. I had an emergency charge if I needed it, but was grateful I did not. Getting out of the driveway was 1000 times easier than driving on the road. The crew had only made one pass, and while it made it possible to drive, navigating was quite another story.

Lenny told me the section of the road he was on when his car broke down, and silly me thought it would be easy to find. It wasn't. Part of the reason was that the snow was high and with the added snowbanks left by the plow trucks, impossibly slow. But even with all of that, that wasn't the worst of it. He was so much further away than I had realized.

My stomach dropped when I found his car. How he survived, even without the trap, was beyond me. To think how close I came to losing him before I ever got to meet him was too much, and I had to shove it down. He was safe now, and that was what I had to focus on.

I stopped the truck and put on my hazards. There was no way to actually pull off the road since the shoulder was completely eaten by the snow plow pileup.

It took me a good forty-five minutes to get the car unburied enough to even attempt starting it. And when I did—I failed. It was dead. I unburied it more and tried my emergency charge and nothing. It wasn't just dead, it was most sincerely dead.

Back to the truck I went and called Trip to see if he could help me out. He was a wolf shifter and owned the small mechanic shop in town. He specialized in cars but also tinkered with lawn mowers, snowblowers, and such. He was a great guy—and honest. He was also the only employee, meaning that he might come right out or have five people in front of us. It all depended on the day.

Today happened to be a good day, and he promised to be right over. Right over still meant a while, because as heavy duty as his truck was, the roads were trash.

“Whatcha got here?” He stood by the tiny car. “You turning green on us?”

“Naw, still have my brute of a truck. This is my mate’s.” I puffed out with pride. “It died, and he decided to hike through the woods.”

“That’s a brave mate you have there.” He eyed the car. “You said you tried to jump it?”

“Yeah, I did. Not sure why, given it stopped working, but you know...it’s like when I look under the hood of my truck.”

Trip chuckled and rightfully so. More than once I looked under my hood, as if I had a clue what things did. I knew the machines I worked with, not motor vehicles, and pretending otherwise was a waste of time. But I did it anyway.

“All right. I should probably not bother with anything and just take it back to the shop.” He scratched his chin. “This sucker is fancy, so hopefully I have the right parts. If not, it might be a day or two.”

“That’s fine. He got hurt on his walk so he’s probably staying put for a bit.” I went into the tale of the trap on his foot.

There were very few shifters around here, but it was imperative that they knew about things like that because no one needed to stumble upon them by accident.

“Fucking Hue.” Trip spit. “I told him not to set traps when he mentioned picking some up. Don’t worry; I’ll deal with his sorry ass and find the rest.”

I had no idea who Hue was or what “dealt with his sorry ass” might mean, but I was relieved that they would be handled. Traps were horrific and should be banned, in my opinion. That could easily have been a child who had been trapped in it, and they would not have fared as well as a full grown man.

“Thanks for handling that. I’d been worried about what to do about it.” And fearful there had been more where I liked to run. “Call me when you have some word?”

“Yeah, will do.”

I helped him get the car onto his rig and drove straight home. I hated being away from Lenny even if it was a short time. I had a strong feeling things would get better when our mating bond was sealed—if he wanted that. I’d never push. But for now, it was rough.

Driving home, it hit me once again how far Lenny had trekked through the snow and how lucky he was that I heard his scream.

Once parked, I went straight inside, not bothering to put the truck in the garage. I just left it as close to the door as possible. I needed to see that my mate was okay, and he was. Lenny had managed to get himself into the living room and once again fell asleep to the movie we saw the other day—or more accurately, that I saw the other day. He was adorable like that.

Pulling the blanket from its spot on the quilt rack, I covered him gently. He needed this sleep more than he needed to know that Trip was working on his car.

“Rest well, mate. Rest well.”





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## LENNY

Lying in bed, listening to Conall banging around the kitchen, probably making me breakfast, was comforting.

For the first time since my accident, I was almost pain free, and I put my hands behind my head and thought of how lucky I was that the car broke down close to Conall's house. Not only did the direction of my life change—not that I was certain which direction I was now headed—but the universe startled me by revealing shifters. More like a shock, but I was cool with it.

“Bed or living room?” Conall shouted from the kitchen.

Of course my mind went to my comfortable mattress and me with my legs splayed, my hole dripping with slick. Or the sofa with my naked butt bent over it and the alpha's arousal probing my entrance while I begged him to fuck me.

“Lenny?”

Conall's voice brought me back to the present. Much as I adored real-life Conall, imagination Conall was hot and his stiff dick had pre-cum dripping from the tip.

“Yeah?”

“Do you want to eat in bed or on the couch?”

Of course I had a vision of us naked. How could I not? Me eating his ass, him nibbling mine? The bed would be easier, but the sofa...we could make it work.

“Couch, I think.” Though I enjoyed the coziness of Conall's spare room, I'd studied all four walls, as well as the furniture

and the view—what I could see of it from my bed—countless times, and I was ready for a change of scenery.

Conall didn't bother with the wheelchair but scooped me up gently. I could have walked but preferred being carried, and maybe he liked it this way, too. With my nose in the crook of his neck, I inhaled his aroma and heated blood surged through my veins. "Mmmm, you smell good."

"That's probably butter you can smell. I've made pancakes."

It was a tossup whether the most intoxicating scent was the alpha who was holding me or the delicious buttery smell. Nah, who was I kidding? Conall was the winner.

He set me on the couch and brought me a tray.

"You're spoiling me, cooking every meal from scratch," I said.

"It's my pleasure, and besides, it's not like I can run to the store or a fast food joint and grab a meal."

I'd only ever lived in an urban area and never considered moving to a more rural environment. I wasn't the outdoorsy type. Just thinking of Conall dressed for work, with his sleeves rolled up, big boots, wearing a cap and holding an ax, had me fanning myself and sweat dotting my upper lip. Though in the twenty-first century, he'd probably use a chainsaw.

"Syrup?" he asked as he stood beside me with a small jug in one hand.

"On the pancakes?" I smirked, hoping he'd catch my meaning.

"Hmmm, I can think of other places I could put it but that would require me having to lick it off." He poked his tongue out and withdrew it.

Did he understand what he was doing to me? To my cock? Judging by his saucy grin, my guess was yes!

I so wanted him to yank down my underwear—it was a sad day when I was able to get a pair over my injury—but getting cocks or tongues in holes would be awkward, and I was still experiencing twinges in my leg. "Yes, please." But after a moment's I clarified with, "On the pancakes. Perhaps we can save some syrup for another time."

“Don’t worry,” he told me as a stream of gorgeous, sticky-sweet syrup hit the pile of luscious pancakes on my plate. “I have plenty more, plus butter and cream.”

My length was so damned hard I winced, though I concentrated on getting the first mouthful of pancake into my mouth. But the syrup dribbled from the fork onto my chest. “Oops, silly me. Look what I’ve done.” I batted my eyelashes at Conall like a champion.

“Can’t take you anywhere.” He dabbed at my shirt with a napkin.

As I lowered my gaze, I said, “You missed a bit,” and I undid a button. Syrup was dribbling over my skin and I fantasized about Conall getting on his knees and lapping it.

His brow furrowed. “Can’t have that. What sort of host would I be if I didn’t clean it up?”

I nodded, putting what I hoped was a solemn expression on my face. And then the alpha kneeled on the rug beside the sofa and undid another button, exposing more of my chest.

His eyes glazed over. That wasn’t my imagination playing tricks. Sticking his tongue out, he placed it in the splotch of syrup on my bare skin and licked.

“Oh gods!” I yelled. That was the hottest, sexiest thing any alpha had ever done, in or out of bed. It was as though I’d been burned. All my nerve endings were alive and tingling. My erection was obvious, my shirt not long enough to cover the bulge. Not that I wanted it to.

Conall peered up, his brown eyes framed by long dark lashes. “Was that what you wanted?”

Completely short-circuited, I couldn’t come up with a reply. “Mmmm.”

“More?”

I gulped, and instead of answering, I tore off more pancake and shoved it in my mouth. “Much, much more.” Talking with my mouth full was acceptable in this situation, right?

Conall sat back on his heels. “Perhaps you should finish your breakfast and then I’ll clean you properly.”

If he didn’t stop talking, I was going to shoot my load right here. “Are you... are you good at cleaning?” I asked, the bite of pancake feeling like sawdust in my throat.

“How about you be the judge?” He jerked his head at my plate. “Finish your meal and we’ll find out.” He stood, and his very obvious erection was right in my face.

I reached out and stroked my fingers over his crotch. “I can’t wait.”



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## CONALL

Gods, I was so hard. Hard, but also not wanting to rush to do something about it. I wanted to take my time and enjoy every single lick, nip, and stroke. And I planned to do exactly that.

I carried Lenny into the bedroom under the guise he needed the help, which he did. But that wasn't why I was doing it. There was something romantic about carrying your partner to bed, and I wanted to give him that—give him romance.

Being human, the whole warp speed that was mating wouldn't have been what he dreamed of as a child. He grew up with movies where alphas swept their omegas off of their feet and took them out on dates and wooed them properly. We had none of that. Although, I supposed saving his life probably fit into wooing in some way or another.

But that didn't make what we had any less real, and nothing made me happier than to see that he understood that—understood it and embraced it. They say that fate doesn't make mistakes when it comes to true mates, and while I always clung to that, it wasn't until I met Lenny that I truly believed it. He was made for me just as I was made for him.

I set him gently on the bed. “Let me know if anything hurts at any point.”

In response, he licked his lips and undid the belt on the robe he was wearing. There was something intoxicating about seeing him in my clothing, surrounded by my scent. I wanted to climb on the bed with him and kiss him senseless, but first I needed to get him comfortable.

I slid a pillow under his hips, then a few under his injured leg. It was better, much better, and I wanted to keep it that way. I refused to let our joining hurt him.

“You’re making it difficult to concentrate.” I said and reached for another pillow, and he took that as an opportunity to reach for his cock and give it a long stroke.

“I wouldn’t have to be distracting if you were on the bed with me and without your clothing.” He didn’t even pretend to stop. Gods, he was magnificent.

Last pillow in place, I decided to embrace his comment about me being naked and did a slow strip tease as he jerked himself, his slick entrance visible thanks to the pillow under his hips. Had I not been hard when I began, that sight alone would’ve taken care of that.

“Join me alpha, I need you.” He patted the bed beside him, and I stepped out of my boxer briefs.

Careful not to jostle things too much, I climbed beside him and took his hand in mine, the one that was wrapped around his thick cock. “I’ll take care of that now.” I nibbled on his chin and he yanked me to him, the nibble not quite enough.

He kissed me long and hard, his tongue exploring my mouth, a moan escaping between breaths. True to my word, I took care of his hardness and wrapped my fingers around him as I sunk into his kiss, my own cock pressed against his hip.

He broke our kiss, his breath shuddering. “If you keep doing that I’m going to come.”

“That’s the point, omega mine.” It felt right coming up, but I had a second of panic that it would feel too much too fast for him. I had no reason to be.

“I want your knot when I come, alpha mine.”

*Ours.*

*Mate.*

*Mark.*

*Ours.*



*No. He's human and we will slow down.*

“Do you not want to?” His confidence deflated, and I hated myself for pausing long enough to argue with my jackrabbit.

“More than anything.” I kissed him and then spoke against his lips. “I just couldn't bear it if I hurt you. I need you to promise that you will tell me if anything is at all uncomfortable.”

“Like your big cock?” He winked. “Pretty sure it is the perfect size.”

“You are going to keep me on my toes.”

“I'd rather you on your knees, but not now. Now, I need you inside me. Don't make me beg.”

I didn't bother to tell him that he already was, and I flogged it so hard.

“Then promise me...promise me that you will let me know.” On that there was no room for negotiating.

He met my eyes, “I promise.”

“Then let's make you scream my name.” I pulled my bottom lip in with my teeth and situated myself between his legs, quickly realizing he needed a second pillow under his hips. “Pillow.”

He threw one at me, and I tucked it under him. Thank my inability to pass up a good pillow sale that we had enough.

I teased his slick entrance, wanting to bend down and worship it with my mouth. That would need to wait, both of us so close already. One finger entered him, and he groaned and then begged for more. One became two, two became three, and he cried out for me just to put it in already.

“I think I know what you want, omega mine.” I situated myself and slid into him slowly, watching his face as I did, looking for any signs of discomfort. Seeing none, I began to thrust in and out of him.

“Faster, alpha mine. I can't meet you halfway with my leg, please—faster...harder.”

“Thank you for telling me.” I wanted him to know how much that meant to me, to let him see that his honesty about his physical needs was appreciated.

I did as he said, pounding into him faster and harder, loving the way his eyes fell heavy, his lust evident on his face, in his scent, and by his slickness. He was close, so close, and so was I. Reaching down, I wrapped my fingers around his length and jerked him, his cum coating my hand quickly and throwing me over the edge, my climax rushing through me, my cum filling his ass and my knot growing to seal it in.

*Ours.*

*Mate.*

*Mark.*

I ignored my jackrabbit and instead collapsed carefully on my sweaty mate. “I love you, omega mine.”

“Love you too, alpha mine. Love you too.”



---

## LENNY

*This is different.*

I was in bed, but it was the middle of the day, and the view from where I was lying wasn't the same as the one I'd been waking up to for however many days I'd been here. The bed was huge, and there was a warm body next to me. A quick glance told me Conall was asleep, snuggled up beside me.

Grasping the quilt in one hand, I lifted it and peeked at the alpha's cock. Damn, it was still hard. We'd fucked more than once this morning, and not only had his dick been in my hole and mouth, his tongue had lapped up every bit of syrup. And there was a lot of it in all my dips and curves. He'd had to work hard to capture it all. Especially when he was around my hole. That took a lot of licking.

*No*, I told my brain. If it didn't stop conjuring up images, I'd come again, right here, right now.

Conall stirred. "What should we do for the rest of the day?"

I was a little miffed that was the first thing out of his mouth. Why not, "I loved being inside of you," or "I don't want to shower and wash off your scent." Nope, he was thinking of cooking or making another snowman. Maybe even tidying up. But perhaps lumberjacks chose actions over words. Earlier today he'd definitely been in action mode when his cock had plunged in and out of me, making me scream.

"Not sure." I crossed my arms, not willing to make any suggestions.

He trailed his fingertips over my chest and I purred. This alpha had magic in those hands, making goosebumps march over my skin, some doing cartwheels.

“I was thinking...” His fingers crept under the covers, over my midsection and along my happy trail. “...of maybe tinkering under the hood.” He grasped my dick and tugged.

“Yes!” He was talking sex, I hoped, and not about his damned car. But his fingers were doing the talking so I listened to them. “You can tinker as long and as much as you like.” Those were my last intelligible words until I screamed, “Conall!” when cum spurted from my length.

It was mid-afternoon before we made it out of bed, and I was able to hobble into the shower. Conall cooked, though there was a lot of kissing and fondling, and he complained he’d end up with dry hands because he kept having to wash them between the caresses and the cooking.

“Be right back,” he said as he brought me coffee in bed the next morning. He wasn’t his usual cheerful self, but perhaps this was him after a sex marathon and not much sleep.

As we sipped coffee, the birds twittering near the window was the only sound that disturbed the silence. Before my accident, I would not have contemplated living outside the city. Food delivery, coffee less than a block away, restaurants, cinemas, and museums at my fingertips were essential.

But without those things interrupting us—and the fact that I’d been injured and couldn’t leave was also a factor—we’d been able to focus on *us*. Conall was an excellent cook, and I’d picked up on him being a neat freak. He enjoyed reading detective novels, and crappy reality TV shows were his favorites.

As I closed my eyes and let the silence wash over me, a new sound disturbed the peace and quiet I’d been enjoying. What was that? Sounded like a lawn mower, but the ground was covered in over two feet of snow. There was no lawn until spring.

Wait, that chug-chug-chugging was familiar. It was something I was supposed to have had fixed weeks ago. Memories of my old life flooded back, and at the forefront was me in the car on that night, stuck in the snow, shivering and terrified.

“My car!” I eased myself out of bed and pressed my face on the window as it pattered up the driveway. There was that feeling of dread again in the pit of my belly. But this time, it wasn’t to do with possibly freezing to death but it was... What was it?

*Alone.* I wasn’t frightened of being by myself. I was a capable adult omega who’d been living alone for years and loving it. What scared me now, right this minute, was not seeing Conall last thing at night and catching a glimpse of him when I woke up in the morning.

“Ta-da!” Conall was in the doorway, brandishing his arms as though he was a game show host and showing the contestants what they *could* win. A guy got out of the car as Conall said, “Good as new, though you should get someone to fix that noise when you get back to civilization. Trip didn’t have the right part.” His voice wavered, making him less like a host and more like a nervous job applicant.

“Yeah.” I didn’t give a damn about the chugging engine.

The guy who brought the car—Trip?—waved me away when I attempted to pay, and Conall said it’d been taken care of. I thanked both them, and Trip got into a pickup driven by a second man and they drove off. I’d have to repay Conall and made a mental note to bring it up later.

“Something wrong?” Conall asked. “Don’t worry about the noise. The car’ll get you where you need to go.”

“Nope.” I wasn’t going to pretend I was excited to leave. “I want to stay right here with you.” Replaying the words in my head, they sounded kinda needy, but I couldn’t take them back. “Is that weird?” Or worse, creepy.

He scooped me up as he had done when I was an invalid and twirled me around. Planting a kiss on my forehead, he proceeded to kiss my nose and mouth. “It’s a shifter thing.” He

explained how shifters and their beasts knew instantly when they'd met their one true mate, and they never wanted to be parted.

“So what do we do?” I asked, ecstatic that what I was experiencing wasn't one-sided. Instead of thumping, my heart was thumpity-thumping, and maybe there was a twirl or two and a happy clap.

“I can't sort out your job.”

Yeah, that would have to be worked out, but whatever happened, I'd find a way to earn money.

“But we *are* fated mates. And as such, we have to mark one another so our beasts are content and the shifter world has evidence we're a pair.”

Turned out we had to mate in bed, after both of us had come and his knot claimed me. Goodie! More of his cock in my puckered hole, more lips on heated skin, more tongues lapping at sweat, slick, and come. Just more.

“Ready?” he panted an hour later as his sweat-coated body lay atop mine and we were both covered in slick and cum.

“Yes.”

“It might hurt.”

“Just do it,” I insisted.

He dug his teeth into the fleshy part of my shoulder, and I tensed as they broke the skin. Blood trickled over my chest and back, and I breathed through the pain.

“My turn.”

“You don't have to.” Conall pressed his lips to my brow.

“I want to.” My teeth barely broke the skin on his chest, but there would be a scar. A permanent reminder that he was my mate. “It's done.”





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## CONALL

Living in this snow-covered bubble was everything, but with the roads cleared, the sky blue, and interviews to be had, there was no hiding away much longer. I had dreaded the thought of him leaving for so long, and now it might still be a possibility, at least short term, but I believed in us. If he had to leave for a little bit, we'd make it through. I no longer felt the dread that built up inside of me at the idea of him walking out my door and back to the city. He was mine, and I was his. We'd figure this out.

The marking, as primal as it was, was calming-soothing—domestic, even, and it gave my beast a peace he'd never experienced before. I had no doubt that everything would work out now. It was Lenny and I against the world.

A world we had to venture out into.

“If this doesn't work out, maybe I can find something in town.” Lenny had told me that he had half a plan about working remotely; it would mean getting some tech upgrades at my place, but that was doable. The question was, did the company want him enough to let me make that happen? They'd be foolish not to, but corporations weren't known for making the best decisions.

“We'll figure something out.” I reached over and placed my hand on his thigh. “This is just one job out of many. If they don't see you as the asset that you are, they don't deserve you.”

I meant it, too. I didn't want to see my mate working in a place that didn't see the amazingness that was him. And while the local jobs might not be the best fit for his skills, he'd find something while he settled in. Or not. I would be fine if he wanted to take the time to find the perfect job.

The ride to his interview was quite a bit longer than I thought it would be, mostly because the roads were cleared but not perfect. A chill ran through me at the thought of Lenny trying to navigate the roads in his tiny car. He'd more likely than not have ended up in a snowbank.

"Do you want me to drop you off, or do you want me to find a parking spot and then walk you in?" I asked as we got close.

He was doing really well. His leg was healing amazingly well. But he was still limping a bit, and while he tried to not let me see it, it was clear it still hurt quite a bit. He'd be fine walking the short distance, but that didn't mean he had to do it. I wanted Lenny to choose what was most comfortable for him.

"I think maybe you walking in with me would be best."

*Ours.*

*Protect.*

*Mate.*

*Help.*

My jackrabbit was as thrilled as I was that as stubborn as Lenny was, he was accepting our offer to help in the way that would best suit him. Lenny was my mate, and I wouldn't judge his desire for help as weakness—in so many ways it was strength. And if the company did, that was on them. I wouldn't love him working for anyone that wouldn't understand that sometimes people need help. He deserved better than that.

I parked the car, and we walked into the large building together. He did much better on his feet than I thought, given how short a time he'd been recouping. He needed some help on the one set of stairs, but for the most part he managed on his own. It would take a while before he was back to normal, or as normal as he would get. But even if this was the best he

got, it was manageable, something I feared would never be the case when I found him that night.

He told me more than once that the stupid trap brought me to him, and that he could never be mad about that. Unlike him, I was mad about it, but I saw his point. It was that series of events that brought us together, and together is where we belonged.

“I’m here.” He stood outside the office door. “Wish me luck.”

I leaned in, kissed his cheek, and then whispered close to his ear, “You’ve got this.”

He walked in with all the confidence in the world, and then came the hard part for me—the waiting. He shot me a text between meetings, something about meeting Kean and things looking good.

“I got the job!” He went on to explain the original position he applied for couldn’t be made remote, and that Kean person was looking at him for a new position, which he got.

“I knew you would.” I stepped close and hugged him close. “Well done, mate. Want to grab some dinner, and you can tell me all about it?”

“It’s already dinner time?”

I nodded.

“I’m sorry. We are going to be driving back in the pitch black,” he said as we stepped outside and surveyed the quickly dimming light.

“Nope.” I gave his hand a squeeze. “I booked us a hotel to celebrate.”

It had been a *just in case* spontaneous thing at the time, but I was glad I did it. The roads would freeze up with nightfall.

“You knew I was going to get the job?” I loved the way his eyes sparkled.

“Of course. They’d have been a fool not to.” We turned in the direction of the truck. “What are you thinking of for dinner?”

“You said we have a hotel room?” he clarified.

Being alone with my mate sounded far better than any restaurant.

“I did.”

“Do they have room service, by chance?” He shoulder bumped me, and I saw exactly where his mind was going—and I loved it. The sooner I could get my mate naked, the better, and he seemed to be on that same exact page.

“I think they do.” We reached the truck, and I helped him inside.

“Sounds perfect to me.” He pulled my shirt and yanked me close, bringing his lips to mine and kissing him with all the passion he was feeling. “I think we should go there, then.” He spoke against my lips. “Probably should keep off my feet.”

“That can be arranged,” I murmured and nipped his bottom lip.

We drove the short distance to the hotel, and while the room service came cold and probably wasn't much better when it was hot, I wouldn't have traded it for the best steak dinner on this planet. We ate, laughed, talked about his new job, and spent the night wrapped in each other's arms.

What had started as a business trip to help us determine what was next turned into a romantic getaway as we planned our future, a future that was brighter than I ever dared dream—a future made possible by a broken-down car, a snow storm, and an illegal hunter. Funny how life worked.



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## LENNY

I sat in the room where I'd recovered from my injuries, my hands hovering over the laptop keyboard. Instead of the peaceful vibe I remembered fondly, where I'd fallen for Conall and he'd wowed me—yes, with his cock but also with the idea of shifters' existence—it was now stacked with boxes, odd bits of furniture, a clothes rack, and kitchen utensils, most of which I'd never used.

It wasn't the best atmosphere for working, but little by little I was making my way through it. Conall had come with me when I packed up my place and we'd tossed masses of stuff with most of conversations going like this:

“Do you need this?” He'd hold up some contraption I'd bought while watching late night TV.

I'd shrug and say, “Maybe. Pack it. I might need it.”

Conall would proceed to trash it or add it to the donate pile. He was ruthless, but as I gazed at unopened boxes, I wished he'd been more merciless. My mate, neat freak that he was, was struggling with the mess. I'd catch him from the corner of my eye in the doorway, one eye twitching as he surveyed the clutter.

But my attention was drawn to the familiar dinging of the video conferencing app. It was the weekly meeting between me and the members of my department, some of whom worked remotely, as I did, and others who preferred working in the office.

I greeted everyone as they joined the meetup, and we chatted while waiting for the rest of the group. Conall held up a mug and tapped it, his way of asking if I wanted a coffee. I nodded, though the thought of coffee brought a sour taste to my mouth. That was odd, because I thrived on coffee, and my mate was always trying to reduce my intake.

He never mentioned my addiction when I drank a cup during one of my online meetings. These were always scheduled for mid-afternoon when I was getting drowsy and finding it hard to concentrate.

Just as I was about to start the meeting proper, my mate placed a mug on the desk, and my stomach heaved. I bit my lip, attempting to hold back the throwup, but the overwhelming urge to vomit persisted. I waved my hands at Conall, who stood there open-mouthed. Why couldn't he understand my signals? My face was scrunched up, possibly with a greenish hue, my mouth was clenched tight, and I was twirling my fingers like when a person was directing a driver parking their car in a tight spot.

I raced into the bathroom, lunged over the toilet, and heaved. It seemed like forever I was on my knees, emptying my stomach. But when I was done and hauled myself up, my cheeks were so white they were almost luminescent. After rinsing my mouth, I staggered back to my office-slash-storeroom-slash-spare-bedroom.

My mate was at my desk talking to my colleagues. They were laughing at something he'd said. I was peeved he hadn't come after me, not that I'd been able to explain I was sick. But as we were true mates, shouldn't he interpret my signals? Apparently not.

"Here he is," Conall breezily announced. "Was it the curry I made at lunch, love?"

"Don't know. Don't think so." Spicy food had never affected me before.

"I'm sure you'll feel better now you've pooped."

Shit! No, not that. Damn. He was discussing my toilet habits with my employees? Once again I signaled and hoped he'd understand me pulling my hand across my throat, indicating he had to stop, or, more accurately, that I was going to kill him for talking about my bathroom habits.

“What?” He furrowed his brow.

“Is the mic muted?” I said through gritted teeth

“No, why?”

I jerked my head toward the laptop. “I threw up.” I plastered a smile on my face that bore a striking resemblance to a grimace.

“Oh my God,” a voice drifted through the computer. “Are you pregnant?”

“No!” I responded automatically.

“Are you sure?” someone else asked.

“Yeah.” But the remaining food on my stomach slid up my throat, and I rushed to the bathroom and vomited again. Conall joined me and placed a wet washcloth on my brow.

“I’m sorry I didn’t recognize your signal. Or signals, rather.”

Getting off my knees, I sat on the floor, head resting on the wall. “I’ll make you a dictionary of Lenny’s twirly-finger signals.”

He sat beside me, our thighs rubbing together. “Do you think they’re right?”

“Who?”

“Your colleagues.”

“The pregnant thing?” Like all newly mated or married couples, we had been having a lot of sex. “I don’t know. Maybe.”

“I can drive to town and pick up a pregnancy test.”

I was about to say I’d go with him but didn’t want to be in the car as it rounded bends and passed other vehicles. “Good



idea.” He helped me up. “Gods, the meeting. What happened?”

“I postponed it until tomorrow. I might have said that you’d let everyone know whether you are or aren’t when you talk to them again.”

“Conall!” I shoulder-bumped him.

“Well, they were nice, and they like you. Told me you were a good boss.”

“One who they think pooped because of a spicy curry but who threw up instead. They heard it all.”

“Sorry. But they were very sweet. No poop jokes.”

I lay on the sofa and sipped water while sucking candy. The next thing I knew, Conall was shaking my shoulder. “Must have fallen asleep,” I mumbled.

“We can do the test later.”

“No. Tell me what to do.” I got up, my mind still fuzzy from my nap.

“Pee on stick. Wait ten minutes. Look at stick. That’s it.”

While my head and stomach hurt, I was up to peeing. “Okay, first part done,” I said as I staggered from bathroom to couch. Conall set an alarm and massaged my feet while we waited.

“Don’t peek!” I told him as the alarm went off and he headed to grab the test.

He returned with the test behind his back, and on the count of three he put it in front of us. “Two pink lines.” We peered at the results. “Does that mean what I think it does?” I’d never considered having kids. I mean, it was something I wanted to do eventually, but Conall and I were so new.

“It does.” His broad smile tamped down my doubts, and he took me in his arms.

“You’re happy?” I asked, wanting to make sure before I reacted.

“Yes. Aren’t you?”

A baby. One we made. We were going to be a family. "I am."



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## CONALL

*Babe.*

*Ours.*

*Protect.*

My jackrabbit was on full possessive alert all morning. While I had known that Conall was pregnant and hadn't kept it from my beast, he sensed our baby for the first time this morning, and he wouldn't let go. He was thumping away with both joy and pride.

*Yes. Our young will be protected and loved, I promised him.*

It wasn't enough. He pushed me down and took his fur, not even caring that our mate was sound asleep beside us. He wanted to be close to our young, and there was no stopping him. He curled up next to our mate's belly on top of the covers, nestling in close, then fell asleep.

"Conall, is everything okay?" Lenny's sleepy voice woke me, his hand settled on my fur. "Do you need anything?"

He'd seen my jackrabbit quite a bit over our time together, and each and every time he surprised me with his interactions. He saw my beast as what he was, an extension of me.

I looked up at him and shook my head, hoping he saw the humanness in the movement, and then curled back up. My beast had calmed as he slept and I could easily take my skin again without him pushing back, but he was loving this togetherness time with our mate, and I was going to give him that.

“It was nice waking up with you like this.” Lenny gave my fur a long stroke. “I don’t understand the whys of it, but it feels safe having you snuggled up to me like this. I was really worried about today when I went to sleep.”

Lenny’s first appointment with a midwife was today. He’d originally wanted to go to a human doctor, and I understood that. Humans found out they were pregnant and booked an appointment with their doctor. That’s how things were done. But Lenny wasn’t having a human baby—or maybe he was, we didn’t know—regardless, the odds were high that something very normal for a shifter pregnancy but concerning for a human one would pop up.

I’d known he was apprehensive, but I hadn’t caught on how worried he actually was. It was a good thing that my beast and I were a strong team. He picked up on what I had not and took care of things, giving my mate what he needed.

We stayed like this, the two of us cuddling, until Mother Nature called and my mate needed to get up. I shifted, thanking my beast for taking care of my mate before I shed my fur.

Lenny and I enjoyed a bland breakfast. He found that if he ate plain toast, followed by a boiled egg, followed by another piece of plain toast, that his stomach didn’t revolt. I ate the same in solidarity.

“Do you know the midwife?” Lenny picked up a glass of juice, sniffed it, and then put it back down. “You can have my juice.”

I took that as code that he wanted it away from him and slid it in front of my plate.

“I don’t know her, but I’ve heard amazing things. Trudy is from the next town over, and a tiger shifter.”

Lenny’s eyes widened as he mouthed, “Tiger?”

“She’s not going to be here in her claws and fur.” I hoped that reassured him and didn’t do the opposite by reminding him that she was, in fact, holding a deadly beast inside of her..

“Not all shifters are as adorable as I am.”

I winked.

“I believe that’s true.” He smiled. “Hard to think of anyone as adorable as you, and I’m sure she’s not going to eat me.”

He didn’t sound too sure about the being eaten thing, but he was putting on his game face and I appreciated it.

She came by around noon, pulling up on her snowmobile, which wowed Lenny. He still wasn’t quite used to how different things were here as compared to the city. That would come with time, and so far he seemed to be enjoying the differences, and that was important to me. I didn’t want him giving up his city life for something he didn’t love, just to appease my job and beast. Thank gods that didn’t seem to be an issue.

“Hello dads!” Trudy walked in after kicking the snow off her boots. “Stedman says we have some good news in the house.”

There was something sweet and grandmotherly about the young tiger—it was an interesting combination, and one that had my mate already visibly relaxed.

“We do, and I’m human so I…thanks for coming out here.” He shoved his hands in his pockets.

“I don’t discriminate, Dad. Human or not, my job is to see all the babies brought into this world healthy just like my mom and grandma and her mom before that. I was pretty much born to this job. Now let’s get you checked out.”

She took Lenny into the bedroom and did her exam, calling me in about ten minutes later to assure me that everything looked right on track and that we were looking at becoming fathers in the new year. She gave a bunch of advice, advice Lenny wrote down as if he were being tested on it in the near future. She also gave him the timeline of her visits and what to expect with each passing month.

“Any questions for me?” Trudy asked.

“Do you know…can you tell…is our baby going to be able to shift like his father?” Lenny reached for my hand, and I gave it to him.

“That we won’t know until he arrives.”

“Oh. Okay.” He held me tighter. “Thanks for coming by today.”

We said our goodbyes and she left, my mind on his “Oh. Okay,” response.

“Are you worried about our baby shifting?” I asked once she was gone and we had our privacy.

“No. The opposite. I want our child to be as amazing as his alpha father.” He leaned his head against my chest.

“And I want him to be like his amazing omega dad.” I kissed the top of his head.

Lenny looked up at me. “Maybe both?”

“I like that, omega mine. I like that a lot.”





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## LENNY

“Nice ass,” I yelled as Conall leaned over and picked up some of the wood he’d just chopped. Even though it was mid-summer, he was prepping for winter.

My bump and I were on the porch on a rattan couch. I had my feet up and was sipping lemonade my mate had made this morning.

“Why thank you.” Conall curtsied.

When we had first mated, Conall was away from Monday morning until Friday night. He stayed at the logging camp because it was too far to commute. But at the end of my first trimester, he got a job in a camp much closer to home so he commuted and only spent an occasional night away.

As I gazed around the yard and beyond, to the woods behind the house and the fields of wheat on one side, woods on the other, I compared it to the snowy landscape the night the car broke down. It couldn’t look more different. Before my belly got so big, we often walked to where I’d pulled over and marveled that I’d managed to make it as far as I did before the trap mangled my foot.

Neither Conall nor Stedman had ever shared how the latter treated my injury. The only indication was a faint silvery line, similar to my mating mark on my ankle. After doing an online search, I realized my wounds should have required immediate hospitalization to prevent almost unavoidable infection, and my rehabilitation should have been months and not days.

After stacking the wood in the shed, Conall plonked himself on a chair beside me, his pungent sweaty aroma a huge turn on. My billowy paternity shirt hid my arousal, but there was nothing I could do to tamp down the slick creeping from my hole.

My mate swallowed a mouthful of lemonade, and I fixed my gaze on the droplets that dribbled over his chin and plopped on his chest. Without looking at me and staring straight ahead, he sniffed. "Something tells me you want me."

I snorted and lemonade spurted into the air. "It's your fault for being so damned sexy when you're dirty and covered in sweat."

He rubbed his chin. "Didn't you blame me last night for being so fuckable when I got out of the shower?"

"Clean, dirty, or anything in between, I love your dick in me."

He outstretched his arm and lifted my shirt. "You're hard, and the scent of slick is overpowering, so your hole is ready for me too."

I wriggled my ass because my butt was sticky and slippery. The cushion I was sitting on would have to be washed, but I didn't care. Conall sat on the floor and undid my shorts, freeing my dick.

"Mmmm." That was much better, because my length hated being cooped up inside my pants, and it was cooler outside than in.

He lapped along one side of the shaft. "Better?"

"A little."

He licked the tip, capturing beads of pre-cum, and my legs quivered while goosebumps crept over my flesh. "You're so slick," he mumbled. At least that was what I thought he said. With a mouthful of cock, it was hard to understand.

But as he sucked and grazed his teeth over my shaft, the phone on the table beside me vibrated. I ignored it, or tried to, until it rang again. With Conall deep throating me, I checked the

display. It was the store in town where I'd ordered the baby crib. I had to take the call.

"Yes?" I gasped, my voice squeaky and coated with desire, though I hoped the person on the other end didn't get wise to that.

"Is this Lenny McGregor?"

"Yes," I repeated, though my voice was even closer to a scream than before.

"Your crib has arrived."

"Yes!" That was definitely a scream, because Conall had maneuvered my ass and stuck two fingers in my hole while blowing my length. I was being fingerfucked and sucked off at the same time.

"I'm so glad you're excited."

"I'm... beyond...excited... I'm delirious." Tiny mewls escaped my lips as my mate cradled my balls. I was going to explode, and the sales assistant on the phone would get an earful.

"When would you be able to collect it?" he asked.

"Soon," I screeched. "I'll be coming very, very soon."

"That's great. I look forward to seeing you."

I tossed the phone aside as my climax had me in its sights and was hurtling to the finish line. "Ahhhh... yes... the crib's here. I love your fingers in me and your mouth on my cock!"

Cum spurted into my mate's mouth as I yelled his name before I sagged back in the chair, my head flopped to the side and my chest heaving.

Conall kissed me and I savored my cum on his breath. "Maybe we can adjourn to the bedroom?" he suggested.

"Yes, please." I held out my arms and he picked me up.

"Hello. Hello."

My mate froze. "What was that? Did you leave the TV on?"

"No."

The voice had a tinny quality to it, and it was kinda familiar.

“Mr. McGregor? Can you hear me?”

Fuck, it was the phone, and I was certain that was the guy I’d been chatting to about the crib. “Ummm, yes?” I said, my face burning at the thought of what he’d heard.

“You didn’t disconnect the call. But I wanted to add that we’ll be closed tomorrow afternoon as we’ll be doing inventory.”

“Okay. Thanks.”

I grabbed the phone and turned it off. No way did I want an audience when Conall plowed into me.

“We don’t have much luck with disconnecting devices,” he said as he lay me on our mattress.

“Huh?”

He reminded me of the day we discovered I was pregnant.

“Oh right.” Seemed like everyone was a witness to our lives.

Conall strode toward the door, and I heaved myself up and tried to mask my disappointment. “I thought we were going to have sex.”

“We are,” he replied over his shoulder. “I’m locking all the doors and windows and closing the curtains so no one can disturb us. I want no interruptions when I eat your ass.”



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## CONALL

I wanted everything to be perfect for the baby's arrival, and part of that meant I needed to figure out a long-term solution for work. I loved what I did and loved my crew, but even with picking camps closer to home, the schedule was not ideal. So I did something I never thought I'd do: when an office job for my parent company opened up, I threw my name in the hat for it.

I wasn't even sure I'd want it, but it seemed like a good idea to leave options open. I could push paper for a while if it meant being near my mate and our growing family. They came first.

"Whatcha doing?" Lenny asked as he waddled into the bedroom where I was staring at my screen, wondering if I made the right choice by hitting submit.

"I put my name in for an office job that opened up yesterday." I set the computer beside me.

"Why would you do that? You love your job." He worked his way across the floor toward me.

"I don't like being away from you, and I have a feeling it will be worse once the baby comes." I patted the spot on the bed beside me.

"I think if I sit down, I'll fall asleep."

He was at the point of his pregnancy where his energy was waning. The midwife said it was to be expected and to take advantage of the time to sleep, because once the baby came there would be precious little of it.

“I love that you love us and don’t want to be away from us, but you know what else you love?” Lenny held his hand out for mine, and I took it.

“Popcorn?” I teased.

“Popcorn, yes, but you also love what you do and you would hate being in an office.” He gave my hand a tug. “Come with me.”

I got up and walked out of our bedroom, through the living room, and out to the front porch.

“See all of this? This is what you love, and you won’t find it in an office.” He indicated the gorgeous wilderness just a few steps away.

Safe wilderness, at that. After the snow, the place was scoured for any remaining traps and none were found.

“I know, but I also know that when I was leaving for days at a time it was rough on you.” I hated seeing his face when I left. He always tried to school it, but the underlying sadness was close enough to the surface that he couldn’t keep it completely from me.

“It was,” he took the steps down off the porch, “but each time was a bit better, and not all camps require you to be gone that long.”

He was right, but also a bunch did.

“And I would rather have you gone some weeks and doing what you love than for you to be in an office all day and be miserable.” He stopped at the small flower bed that he grew in one of my old tires. “Remember how you thought the tire was trash?” He leaned into my side. “And I said it was gorgeous.”

“I do.” I kissed the top of his head. I’d been cleaning out the garage at the start of the season, putting the winter gear near the back and the summer near the front. “And you made it this way. It was your love and patience that transformed it into something beautiful.”

“Mother Nature made it this way, and thank you, but I wasn’t fishing for compliments. I had a point buried in there.” He

reached down and pulled a dead leaf off of the one stem. “It’s beautiful now because it’s outside and not stuck inside of a dark building.”

I chuckled, his analogy a reach at best. “I love you.” I hugged him from behind, his belly too much in the way for front hugs anymore. “And I assure you my office would not be the equivalent of a dirty garage.”

He leaned back. “But would it feel that way?”

Dagnabbit. He had a point.

“Let’s see if they even consider me.” I wasn’t sure I had the skills they were looking for. A lot of this was putting the horse before the cart—or whatever that saying was.

“They would be a fool not to, but you know I’m right.” He started to turn around, his belly quickly getting in the way, and he stopped and stomped his foot the way he did when this happened, which was increasingly frequent. His belly was ginormous, and I freaking loved it.

“You are, omega mine. But I want life to be as good for you as possible.”

“And do you know what makes me happy and makes my life good?” He settled his hands on his belly.

“Seeing my cute little jackrabbit bouncing around the yard?” I joked.

“I was going to say you make me happy and life good, but if you’re offering to let me spend some time with your beast, I’m not going to turn you down.” He puckered his lips. “Kiss me first.”

I leaned in, giving him what he asked for. “Thank you.”

“For kissing my sexy alpha?” He gave my lips a peck.

“No, omega mine. For being you, for loving and accepting me for who I am, and for being you.”

“You said that already.” He rubbed his nose against mine.

“Because it’s doubly true.” I pointed to the porch. “Why don’t you go sit down and I’ll hop on over and give you some



jackrabbit cuddles?”

“I love that idea, but you should go ahead of me.”

“Because?”

“Because I want to see your sexy ass, of course.” He gave my ass a playful slap.

“But then how am I going to see yours?” It was a fair question.

“You’ll just have to wait until later when you slam your big cock into it.”

I let out a groan. My omega was going to be the death of me, and what a fan–freaking–tastic death it was going to be.



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## LENNY

“Are we there yet?”

We’d been into town to stock up on groceries and last minute baby items. But by the time Conall had packed all the stuff in the car, my legs were aching, as was my back, and I was dunzo. I wanted to be home with my feet up, eating whatever my mate had cooked for dinner.

“I’ll run you a bath when we get home and give you a foot massage.”

Arching my back, I grunted and did my best to get comfortable. Even with a cushion at my back and another behind my head, my body ached, and my head pounded because I hadn’t drunk enough and my water bottle was in the back seat.

Being grumpy was part and parcel of the last few weeks of being pregnant. At least it was for me. I turned up my nose at the smiling, heavily pregnant omegas on TV, in magazines, and on the internet. “Blech,” was my reaction as one singsonged about sailing through the nine months with help from some garbage product he was selling.

“Turn the a/c up please, babe.” I could have done it myself, but I was so achy and bad-tempered I wanted him to pamper me. Not that he hadn’t. Conall was a dear and had coddled me throughout the pregnancy.

We were almost home when I yelled, “Slow down!” and gripped the handlebar above the door as intense pain gripped my belly.

“That’s sweet you want to see the place where you pulled the car over the night we met.” Conall slowed down.

“No! I need to get out.” And remove my clothes. I wanted to tear them off as though ants were biting me. Maybe rip off my skin while I was at it.

He shot me a glance, concern etched on his face as he guided the car onto the shoulder. Racing around to my side, he helped me out. Gods, my pants were soaked and there was puddle on the seat. Had I peed myself? My stomach cramped, and I leaned on my mate’s shoulder. Nope, I was in labor.

“The baby,” I babbled, because I wasn’t ready. Yes, we had all the baby paraphernalia, but mentally I wasn’t prepared, no matter how many books I’d read or birthing classes we’d attended.

Conall stiffened. “We’re going back to town.”

“No,” I said, my voice muffled against his shirt. “There’s nothing wrong.” Not that I was an expert, but my water broke and I was having contractions. We weren’t in the middle of nowhere, and I could see our house. If it’d been in the depths of winter and we’d been stranded, as I had been in this very spot, I would have been terrified.

“The baby’s coming.”

“Now?”

I nodded.

“Let’s get you home.”

But a cramp took hold of me and I tugged at my shirt and screeched at Conall to remove the rest of my clothes. The universe was telling me I was having the baby here. There were no hours of pacing and sucking ice chips while my mate rubbed my back or pushed a rolling pin over it.

“Are you sure, love?”

I glowered at him and he got to work undressing me without another word. He peered at the uneven ground and bushes beside the road. “In the car,” I insisted. Conall helped me crawl onto my hands and knees on the back seat while I

grunted and groaned and yelled about how freaking painful it was.

“What do I do?” he uttered, his voice a pale version of its usual self.

“Be with me and catch the baby.” I jerked my head at the travel blanket flung over the seat. It was the same one I’d used the night I’d trudged toward my mate’s house.

“Okaaay.” His warbling voice didn’t give me confidence, but my mate had never let me down and had always been by my side. No matter how difficult, we would get through this together.

The pain was coming in waves, each one stronger than the last, and my body did the hard work of getting the baby out. Instinct told me I needed to push. The movies made it seem as though one or two pushes and presto! Out popped baby. Lies. Filthy, rotten lies. Gods, it was as though I was expelling a watermelon, and it *hurt*.

The car seat was swimming in sweat as I bore down and pushed. Conall had seemingly recovered from his earlier insecurity and whispered encouragement with each push.

“You’re doing it, love. I see our little one’s head!”

Thank goodness the baby had a head. Tears leaked from my eyes. Hopefully, there was a body, with arms and legs attached too.

“Keep going. The babe is almost here.”

My body was being torn in two, but I gritted my teeth and gave a gigantic push as I howled, a sound that echoed around the car.

“Head’s out. A few more pushes.”

My mate had become a birthing expert. I would have giggled if I hadn’t been in agony. Determined to meet our baby, I used the last little bit of my strength and forced the baby out.

“I’ve got the little one in my arms. We have a baby with two arms and two legs!”

Sinking onto the sticky upholstery, I asked, “Boy or girl?”

“It’s a boy.” Conall placed our child on my chest and covered us with my travel blanket. He leaned over us, tears dripping from his cheeks onto the fleecy wool. “He’s so beautiful, and you were amazing, love. I’m so proud of you.”

“Now this place is extra special.” As our son grew, we’d walk to this spot and show him where he was born.

“Ready to go home?” my mate asked as he kissed our son’s head and gave me a peck on the lips.

“What about a name?” We’d whittled a list down to about four and decided we’d wait until the baby was here before assigning a name.

“What about Arlen? It means ‘hare land.’”

“Yeah, it suits him. Let’s go home, Arlen.”



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## CONALL

“Good morning, little fella.” I reached into the bassinet for our son. “Daddy is taking a nap, so we have to be very, very quiet.”

Lenny was a rock star at the whole father thing, but that didn’t mean he needed to be running on fumes all of the time, not when I could help. I took an extended paternity leave, wanting this time to be ours as a family, and I wanted to use it wisely.

“Let’s get you all changed and something to eat.” I made a little face at him, hoping it was funny and not creepy from this angle.

When the midwife suggested Lenny pump and store some milk for times like these, Lenny insisted that he was fine exclusively chest feeding, but promised he would give it a try. I was so glad that he did because it meant that every day this week I’d been able to give him a nap, one that didn’t have to be interrupted by a hungry little one needing his food.

“Your daddy left you out your elephant jams. You’re going to look adorable.” He always did no matter what he wore, but feety pajamas by far won out for the cutest.

I changed his diaper and jams and then picked him back up, holding him close. “Let’s go get you some yums. Remember—we are letting daddy sleep.”

He looked up at me with his huge eyes. “I know. You’re wanting food now.” I held him close and walked into the kitchen.



We had a fancy put-the-bottle-in-the-dooickey, and it warmed it to the ideal temperature in thirty seconds flat. When Lenny put it on the list of things we'd need when the baby came, I thought he was being silly. Why would we need that? Now as Arlen looked up at me, his bottom lip starting to quiver—his tell that he was about to cry for his supper—I was beyond grateful for the device. The button popped, letting me know it was ready, and I grabbed it as quickly as I could.

“Here you go, sweet boy.” I brought it to his lips, and he began to suck greedily. “You were so quiet for someone so hungry.” I walked us out the front door and onto the porch, swaying from side to side as I did. I always thought it was odd seeing parents swaying like that, but now that I had a wee one of my own, I understood it.

Arlen loved sitting out here, which was very common for shifter babies. Their beasts liked to stay connected to nature, and so far Arlen gave every indication he had a jackrabbit inside of him. We wouldn't know for sure until he hit puberty. Everything about him so far was jackrabbit, from the way his scent changed slightly as he slept to the way he seemed to recognize my beast. It was as if he knew instinctively who he was.

Neither Lenny nor I cared if he was a shifter or a human. We loved him unconditionally. He was our son and our sunshine, and if he sprouted fur during puberty—great. If he didn't—also great. He was perfect exactly the way that he was.

“You're really hungry today, little man.” The bottle was already nearly sucked dry. “Why don't you slow down and maybe get a little burp out?” I began to pull the bottle and he clamped down tightly with his pink little gums. “Or not,” I chuckled.

“Not what?” Lenny asked.

I looked over to see Lenny standing in the doorway, wearing his own jams and looking well rested. The nap had done what it was meant to, and I was glad for it. Neither of us begrudged waking up in the middle of the night, but it did wear us out.

“I offered for him to take a break mid-bottle. He was having none of that.” I rolled my eyes. “The little guy has a grip like a vise.”

“You’re not wrong about his grip, and he for sure doesn’t like to have anyone getting in the way of his yums.” He padded over to me and held out his grabby hands. “But he sure is cute.”

“Beyond cute.” I placed Arlen in Lenny’s arms, the bottle now empty.

“Time to let go,” Lenny singsonged. He took the bottle and handed it to me. “Now let’s see if we can get out a little burp.”

Lenny put him over his shoulder and asked me to go get him a blanket. I went inside and grabbed one with a little gnome on it. It was the softest of the blankets he’d been gifted, and there were many. Blankets and onesies were things we weren’t going to be running out of anytime soon.

“Here you are.” I handed it to him, and he shook his head.

“Sorry, I meant a full-sized one. So we can go hang out in the yard.” He carried Arlen off the porch and into the yard.

I ran back inside and grabbed a blanket suitable for us to all sit on.

Lenny was near the tire garden, and I spread the blanket out and then started to take my clothing off. “Ready for some jackrabbit time?”

Lenny sat down and set Arlen on the blanket in front of him. “You ready for daddy to hop on over?”

He didn’t answer, of course, but we both read that talking through things even before they understood words helped babies develop language, so we talked him through pretty much everything.

“Want to watch me shift?” I asked and then brought forth my beast, shifting in front of him, my jackrabbit landing on the ground with a thump.

I hopped on over to our son, letting him see me and then rubbing against his little hand. He wouldn’t be reaching for

things for a while, and when he did, I might need to reconsider how close I got to him if I wanted to keep my ears on, but for now this was perfect.

I rubbed against his little hand once more, and he smiled at me—a real smile, his first.

“Look at you smile.” Lenny laid down beside the two of us.  
“My happy little family. What more could an omega want?”



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## LENNY

“You look so cute, little guy.”

Arlen was dressed and ready for our family photo.

We’d decided to take a pic of us every year on the day Conall and I met, but instead of me wearing the same clothes and my mate appearing as his jackrabbit, we were all dressed as lumberjacks, including the baby. We had red and black checked flannel shirts, black pants, and boots, and I’d had caps made with our names.

One omission was an ax or chainsaw. Conall said no matter how he held either one, it looked like a weapon, and that was not the impression we wanted to give while commemorating our meeting.

“You ready?” he asked as he got a tripod and his camera.

“Yep.” But as I picked up our son, I sniffed. “Maybe not.”

“I’ll change his diaper.” My mate took the baby and disappeared into the nursery, which was no longer my office. He and his lumberjack buddies had built another room onto the house so I didn’t have to work in the living room.

There was a crib and a play mat set up in the corner, and most days I managed the juggle between being with Arlen and getting my paid work done, though I often had to finish my tasks after he’d gone to sleep for the night. I couldn’t complain because our son was a great sleeper. Once a week I took him to a Daddy and Me group in town and listened to the horror stories of babies not sleeping. Yikes.

“Here we go. All clean.”

I put Arlen into the baby carrier, and we left the house. Yesterday’s snowfall had been far less than the previous year, and it was an easy journey down the driveway and along the road to what we called “our spot,” the place where our baby was born and where my car had died twelve months ago. I thanked the engine for breaking down there every day.

“Brrr, it’s cold,” Conall said as he opened my door. “We could have taken a pic in the living room in front of the fire.”

“We could.” I hugged Arlen, hoping he was warm enough, but he had so many layers, and I wrapped the travel blanket over him and the carrier. It was *the* blanket—the one that kept me warm that night, and the one we put over him when he was born.

My mate set up the tripod and attached the camera. “Maybe next year we could pretend we met in summer.”

“We could. Or we can do a second pic on Arlen’s birthday.”

“Yay.” His voice lacked enthusiasm.

“He does look cute, though,” Conall noted. “I love his little boots.” My mate often spoke of the day he was able to teach Arlen how to fell a tree, but he should teach me first, I reasoned. I didn’t want to be the odd one out.

“Ready?” Conall asked.

“We are.” I’d removed the baby from the carrier, and his face was just visible in a gap in the blanket.

“Smile.”

My face ached in the cold as I grinned. Maybe Conall was right and we should have stayed home. It wasn’t snowing, but it was really cold. But Arlen cried out. Not in pain—I recognized when he was unhappy, and that cry was not this one. He squirmed and waved his arms.

“Awww, he likes getting his photo taken, don’t you, sweetheart?”

“Glad our son does,” my mate grumbled. “Is one pic enough?” He grabbed the camera and the tripod without checking the photo and put them in the car

“I’m sure it’s fine.” I opened the door, and the warmth welcomed me.

“Oh my Gods.” Conall was staring at the camera. If the pic was blurred, it’d have to stay that way. We’d laugh at it in years to come, and the family would poke fun at my idea to take a photo at the side of the road.

“We’re not getting out again,” I told him as I settled our son in his car seat. “If my mouth is gaping, or if Arlen is scrunching up his face, I don’t care.”

“No. Look.” He gave me the camera.

It was a cute photo. We were all smiling, even the baby. “There’s nothing wrong with it. I like it. It’ll make a nice memory.”

“You can’t see it? He’s camouflaged by the snow.”

“He?” Someone had snuck up behind us, and even Conall hadn’t scented him? That was disconcerting, as he had shifter hearing and sight. I snatched the camera and took a closer look. “Who? What? Where?”

“Just behind you, to the left.”

I squinted and made out a... not a bunny. I knew better than to call the animal a bunny. “Is that a jackrabbit?”

“Mmmm.”

“One of your cousins?” My mate had a large extended family, and I’d not met them all.

“Nope. He’s not a shifter.”

I peered through the car window, but there was no sign of the jackrabbit. “Do you think this is what the baby reacted to?”

My mate shrugged. “I can’t be certain, but it’s possible.”

“That’s sweet. Maybe our little one is a jackrabbit shifter after all.” We wouldn’t discover if he’d inherited his alpha father’s

shifter genes for some years.

“Perhaps.”

Back in the house, Conall made us hot cocoa while I fed the baby, but I couldn't get my mind off the jackrabbit in the photo. “It's a nice memory for Arlen. Other than you and your family, that is his first experience with a jackrabbit.”

At the mention of his name, Arlen stopped feeding and kicked his legs, making the same cry as when we'd been taking the photo. Conall and I shared a glance, and he tiptoed to the window and beckoned me to follow.

A jackrabbit was sitting in the yard, staring at us. “Is that the same one as earlier?”

“Appears to be.”

I held up Arlen to the window, and he gurgled. The jackrabbit stayed where he was and then bounded away.

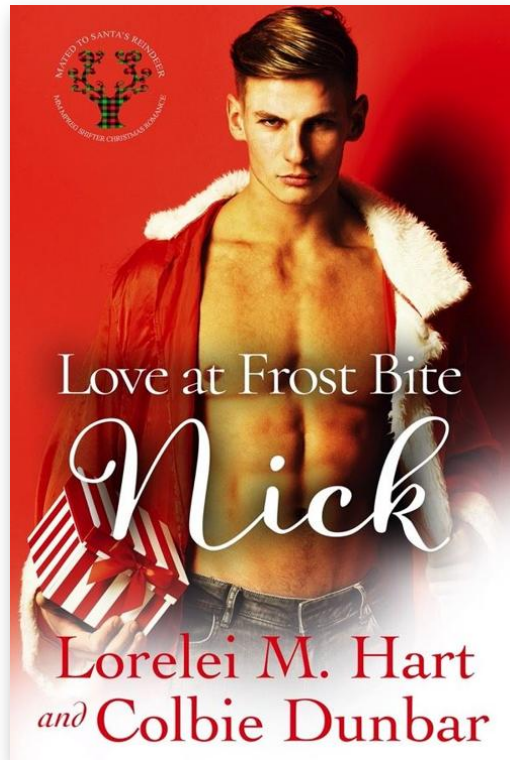
“I think he just wanted a good look at Arlen. Maybe he recognized something of himself in our son.”

“I like the idea that our son is bonded to the land and the creatures that inhabit it.”

Conall kissed me and the baby. “We three are bonded. Always.”



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