



SNUGGLE

slut

Set in the world of Heron Manor

AMY BELLOWS

SNUGGLESLOT

BURROWING HEARTS: BOOK 2

AMY BELLOWS

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Acknowledgments

EVAN

When I pictured getting my big break, I thought I'd be in LA, working on a film set with three walls and practicing lines in a trailer with my name on the door. Instead, I'm standing in front of cabin twelve on a campground normally used by scouting troops. But I don't care. This is the kind of role that will change my career forever.

My agent couldn't believe the studio even considered me for it. If the first guy they'd casted hadn't ended up in rehab and their second choice wasn't already shooting a TV show in Costa Rica, I wouldn't be here. The budget is over seventy million dollars, and the script is beautiful. Apparently, the director personally wooed the *New York Times* bestselling author to get the rights for it.

"It's fun that we get to stay in these cabins while we film, isn't it?" the director says. Amber's a bubbly woman in her midthirties with a long blonde braid and a ratty pair of overalls. If I didn't know better, I'd never guess she won an Oscar two years ago. She seems so... human.

"Uh, yeah," I say, trying my best to sound convincing. The closest thing I've ever come to camping was watching the Lindsay Lohan version of *The Parent Trap* when I was a kid.

"Filming starts in two days. You're the first actor here. Most of them are flying in tomorrow. Since you're one of the leads, you get a cabin with indoor plumbing. Lucky you." She winks at me as if indoor plumbing is some kind of exotic luxury.

“Thank you,” I say sincerely. I don’t know why she decided to give the cushy cabin to the rookie, but I’m grateful.

She hands me a key connected to a wooden carving of a bear. “It was nice to meet you, Evan. See you on Thursday.”

With that, she heads down the wooden steps toward the dirt path connecting all the cabins. They’re far enough away from each other that I can’t see them through the thick fir trees but close enough that I won’t need a car to get to the set every day.

I slide the key into the front door’s rusted deadbolt. It clicks open a lot easier than I thought it would. The inside is a surprise too. I was expecting a basic kitchenette and utilitarian bunk beds, but the kitchen has a full gas stove, a large stainless-steel fridge, and a double sink. A wood-burning stove stocked with a pile of firewood is at the center of the living room too. Aside from the deer head mounted on the wall, it’s really cute.

I roll my suitcases into the bedroom. It’s bigger than the one I share with a roommate in LA and has two large dressers. Even the bathroom is nice. The mirror has good lighting, and the toilet is old but clean. This cabin will be the perfect place to decompress in between shoots.

I start snapping photos for my moms. They struggled with my decision to take this role. Tomorrow is February first, the beginning of burrowing season.

Arctic fox shifters are unusual in a lot of ways. We have white hair even in our human forms, we have deep relationships with our families that often lead to cohabitation, even in adulthood, and we have a biological need for prolonged physical contact during burrowing season. If we don’t have someone to cuddle with, we experience severe depression and what psychiatrists call “skin hunger,” which is basically a desperate desire to be touched. It’s one of the reasons we rarely move away from home. We’re reliant on our families for physical touch during the entire month of February.

My mothers offered to stay with me on set, but the casting director refused. The last arctic fox shifter who brought their family onto the set of a film was foolish enough to ignore their NDAs and posted photos with the cast and crew on their social media accounts. That caused the whole industry to tighten up accommodations for arctic fox shifters working during burrowing season. Instead of allowing my mothers on set, the film producers hired a professional cuddler for me. Which is fine. A bit awkward but fine.

This is the opportunity of a lifetime. I can tough it out.

Luckily, I have cell reception, so I send my moms lots of photos, including a smiling selfie. Someone should give me an award for how genuine that smile looks. No one would ever guess how much I long to be home in Montana instead of in this cabin in Washington.

I close my eyes and picture the cozy rambler where I grew up. It isn't the kind of place designers decorate like the houses in LA. There are lace doilies on top of the bookshelves that my omega mother tatted herself. She also sewed the intricate patchwork quilts stacked in the corner and crocheted the pillow shams on the couch. It's not fashionable or sleek, but it's comfortable and warm like a pair of custom-made boots.

My alpha mom is a crafter too. She likes to work with leather and metal. When I left for LA, she gave me two beautiful leather suitcases that she welded herself. I'm their only child, so my move was heartbreaking for them. But they've always supported my acting career, even though they knew it would someday take me far away from home.

My phone dings. It's a message from my alpha mom: *That looks safe.*

I hold back a smile. According to her, the area where my apartment is in LA seems "absolutely terrifying."

My phone dings again, and this time it's a message from my omega mom. *Can we send you a package?*

They've sent me a package every week since I moved. They must spend a fortune on postage. I know I should tell

them they don't need to, but every Saturday I check the mail with my heart in my throat, hoping there's a box for me that will get me through the next week. My half of the bedroom is covered in photos they've sent me over the years. The best part of those photos is that most people take pictures of themselves traveling or at least outside the house, but my mothers are homebodies, so they take photos of each other doing things like sitting at the sewing machine or switching out a lightbulb. It's like they know how desperately I miss them. Or maybe it's because they miss me just as much.

I text my omega mom back.

I'm not sure if the mailman delivers up here, but I'll ask the director.

A video call comes in from my alpha mom. I'm surprised I have good enough reception for that. When I answer, I see both my moms huddled over the phone with their glasses perched on their noses.

"Are you watching the game?" my alpha mom asks before saying hello. Arctic fox shifters are completely apeshit about hockey. They joke that other fox shifters worship the Catholic God, but arctic fox shifters don't need Him because they have hockey.

"No, I've been traveling. Who's winning?"

My alpha mother rolls her eyes. "The Dragons are letting us down."

The Chicago Dragons are her team now. We used to follow the Bruins until Dimitri Cross started playing for the Dragons eight years ago. Dimitri is an arctic fox shifter.

Ironically, arctic fox shifters don't usually play hockey. We spend February indoors cuddling with our families, and we're too small to compete with the grizzly and ice dragon shifters the NHL drafts anyway. But Dimitri is only half arctic fox. He's also half grizzly shifter and absolutely enormous.

When the arctic fox shifter community found out one of their own had been drafted into the NHL, they lost their minds. During the nine years he played for the Chicago Dragons,

literally every arctic fox shifter in our neighborhood was following the team. Some of them stopped last year after Dimitri got injured and had to retire, but my alpha mom didn't sway her allegiance.

"That cheetah shifter they have playing forward now worries me," my omega mom says. "He's too small to play for the NHL. He's going to get hurt."

My alpha mother sighs. "He's the only one scoring these days, but you're right. Some grizzly's gonna slam into him, and that will be that."

She turns the phone in the direction of the TV where the game is playing. A part of me longs to sit here and watch the game with them, even though the picture quality is terrible, but I can't.

In two days, I'll be filming with an Oscar-winning director. I need to unpack and practice my lines again.

"I should go. I have a lot of work to do," I say.

My alpha mom spins the camera around. "Okay, but we're here when you need a break. Don't hesitate to call."

My omega mom waves. "We love you."

"Text me the score when the game is over," I say, even though I'm the only arctic fox shifter who doesn't care about hockey. I don't mind watching games with my moms, but I rarely watch them on my own.

"Sure thing. Love you, son."

Hanging up is hard. I slide my phone into my pocket and take a deep breath. It's just one month. I can do anything for one month.

Knock, knock, knock.

Is that Amber? I amble toward the door and pull it open. Instead of Amber, I find a large man holding two suitcases—a man I'd recognize anywhere. He's well over six feet tall with hulking wide shoulders and big brown eyes. Thick salt-and-pepper stubble covers the lower half of his face, except for a

scar along his right cheek he got from an accidental collision with the blade of a hockey skate.

Why is Dimitri Cross on the doorstep of my cabin? Is this some kind of weird paid celebrity meet and greet my moms splurged on or something? While I've never been into hockey, I was an avid fan of Dimitri too. I didn't have the heart to tell my alpha mother that my interest was more in his appearance than his game play. Big jocks have always been a weakness of mine. There's something about a guy who could throw me over his shoulder and run a mile without breaking a sweat that does it for me.

“Uh... What are you... How are you...” I stammer.

He holds out his hand. “I'm Dimitri Cross. Your professional cuddler.”

It doesn't matter how skilled I am as an actor, there is no way to hide my shock.

“Wh-what?”

DIMITRI

When I pictured being a professional cuddler for an actor, I figured I'd be spending my days on standby in a hot trailer and my nights in some overpriced suite. I wasn't expecting a scenic drive to a cozy cabin tucked into the woods south of Mount Rainier.

The tall evergreen trees lining both sides of the road are wide and flanked by bushes and moss. Everything is so goddamn green you'd never guess it's January. That's the strange thing about Washington. Despite the bitter cold, there are parts of the state where it rarely snows.

The white-capped mountains ahead are a reminder of the season. So is the shock of freezing air when I lower my window to take in the scent of pine and rain.

Chicago never smells like this. I've avoided home for too long.

My GPS tells me to turn onto a narrow gravel road. I'm grateful for the suspension on the four-wheel-drive rental the film production company sprung for when I asked about transportation. The whole interaction with them was awkward and tense. They'd clearly never hired a professional cuddler before and treated me like a nuisance. It was the same when my agent tried to get a professional cuddler included in my contract with the Chicago Dragons. Legally, employers have to accommodate shifters with unique needs, but there aren't a lot of set guidelines on what those accommodations should be like. One of the assistant coaches asked why I couldn't cuddle

with one of the many puck omegas eager to share my bed. He didn't understand that the skin hunger arctic fox shifters feel every winter can't be satisfied with touch alone. We need companionship and intimacy too. We need a deep emotional connection.

I hope I can provide all that for the guy I'll be cuddling with this month.

Originally, I was scheduled to work for a female alpha directing a TV show in LA, but two weeks ago, I got an email saying my contract was bought out by a production company shooting a film in my home state of Washington. I was surprised because they hired me to cuddle with a male omega. That's strictly against the rules. Men are usually paired with women because opposite sex attraction is uncommon, but even when that isn't possible, alphas are paired with other alphas and omegas are paired with other omegas. It prevents the connection we build with our cuddle partners from becoming romantic or sexual.

The professional cuddling guild fought my contract change. They insisted the studio should hire a woman instead. Unfortunately, it was too late. There weren't any female cuddlers available. They told me I had to either take the job or they would give the omega's role to someone else. That's against the law, of course. They can't refuse to hire a shifter because he needs extra accommodations, but I knew they would get away with it. The actor couldn't sue them without ruining his prospects for future jobs. He'd simply miss out on an amazing opportunity because he was an arctic fox shifter.

I couldn't let that happen, so here I am. I'm sure it will be fine. We're both adults. We can keep our dicks in our pants.

The gravel road leads up to a campground owned by a scouting organization. A security guard stands at the entrance. She asks for my ID and waves me through when I flash my driver's license. I drive for several more minutes before I see a cabin labeled with a number one. It's small and a little more rustic than I was expecting. There's an outhouse behind it and a water spigot out front that suggests there may not be running

water inside. That surprises me. The guild told me they had negotiated for indoor plumbing.

The gravel road continues for several more miles with numbered cabins popping up on either side of the road. I drive for another twenty minutes before I reach number twelve. It's larger than the others with a firepit and wooden benches outside. There isn't a water spigot out front, so maybe the guild did manage to secure indoor plumbing for me. I park the car on a muddy driveway and step outside.

Is Evan already in there? What will he be like? I chose not to google his name before I came. I want to get to know him as a person and not make any judgments based on his work. That's what my cuddler did for me. When she showed up in my hotel room for the first time, all she knew about me was my name and what team I played for. It was such a contrast to everyone else I met. I was never the Chicago Dragons' Dimitri Cross to her. I was simply Dimitri, her friend.

I climb up the steps, hoping Evan isn't a diva or someone I'll struggle to get along with. The hard thing about being a professional cuddler is that most of us are arctic fox shifters too. We need someone to cuddle with just as much as our charges do. If Evan is petty or mean, the next month will be hard.

The guild promised they screened him and he was fine. I need to trust them. They haven't misled me so far.

I lift my hand and knock three times. There are footfalls on the other side of the door. He must already be in there. I wait a few moments until the door swings open, and a male omega looks back at me.

There are moments in life when you know you should say no and walk away. This is one of those moments. Evan might be the most attractive man I've ever seen. He has the standard high cheekbones, full lips, and sharp jaw you'd expect from a movie star, but there's something sweet about his face too. Maybe it's the rounded tip of his nose that's more cute than pretty or the way his ears stick out ever so slightly.

His neck is a little too long for his face, and he's wearing a sweater with a wide collar to accentuate it. I can't help but glance at the crook of his neck where the light pink skin of his scent gland is exposed. That part of an omega arctic fox shifter's body is incredibly sensitive. Most of them like to cover it up in the winter.

He stares back at me with wide eyes. "Uh... What are you... How are you..."

Either they didn't tell him his professional cuddler was an alpha or he's a hockey fan. My guess is the latter. Most arctic fox shifters know who I am.

I hold out my hand. "I'm Dimitri Cross. Your professional cuddler."

"Wh-what?" He shakes his head. "Oh. I... um..."

"Is that okay?"

"Yes," Evan says, finally gaining his bearings. "Sorry. I didn't realize you'd be Dimitri Cross." He places a hand over the crook of his neck, hiding his scent gland from me. I've seen omega arctic shifters do that subconsciously far too many times to count. Normally, it's when they're sitting next to me at the bar, and they've already had a drink or two. That gesture is flirty with a capital *F*.

Fucking hell. This is why they shouldn't pair cuddlers with someone of the same gender.

"What were you expecting me to be?" I tease, even though I shouldn't. Teasing is also a form of flirting, which I definitely shouldn't do.

"I don't know what I was expecting," he says. "A regular person, I guess? Definitely not my alpha mom's favorite hockey player of all time. And not someone so..." he gestures up and down at my body and does this cute little shrug. Damn it. He's fucking adorable.

"Big?" I suggest.

"Well, that too. I mean, you can bench press five hundred and twenty pounds. You're a tank." His cheeks flush bright

pink. “Not that I have any excuse to know that strangely specific detail about you.”

I laugh. “Don’t worry about it. I’m used to people knowing random shit about me. That’s part of playing in the NHL.” I’m also used to people getting a little starstruck. Some fans will pay hundreds of dollars for a meet and greet with the Chicago Dragons and be too nervous to talk to any of us. Honestly, I get it. I was nervous as fuck when I met David Sterud, the first grizzly shifter to play in the NHL. He’s also a member of the Puyallup tribe like my alpha dad.

Back when Sterud got drafted as goalkeeper for the Chicago Dragons, hockey was exclusively an ice dragon shifter’s game. It was simply too expensive for most of the grizzlies growing up on the reservation. Sterud changed all that after he helped the Dragons win five consecutive Stanley Cups. Scouts started scouring the reservations for other athletic grizzly shifters. They even created a summer camp where grizzly kids could learn how to ice skate for free. One of those camps was where my alpha father put on a pair of ice skates for the first time. He’s been in love with hockey ever since.

My grandmas are less enthused about the way hockey coaches lure boys off the reservation, but they always supported my alpha dad’s dream.

“Can I come in?” I ask Evan because he’s still standing in the doorway, and it’s thirty degrees outside.

“Yeah, of course.” He steps back, leaving a narrow space for me to walk inside. To be fair, that space would be more than enough for an average person, but it’s not big enough for me. I bunch up my shoulders and try to squeeze in anyway, brushing against him in the process. His scent washes over me as the warmth of his body leaves a path of electricity along my right side. He smells of leather and cedar with a hint of vanilla.

No man has any business smelling that good.

“Sorry,” he says, darting back to give me more space. He’s light on his feet like a lot of arctic fox shifters. It’s one of the reasons I played forward instead of defense, despite my size.

“No worries. Living with a tank is tricky sometimes,” I tease, shutting the door behind me. The warmth of the cabin is a welcome relief from the frigid air outside.

Evan holds out his hand to me. The gesture is a little stiff, but the blushing and shy smiles are gone. “Let’s try this again, shall we? I’m Evan Garrett. It’s nice to meet you.”

I grasp his hand and shake it. His palm is soft and much smaller than mine.

“Dimitri Cross. It’s nice to meet you too.”

“Thank you for coming.” He drags a hand through his white hair. It looks impossibly soft and silky. Not that I should notice a thing like that. “I mean, I know you’re getting paid and everything, but I appreciate you being here. The director said they were having trouble finding a professional cuddler at the last minute, and I was so worried they’d cast someone else. This role is... well, I guess it’s my dream. That sounds a little dramatic, but it’s true.”

He doesn’t sound dramatic at all. As Evan stands there, looking back at me, I’m struck by how genuine he is. There’s no pretense here, no cattiness. I think we’ll get along just fine.

“I’m happy to be here,” I say. “Really, I am. I’m looking forward to watching your dream come true.”

That’s the reason I became a professional cuddler. After my ACL snapped and the doctors told me I’d never play pro hockey again, I felt lost. Hockey was everything to me. Most arctic fox shifter families cuddled with each other in the warmth of their homes, but I grew up huddled next to my brothers and sisters on the seats of the hockey stadium where my alpha dad was coaching. I got my first pair of ice skates when I was three years old. I remember my alpha dad skating backward while he held my hands, urging me forward on the ice. He never got drafted onto a pro team, so he lived his dream through me.

I’m not angry about that. It was a badass dream, and God knows I love the game, but I never allowed myself to think about what I’d do when it was all over. It was Laura, my own

professional cuddler, who gave me the idea to apply for this job. We met for a cup of coffee to catch up, and she mentioned that she'd been offered eight different contracts this burrowing season. She ended up choosing the contract for an up-and-coming pitcher playing for the New York Yankees.

"I like working for arctic fox shifters who are at the beginning of their careers. You get to watch someone's dream come true. It's the best job ever."

If I can't play hockey, watching someone's dream come true seems like the next best thing.

I backtrack to the front door. "I should grab the food in my car, then maybe we can sit down and talk about your schedule and what my services will be for the next month."

"Okay, that sounds good."

"I'll be right back." I head back outside to get the reusable bags filled with food I bought from the grocery store. I manage to grab all eight of them in one go, along with the last of my luggage, which I wheel behind me as I head back to the cabin. Navigating through the door is tricky. I have to turn to one side and lift the luggage over the step.

"I'm sorry. I should have helped," Evan says, rushing toward me.

"No, I'm good. I've got everything."

Evan closes the front door and follows me to the kitchen where I set the bags on the counter.

"Wow. That's a lot of food."

"Well, yeah. I'm half grizzly shifter and an athlete, so I eat a ton. When my brothers and I were in high school, my dad's grocery bill was as high as their mortgage." I open up two of the cupboards above the sink, only to discover they're already full of food. "Is this yours?"

He shakes his head. "Maybe the studio got us food."

I open the fridge next and discover rows of neatly labeled tins filled with premade dinners. They're all gourmet, healthy

entrées like salmon and asparagus with a side of risotto or a turkey lettuce wrap with a side salad.

“It looks like they already stocked the fridge.”

He peers over my shoulder. “I’m sorry you went to all that trouble.”

“It’s fine. I like to have comfort foods during burrowing season anyway.” I return to my grocery bags and start separating the items that need to be refrigerated.

“Oh, I love this stuff,” Evan says, pulling out the cinnamon and ginger tea my omega dad makes with shortbread cookies during burrowing season. “I can’t find it anywhere in LA.”

“Yeah, I haven’t seen it anywhere outside of Washington either. When I was on the road, I’d combine a cinnamon tea bag with a ginger tea bag. It wasn’t the same, but it was better than nothing.”

“I’ll have to try that. I’m still getting used to tea bags. I never saw one in person until I left for college. I thought people only used them in movies.”

I can’t help but laugh. “Arctic fox shifters and their loose-leaf tea. For my omega dad, it’s like a religion. He has at least forty different flavors.”

Evan and I talk companionably about our parents’ tea obsession while we go through the food I brought. His eyes light up when he finds the freezer bag full of beef stew.

“Is this homemade?” he asks.

“Yep. My omega father insists on sending me some every time I can’t come home for burrowing season. I brought all the ingredients for it too. I figure I’ll have time to cook.”

“My family eats mostly soups and stews during burrowing season. And sweet breads of course.”

I grab the small loaf of potato bread my omega dad sent with the stew and hand it to him. “You mean like this?”

He smiles. “Yes, exactly like that.”

I feel strangely giddy at the prospect of spending burrowing season with another arctic fox shifter again. Laura is wonderful, but she's human. She never understood how important certain foods were to me in February.

"I can learn how to make more sweet bread too if you like," I offer.

Evan's smile spreads into a grin. "Really?"

"Yeah." Hell, if sweet bread makes him that happy, I'll bake it every damn day.

He lowers his gaze, and a rush of pink floods his cheeks. "I'm sorry." he grasps his elbow, almost hugging himself. "I'm just... so relieved. I wasn't sure who the studio hired, and... well, you're really nice."

"I'm relieved too. I thought I might have to spend the next month with a high-maintenance diva."

He laughs, his gaze finally meeting mine. "You should see my skincare regimen before you assume I'm not high-maintenance."

Without thinking, I brush my fingers along his smooth cheek. "Whatever you're doing, it's working."

He closes his eyes and leans into my touch. Of course he does. It's the evening before burrowing season, and he's a million miles from home. I know it doesn't mean anything, but I still hold my breath as I open my hand and slide my palm along his jaw.

For the last ten years, I've only allowed myself the occasional night with a puck omega. I was too busy with hockey for anything else. I never stopped to consider how nice it might feel to have a man want my touch with something besides sex in mind. I am entirely unprepared for the way Evan's reaction makes me ache.

But this month isn't about me; it's about Evan and his budding dream. I'm not here to be his boyfriend. I'm here to help him deal with the skin hunger that's kept too many arctic fox shifters from pursuing their dreams.

I lower my hand and move away from him, careful to school my face as his eyes flutter open.

“I’m sorry,” he says. “I didn’t mean—”

“It’s okay.”

I’ll make sure of it. Evan’s dreams are safe with me.

EVAN

I try not to stare at Dimitri as we put the rest of the groceries away. The problem is, he has the same smile with the strong jaw and a dimple on one side that I cut out of *Sports Illustrated* when I was sixteen and taped to my wall. He's also enormous. He takes up most of the kitchen, which makes it difficult to put food away without brushing up against him. That's too much of a temptation right now. I don't know if it's because he's ridiculously handsome or because it's the night before burrowing season, but I want to rub up against him like a cat. He was kind enough to not say anything about the way I reacted to his hand on my cheek, but how will he react when we have to start touching each other, and he finds out I cuddle as aggressively as he plays hockey?

I'm also concerned about sleeping next to him. There were reasons I taped his photo to my wall when I was sixteen. Embarrassing reasons. As in, I may have discovered how to pleasure myself while looking at his photo. There might have been fantasies too detailed fantasies involving the roughness of his stubble against the sensitive skin of my inner thighs or how his thick fingers would feel inside certain places on my body. All I can do is hope none of those fantasies resurface while I'm curled up against him all night.

The potential for embarrassment in this situation is alarming.

After the counter is clear, we both stand awkwardly in the kitchen. Suddenly, I don't know what to do with my hands. I slide them into my pockets, but that feels weird, so I fold my

arms across my chest. Dimitri simply stares at me like I'm supposed to say something. Am I supposed to say something?

"You seem a little nervous," he says.

"I might be," I admit.

For a jock, he's very perceptive. That isn't normal. I've dated my share of jocks, and most of them had the emotional range of a teaspoon.

"Let's sit down and figure out how this is going to work between us."

"Okay."

Dimitri leans his head in the direction of the living room. "How about we chat on the couch? That will give us a chance to get used to touching each other."

I swallow hard. Getting used to touching Dimitri feels as unlikely as getting used to being struck by lightning, but he's right. We should at least try.

He walks over to the couch and sits down. I pause by the kitchen counter, my heart racing. I have to cuddle with Dimitri if I want to work on this film. He's just a man, and he's here to help me.

He looks up at me expectantly and pats the seat next to him.

I square my shoulders and take a few nervous steps toward the couch. After a deep breath, I sit down gingerly. There's still space between our bodies, but that space is very small. I inch closer until the right side of my thigh presses against his leg. "There's something you should know."

"What?" he asks.

"My moms have a nickname for me during burrowing season."

That makes his lips quirk up on one side. "Yeah? What is it?"

I'm unsure if he'll find this confession endearing or annoying. Probably the latter. "Spider monkey. When I was a

kid, I latched onto them like a barnacle and rarely let go during the whole month of February.”

He laughs, his eyes twinkling with amusement. “That’s sweet.”

“Or a lot, depending on your perspective.”

He slides his arm along the top of the cushion I would be resting against if I wasn’t sitting at the edge of the couch. “I think it’s sweet. My omega dad called me his little teddy bear when I was growing up. I liked burrowing in my bear form.”

The idea of a young Dimitri running around as a bear cub is adorable.

“You can take your bear form, even though you’re only half grizzly?” The question flies out of my mouth before I realize how rude I must sound. It isn’t any of my business.

He nods. “I can take my fox form too, but I’m more comfortable as a bear. My fox form feels too small. The doctor said it has something to do with my body mass ratio.”

“Do you feel the skin hunger of an arctic fox shifter in February?” Again, it isn’t any of my business, but a part of me longs to know if he’ll need my touch as much as I’ll need his during the next month.

“Yes, very much so. Playing hockey during February was always a challenge for me, even with a professional cuddler.”

Then he had a professional cuddler too. That makes me feel better for some reason.

I scoot back on the couch until I feel the warmth of his arm along the back of my shoulders. My heart races as I meet his gaze. “How does it work, exactly? The whole professional cuddling thing? We’ll cuddle on the couch when I get off work? Sleep in the same bed?”

He leans in closer, and I can smell the subtle scent of his cologne. “I don’t mind going to the set if you need me to. Sometimes my cuddler would give me a hug in between periods of a game. It grounded me and helped me focus. But if

you don't want me on set, I can hang out here. Whatever you need, Evan."

Do I want hugs from Dimitri in between takes? He's so big and overwhelming. I think his presence would be distracting. But I've never worked overtime during February before. Maybe the skin hunger will be worse than a mere distraction.

"Can I think about it?" I ask.

"Of course." Dimitri places his other hand on my thigh. I'm completely surrounded by him now. I sit motionless, barely breathing.

"How do you want me to touch you while we cuddle? What positions are your favorite?"

My mouth goes dry. I know he's just trying to do his job, but the way he phrased the question made it sound like he was asking me how I wanted him to fuck me.

"You can hang on me like a spider monkey if you want to." His face is close enough to mine that I can feel his breath on my cheek. "I could walk around with you wrapped around me while I'm cooking or cleaning."

As embarrassing as it may be, that does appeal to me.

"Don't make promises you don't intend to keep," I joke. Or I mean for it to be a joke, but he's so close I end up whispering, and that makes me sound more serious than I intended.

Dimitri's hand is suddenly gone from my thigh, leaving my skin cold. "None of my promises are empty. Tell me what you need, Evan. Would you like to sit on my lap? Do you want me to wrap my arms around you? Do you enjoy spooning?"

All those options sound wildly exciting with Dimitri. Nothing about cuddling with him reminds me of the cozy burrowing seasons with my mothers, where I felt cocooned and safe but also very bored. I wonder what he would do if I told him how attracted to him I was. Would he think it was stupid? Or is there a chance he could want me back? That's probably not even appropriate. This is his job. It would be wrong for me to come on to him.

“I like all cuddling. Basically, if it involves physical contact, I’m down,” I say.

“I didn’t ask what you were down for. I asked what you need. At the very least, what do you want?”

“What do *you* want? You have skin hunger too.”

He looks away from me. “I don’t know. I like all cuddling too. But I do like being the big spoon and holding someone in my arms. That would be a nice way to spend every night.”

Knowing what kind of cuddling Dimitri wants is strangely comforting. Maybe because my moms have never been shy about asking me to put my head on their shoulder or requesting that I sit between them on the couch while we watched hockey. If I wasn’t in the mood, they never forced me. It was always completely up to me. But I liked feeling wanted, I guess. It was nice to know that I belonged.

What do I want with Dimitri? Or more importantly, what can I have that won’t expose my overwhelming attraction to him? I suppose sitting on his lap would be safe. He couldn’t feel any accidental boners, and the idea of his arms wrapped around me while I’m on his lap is very appealing.

I watch him closely as I stand up and slowly lower myself onto his thighs. He offered this up as an option, but I still want to be sure it’s okay. I grasp his right forearm and stretch it around my back, then grab for his left and do the same on that side. He takes the hint and closes his huge arms around me until I’m surrounded by his solid warmth. I rest my head on his chest and close my eyes.

“This,” I say. As exciting as it is to be close to him, it also satisfies something deep and needy inside me. Not all arctic fox shifters experience skin hunger the same way. My omega mom describes her skin hunger as an itch she could never scratch on her own. Mine has always been worse than an itch. It’s more like a chasm in my chest, greedy and all-consuming.

But Dimitri’s arms fill the hole that I’ve always struggled to satisfy during the month of February. And that’s nice. It’s

lucky really. The studio could have sent me someone who wasn't as kind.

He really is the perfect professional cuddler. It's too bad that only makes me more attracted to him.

DIMITRI

I spend the afternoon with Evan in my lap and his script in my hand. It becomes clear very quickly why his mothers call him a spider monkey. Laura sat in my lap too when she worked as my professional cuddler, but she kept her head up, and she never leaned into my body. Evan plasters the entire side of his body to my chest and rests his head on my sternum. He even has his arms wrapped tightly around my bicep as if he's worried I might try to peel him off me.

It's very cute.

The script is about an omega who works as a forest ranger at a national park and falls in love with an alpha who has camped there all summer in his RV. But the love isn't mutual at first. The alpha is still heartbroken over his deceased mate and not ready to give his heart to someone else. The two of them sort through the grief and find happiness together over the course of the next several years, finally building a cabin together not far from the national park.

Evan knows every one of his lines by heart, so going over them doesn't seem productive, but he still wants to do it again and again. It's an emotional roller coaster for me because he's so damn good I get lost in the story. I feel like I'm the alpha wallowing in my grief, and he's the ball of sunshine that beams through my darkest hour. He isn't just an actor portraying Jason, the main character in the film, he becomes Jason completely.

The sun is no longer shining through the windows when Evan says the final line of dialogue for the third time. Without warning, he releases his grip on my arms and launches off my lap.

“We should eat. I’m starving.”

I follow him to the kitchen where he opens the door to the fridge and peers inside. “What do you think? Should we have the fancy dinners the studio sent or the stew?”

He must be used to the emotional experience of going through a script like that. Or maybe he isn’t as moved because he’s read the script so many times. I don’t know. All I know is that I can’t recover as quickly.

“That story is heartbreaking,” I finally say.

Evan smiles. “Yeah, it’s really good. I love working on projects like this. That script makes it easy to get into character.”

“You’re perfect for the role. It feels like it was made for you.”

He turns back to the fridge, the light gleaming on his face. “I was their third choice. But that’s completely fine with me. I’m lucky to be here, and I know that. Should we do stew? I feel like we should do stew.” He grabs the freezer bag of stew and shuts the fridge door.

“This film could make you a star, right?” I ask.

He sets the bag on the counter. “Um, sort of? I don’t know if *star* is the word I’d use. I’m not going to be famous or anything, but—”

“Isn’t Liam Genova your costar?”

He winces. “Yes. Which is slightly terrifying.”

“Then you’ll be famous, Evan. You’re going to do a sex scene with Liam Genova. There’s no way that won’t make you famous.”

He waves away my comment. “It’s not a full sex scene. We just make out for a bit, and then it’s fade to black.”

“You’re going to make out with Liam Genova. You’ll be famous. I’m absolutely certain of it. Also, you’re very cute. People are going to be obsessed with you.” The words fall out before I realize what I’m saying.

Evan blushes, which only proves my point. He’s adorable. The second people see him act in this movie, they’ll want to know who he is.

“I’m sorry,” I tell him. “I know I shouldn’t say stuff like that.”

“It’s okay. I think you’re cute too. I mean, handsome. You’re too big to be cute, or it seems like the wrong word. I don’t know, maybe big guys can be cute too?” His cheeks become a deeper shade of pink. “Oh God, why can’t I stop talking?”

Evan thinks I’m handsome. I don’t know why that hits me so hard. Lots of people think I’m handsome. As much as I didn’t want to admit it when I was younger, I think it’s part of the reason I got so many sponsors while I was playing for the Dragons. But hearing it from Evan is different. Dangerous. Evan doesn’t need any distractions right now. He’s about to start shooting a film that will change his career forever.

“Do you know what the phrase ‘put a pin in it’ means?” I ask.

Evan nods. “Deal with it later?”

“Yeah. Or come back to something when the time is right. I just called you cute, and you said I was handsome. Which is fine. But I don’t want to create any complications in your life right now. Could we put a pin in this?”

He bites his lip. “Does that mean we’ll talk about it after I’m done filming?”

Answering that question might be its own kind of distraction. Maybe I shouldn’t have addressed the elephant in the room. Then the elephant wouldn’t have a name or a timeline.

“Yeah,” I finally say.

But to what end? I'm getting old enough that I should settle down with a mate soon, and a future with Evan is impossible. Fox shifters can't bond to each other through a bite like wolf shifters or simply give each other a pebble the way penguin shifters do. They have to spend a full month with their intended in complete seclusion for a bond to form.

I'm only half fox shifter, so it's unlikely a bond with another fox shifter would have taken anyway, even if I had burrowed back when I was in my twenties. But now that I'm in my thirties, it would be next to impossible. I knew that when I decided to dedicate my twenties to hockey instead of having a family.

Bonding to a grizzly shifter always appealed to me more anyway. They say grizzlies only love once, and the connection they share with their mate is so deep it's physically painful for them to cheat. There are never warlocks called in to sever a bond between grizzlies. They never fall out of love over time. In comparison to other types of shifters, they have some of the healthiest, happiest bonds in the world.

But maybe Evan and I could have a few weeks or months together after this is over. I know that's a bad idea because my dad's always said my heart is more grizzly than fox, but I'm not going to worry about that now. I'll put a pin in it and deal with it later.

I grab the bag of stew and head for the stove. "I'll heat this up."

"We could put it in bowls and stick it in the microwave," Evan suggests.

I scoff at him. "My omega father would be scandalized. Stew should always be warmed up on the stove."

That brings a smile to Evan's face, which is exactly what I hoped for.

"He would also be scandalized if he knew that I heat up water for tea in the microwave sometimes," I say. There was no way to avoid it if I wanted tea at the rink where the Dragons practiced. I brought in electric kettles, but they

always disappeared because they were against safety regulations.

Evan's eyes widen in genuine shock. "Are you serious?"

"Yep."

"But that isn't... Tea shouldn't..."

I find a pot and set it on one of the burners. "Tea tastes perfectly fine with water heated up in the microwave. Although there was this one time my teammate heated up leftover tuna fish casserole in that microwave, so my tea smelled a little like canned fish."

Evan looks like he's going to barf. At least I've successfully distracted him from our earlier conversation.

I hook an arm around him and bring him close for a hug. "I can make you canned fish tea if you like."

He pushes me away. "Gross."

"Oh, that's tame compared to the kind of stuff that happened in the locker room. There was this guy on my college team that had a pimple on his back, and—"

Evan covers his ears with his hands. "La, la, la."

I grab both of his wrists and pull his hands away from his head. "We would take turns—"

He raises his voice. "La, la, la!"

I want to kiss him quiet in that moment. I'd love to see the shock on his face and feel the softness of his lips. I think he can see the yearning in my eyes because he stops singing. Then I realize his focus isn't on me but on the window behind me. I turn around and realize why he stopped.

I release his wrists as he stares out the window. The flakes coming down are huge. It's already begun to collect on the dirt roads.

My stomach sinks as I realize what this means. In areas of Washington where it doesn't normally snow, people aren't prepared for it. There aren't enough snowplows, and the

residents don't know how to drive on the residual ice. Everything gets shut down.

“It will be fine. Filming doesn't start until the day after tomorrow. Everything will clear up by then,” Evan says.

“You're right. It will clear up,” I agree, even though I don't know if that's true. “Let's heat up this stew, then we can check out the weather forecast.”

EVAN

“Major storm rolling in—”

“Snow is covering the—”

I flip the channels, but the only thing I can find are news stations and cheesy sitcoms. Dimitri holds me close on his lap as the news anchors drone on about the big storm that has unexpectedly changed directions—the storm covering the set of the film that was going to be my big break.

When my phone finally rings, it’s almost ten o’clock. I’m not surprised when I see the name on the screen: Amber Stent. I accept the call and bring the phone to my ear. “Hello?”

“Hey, Evan. I wanted to call you personally to tell you the news. As I’m sure you’re aware, a snowstorm has hit the area where we want to film. A lot of flights have been canceled, and the crew is having a hard time getting here. Also, much of the film is set outside, and we can’t have snow in any of the shots. So we’re going to push back filming for a week.”

“Okay,” I say. It’s a good thing I know how to act because it takes everything in me to mask the disappointment in my voice.

“There’s also... Well, you know your contract is conditional on Grayson Bloom being unable to do the role.”

Grayson Bloom is the guy who had to go to rehab.

“The producers are playing with the idea of shooting Liam’s solo scenes first and waiting for Grayson since it would only be another week before he gets out of rehab.”

Tears burn in my eyes as I realize what this means. The golden opportunity I was so eager for—that I had all my hopes riding on—is no longer mine.

“But I disagree,” Amber says. “Grayson will be fresh out of rehab and still adjusting. The long hours on set might be too much for him, and if he relapses, that’s bad for everyone. I think you’re a better choice for the role. I’d like a little time to convince the others before we send you home. Is that okay?”

I almost laugh. Is that okay? How does she think I’m going to respond? Of course it’s okay.

“Thank you,” I say.

“Don’t thank me yet. I have to convince a room full of rich, white alphas to throw away the money they’d make from Grayson Bloom’s following. They don’t care if holding Grayson to his contract might endanger a young man’s recovery. They just want to get richer.”

I know I should be disappointed that she wants me for the role because of Grayson’s health rather than my own talent, but her response is a relief. Living in LA has been hard for a lot of reasons. I miss my moms, I hate the heat, and it’s incredibly expensive. But the thing I dislike most is how fake and selfish everyone is. At least Amber isn’t like that.

“Please let me know if there’s anything I can do,” I say.

“You can keep practicing your lines. I’ll let you know when I have more news.”

With that, she hangs up.

Dimitri waits silently after the call is over. I know I should tell him what happened, but the strength I held on to during the call is gone, and I don’t trust my voice anymore.

“Did they postpone filming?” he asks after a few long beats of silence.

I nod.

“For how long?”

“A week,” I choke out.

“That’s okay. You’ll have more time to practice. And we have plenty of food to hole up in here for a long time. We can bake sweet bread and—”

“Grayson Bloom was their first choice, but as you may have heard, he’s in rehab.” It was big news in the acting world and the gossip rags, but maybe Dimitri is too far removed from all that to know. “He gets out in two weeks, so…” I let the rest of the sentence fall away because I can’t say it out loud.

So they want me to go home.

So it’s over.

So this was all a waste of time.

“Oh, Evan. I’m sorry.” He hugs me so tightly I can’t breathe. It’s nice to be hugged that hard. It makes my chest feel less empty.

“The director still wants me for the role, but the producers don’t. I’m supposed to wait here until they make a decision.”

I should call my moms. At the very least, they’re probably nervous about the snowstorm. But I don’t want to.

What if all those expensive acting camps, my degree in theater, and the years away from home never amount to anything? At this point, I’ve only had minor roles in TV shows. I’m barely making enough to pay rent. I don’t know if I can face their disappointment when they find out this role might not pan out.

“Am I crushing you?” Dimitri asks.

“Yes, but don’t stop. I like being crushed.”

“Okay. I can crush you for as long as you need.”

I hide my face in his chest. “I hate waiting. There’s so much of it in acting. You wait to audition, then you wait to hear back. Then you go in for another audition and you wait again. And even when you think you have the part, there’s sometimes a clause in your contract that means you could lose the part to someone else. I’m so sick of it.”

“Yes, but you love acting,” Dimitri says.

I pull away to look him in the eye. “How do you know?”

He shrugs. “You wouldn’t miss burrowing season with your family for anything less. It was the same for me. The first burrowing season I couldn’t be with my family was torture.”

The tears I’ve been holding back well in my eyes and escape down my cheeks. No one in LA understands how difficult it is to be away from home. When I tell them I’m homesick, they say they are too, but it isn’t the same. They don’t have a deep, biological need to be with their families.

Dimitri gets it. He feels it too.

“What will I do if this doesn’t work out? What if I’m a failure?” More tears stream down my face, and I wipe them away so they don’t end up on his shirt. He rubs his hand up and down my back.

“Shhhhh. You aren’t a failure, Evan. You chased after your dream. It takes courage to do something like that. And here you are, on the set of a high-budget film, rehearsing for the lead role. Does that sound like something a failure would be doing?”

I don’t answer him, I just cry. Big sobs tear through me, and my nose starts leaking. It’s messy and embarrassing and probably immature. But Dimitri continues to rub my back and lets me cry for as long as I need to. When the sobs finally slow, I realize something that should have occurred to me hours ago.

“Chicago played a game today. I’m sorry you missed it. We could have watched it on our phones or something.”

His hand pauses on my back. “No.”

“What do you mean? Did you record it or something?”

He gives me a sad smile. “No. The only problem with doing what you love for a living is that it has to end at some point.” This time it’s his eyes that become glassy. “I can’t watch other people play hockey. Not yet. I’d like to be able to do that someday, but I think it will take time.”

This is his first season after retirement. And here he is, helping a stranger pursue his dream, rather than enjoying the comfort of burrowing with his own family.

“You can watch hockey, though,” he offers. “I’ll put on some headphones and listen to music or something. I don’t mind.”

God, he’s sweet.

“I have a confession to make,” I say.

“Okay, let’s hear it.”

I pause for dramatic effect, then lean in and whisper, “I don’t like hockey.”

“What? You’re kidding. You’re an arctic fox shifter. Of course you like hockey.”

I laugh. “My mothers were beside themselves. They didn’t know what to do with me.”

“But you knew who I was,” he says.

“Of course I knew who you were. You were all anyone could talk about for ages.” I roll my eyes. “And I sort of had a crush on you in high school.”

That makes him grin from ear to ear. “Yeah?”

“Mmmhmm. I might have saved a few magazine clippings.”

He shakes his head. “Jesus, Evan. You’re so fucking cute.”

Butterflies flutter in my stomach. Every time I hear him call me cute, I like it better and better.

“You make it sound like my cuteness is a bad thing.”

“That’s because I can’t have you. And because I’m trying to be your cuddler. I can’t coach right now, so this is basically all I can do. If I fail at this...”

It all makes a lot more sense now. Dimitri and I are both on the cusp of a new life. That life might mean fame and fortune for me, but for Dimitri it’s something quite different. He has to build a life for himself without hockey.

“We’re going to put a pin in it,” I remind him. “I’m cute. You’re cute or handsome. We didn’t decide. It could be both. But none of that matters right now. For the next month, we’re cuddle buddies.”

He sighs. “That makes us sound like cartoon characters on a kid’s show.”

“Perfect. I would take a voice acting job for an animated kids’ show in a heartbeat.”

Dimitri throws back his head and laughs.

DIMITRI

We stay up later than we should. I don't know if it's because I enjoy Evan's company or because I'm afraid of what will come next. I offered to be the big spoon while I lie in bed next to a guy who is sure to give me a hard-on.

I did okay while he sat on my lap because his body was angled in such a way that the weight of his lower body rested in the middle of my thighs while his upper body was leaning against my chest. Lying down will be a totally different story.

Evan has changed into flannel pajamas with kittens on them, which only makes him cuter. He even raises his arms into the air and yawns, leaving a sliver of his stomach exposed. The whole situation makes me want things I've never really considered before. What would it be like to have a mate that would understand my skin hunger during burrowing season? My alpha father has always been accommodating to my omega father, but often it was my brothers and I who snuggled with him during February. It was the height of hockey season, and my alpha dad was a coach.

I never considered how lonely that must have been for my omega dad.

"Do you want to get in first, or should I?" Evan asks.

Unlike him, I didn't bring pajamas. I don't like the way pajama pants twist around my ankles. Even when I had a professional cuddler, I went to bed in my boxers and a loose T-shirt. So when I do get a boner, it will be painfully obvious.

"Uh, why don't you get in?" I say.

He climbs across the mattress and tucks his legs under the flannel sheets and blankets. It's still snowing outside, which makes this whole thing with Evan feel cozier and more intimate. This is exactly the kind of place where people go on romantic getaways.

The professional cuddling guild was right. Cuddlers should not be placed with someone of the same gender.

Evan rolls onto his side. "It's a good thing you're a human heater because I'm cold."

I like how comfortable he is with me already, but again, it makes me feel like I'm on vacation with a boyfriend. Evan is the kind of guy I'd choose as a boyfriend too. Spending the night cuddling with him was easy. We looked up sweet bread recipes online and found a rerun of *Grey's Anatomy* on TV. I'd never seen the show before, but he recited some of the lines and blushed when he noticed I was watching him.

For someone who is on the path to becoming a movie star, he embarrasses easily.

After *Grey's Anatomy* was over, he did his admittedly extensive skincare routine. It took almost an hour, but now his skin is nearly glowing as he lies in bed. To be fair, I had a full stretching and body roller routine I'd do before bed during hockey season. Maybe I should pick that up again while I'm here.

I flip the light off and stop near the doorway because I wasn't prepared for how dark it is. Sensing the problem, Evan turns the screen of his phone on and holds it up to light my path. The lock screen has a photo of an older female alpha standing on a ladder with a lightbulb in her hand.

"Is that your alpha mom?" I ask as I sit on the edge of the bed.

"Uh, yeah. They like to send me photos of them, but they rarely leave the house, so sometimes the photos are of them doing weird things." He twists in the bed and holds out his arms to me. "I'm cold. Where's my big spoon?"

His big spoon? Jesus. He couldn't sound more like my boyfriend if he tried.

I pull back the covers and climb inside. He turns his back to me and dutifully waits for me to spoon him. I pause, still not sure what I'm going to do when my body reacts to him. Maybe we should talk about this. He's a guy. He understands how erections work. Why don't I just tell him what I'm worried about?

"Is everything okay?" he asks.

"Yeah. But... I'm worried about getting aroused while we're in bed together, and..."

"Is the great Dimitri Cross scared of getting in bed with little old me? Are you afraid you won't be able to resist me in these sexy pajamas?" He's clearly joking, which means he doesn't realize how appealing he is right now, pajamas and all.

"Yes. I really am worried."

"Okay, I'm sorry," he says, the smile gone from his voice. "I won't mind if that's what you're concerned about. I'll think of it as a compliment."

I'm not sure that's a good thing. It's already hard enough to keep this platonic as it is. If he can feel my body's reaction to him, I don't know if either of us will be able to maintain our self-control. That seemed bad earlier today, but what if the studio decides to go with Grayson? Are we denying ourselves for a job he's already lost? I shake my head and force myself to stop that thought process. There's still a chance Evan has the role, so I need to do everything I can to support him in that.

But wouldn't sex, or at least making out, be a great distraction while he waits? I could make him forget all about the casting drama until the decision is made. Wouldn't that be better than denying him something we both clearly want?

Jesus. I'm not even touching him yet, and I've already justified having sex with him in my head. This is ridiculous.

I scoot closer to Evan and wrap my arm around his body, careful to keep our lower bodies separated. He's warm, and his

hair smells of soap. A part of me wants to bury my nose in his hair, but another part of me knows that isn't a good idea.

He lets out a peaceful sigh. "This is nice."

It's incredibly satisfying to know that I'm the cause of his contentment. It reminds me of making my sexual partners orgasm. I've always enjoyed pleasing an omega in bed. But Evan's contentment creates a deeper sense of satisfaction for me than an omega's orgasm ever has. He won't be blissed out for only a few moments and then leave my bed like my past lovers. I get to hold Evan all night.

God, I am in so much trouble here.

"You're still far away," Evan says.

Since my arm is wrapped around him, he must be referring to our legs. I briefly consider telling him that this is as close as I can get to him without making things too complicated for myself, but the truth is, I want to get closer too. I lift my knees under the covers until my upper thighs are resting against the curve of his ass. Our bodies fit together like puzzle pieces. All his curves and lines match mine perfectly. It feels like we were made to fit together.

Predictably, my cock wants to be included in the party. There are other parts of our bodies that could fit together too. I'm certain Evan can feel the way I harden against his soft ass. We simply lie there for a while without saying a word, but I hear the acceleration of his heartbeat and the shallowness of his breaths.

"If I don't get the role, we could take the pin out early," Evan says in a husky voice.

"That isn't going to happen. The director wants you, Evan." I finally allow myself to bury my nose in his hair. It's just as soft as I thought it would be. I want to moan at how good it feels while we're connected like this.

"We don't know that. We could... take out the pin. If you wanted."

It takes a herculean amount of self-control to stop myself from kissing him or lowering my hand to his cock. His scent

gland is only inches away. I want to bury my nose in it the way I buried my nose in his hair. But that isn't why I'm here.

"We should wait," I say. He squirms, clearly embarrassed that he offered to have sex with me and I didn't take him up on it. Maybe I should have shown him how badly I wanted him rather than rejecting him. What's more distracting? Unresolved lust or sexual satisfaction?

"I guess taking out the pin sounds too much like throwing a grenade, right?" he tries to joke, even though he still sounds sad.

"Yeah. Kissing you would feel like an explosion."

He turns his head, accidentally brushing his nose against mine in the process. By this time my eyes have adjusted to the dark, and I can see the worry on his face.

"A good explosion?" he asks.

I nod, letting our noses brush against each other again. The way his body tenses up as if poised for something more makes me question my decision to stop the inevitable from happening. Am I being condescending by denying him because it's "for his own good?" Is my reticence to give him what he wants wrong?

A memory from a different night over fourteen years ago flashes in my mind. My alpha dad had caught me in the back seat of his car with the omega I was dating over the summer. The omega was a grizzly shifter named Charlie and very, very sweet. In a lot of ways, he was like Evan: kind, genuine, and cute as a button. We were half-naked when my alpha father found us and insisted on driving Charlie home. After he returned to my grandmas' house, where we were staying for the summer, he called me out to the porch to talk to him.

I walked out with hunched shoulders, my gaze fixed on my shoes.

"What was that, Dimitri?" he asked.

"I don't know. We were just..."

"You were just what? Are you ready to bond to him?"

I looked up, shocked by the question. “What?”

“Are you ready to bond to him? Most grizzly shifters end up bonding to their high school sweethearts. Are you ready to bond to Charlie?”

I shook my head.

“Then you can’t park with him. It means something different to him than it does to you.” My alpha dad’s eyes softened then. I’d seen that switch plenty of times before. It happened when he was done scolding us and the sweetness of his grizzly heart shined through. “It must be confusing to be caught between two worlds. I imagine juggling the expectations people have of you is hard.”

“I didn’t mean to hurt Charlie,” I said. The guilt that churned in my stomach was almost unbearable.

“I know, son. But I need you to be more careful when you jump back and forth between the grizzly and arctic fox shifter communities. You are responsible for the impact you have on people, regardless of what your intentions are.”

During the next few years, my alpha father talked about intention versus impact often and how I was in control of the impact I had on the world. In the end, that’s why I press a kiss to Evan’s forehead instead of his lips. The impact I’ll have on him will probably be more positive if I refuse to complicate things between us until he finds out what’s happening with his role in the film. As much as I hate to wait, it’s the wiser choice.

“Later, spider monkey.” I say. “We’ll throw that grenade later. I promise.”

I hate the disappointment on Evan’s face. The last thing I want is to make tonight harder for him.

He flashes me a brave smile. “Okay. For the record, I like it when you call me spider monkey.”

Damn if that doesn’t melt my already soft grizzly heart.

EVAN

The next morning, I wake with Dimitri's arms around me and a lovely hardness pressed against my ass. I stay in his arms for a long time, even though my bladder is extremely uncomfortable. The urge to wriggle against his erection while he's asleep is overwhelming, not only because it would feel good but also because I want to know the size of what he's working with. Dimitri is a big guy, and big guys generally have big dicks, but still... I'm curious how big.

It's too bad that wasn't listed in any of his stats.

Eventually, my bladder becomes so angry with me that I have to slip out of Dimitri's arms. He does this adorable moan as I escape his embrace and mumbles something that sounds like "Spider monkey."

That settles it. Big guys can be cute too.

After I pee, I do my morning skincare regimen, which is less extensive than the one I do at night but still quite lengthy. Then I take a smiling photo, send it to my moms, and check my email for messages from my agent or producer, just in case. The only thing I have in my inbox is from an organization called the Professional Cuddler Guild. The email is entitled: Why We Cuddle.

Only an arctic fox shifter organization would send an email with a title like that.

I click on it and scan through the message. There are photos of almost every famous arctic fox shifter actor and athlete I know of, standing arm in arm with a stranger.

Dimitri's photo is the largest. He's arm in arm with an older woman who has silver hair and a kind smile.

The Professional Cuddler Guild makes it possible for arctic fox shifters to dream big. We're on the sidelines with world-class athletes, behind-the-scenes with award-winning actors, and backstage with musicians who rock the world. Because of our cuddlers, skin hunger doesn't have to hold arctic shifters back anymore.

All that we ask in return is that you consider the unique needs of your cuddler and make the arrangements necessary for them to serve you with dignity. Remember, the salary of your professional cuddler may be included in the contract with your employer, but these accommodations might need to be negotiated separately. Please help us so we can help you.

Most of the items on the list are things like access to necessary medical providers, flexibility and transportation for religious observance, and safety precautions for food allergies. The request to never post a photograph of a professional cuddler on social media surprises me. It never occurred to me how professional cuddling might be perceived by the families of those who do it. After all, arctic fox shifters rarely spend February with anyone but their families or mates. My mothers struggled with my decision to accept a job in February, and this role was a dream come true. How would they feel if I was cuddling with a stranger for money during burrowing season?

Underneath the list is a code of conduct. Not for the professional cuddlers but for their cuddlees. That word makes me smile. Cuddlee might be the cutest word I've ever seen.

The first rule in the code of contact stops me cold: *Any sexual language or behavior is strictly prohibited. Professional cuddlers deserve a workplace free of sexual harassment and coercion. They are being paid to provide a service, and that service is not sexual. Please respect the time and effort of your cuddler by understanding the difference between platonic and sexual touch.*

In the event a cuddlee does sexually harass their cuddler, their contract is void, and the guild will provide legal

representation if the cuddler chooses to press charges.

This cabin is Dimitri's workplace, and technically, he's my subordinate. I never thought about it like that. In any other circumstance, I would never flirt with a subordinate. It's completely inappropriate. Why did I think it was okay to do it to Dimitri?

I open the door to the bathroom, completely forgetting that I took my shirt off to do my skincare regimen. There's a shirtless scene in the film, so I figured the skin on my chest could use some love too.

Dimitri is lying on his side, propping his head up with his left hand, while his right holds his phone. He looks up at me, and a lazy smile slides across his lips. "Good morning. This is a nice way to wake up."

I try to cover my chest with my arms, opting first to cover my nipples, then deciding I should cover my stomach instead. "I'm sorry. I forgot I wasn't wearing a shirt."

He chuckles. "Don't apologize to me. I'm enjoying the view."

"We can't say stuff like that to each other. The studio hired you to cuddle with me, which means I'm your boss in a roundabout way. I don't want to create an uncomfortable work environment for you."

He raises one eyebrow in question. "An uncomfortable work environment? Evan, I'm fine. Where is this coming from?"

I unlock my phone screen and hand it to him, pointing to the paragraph in question. Dimitri takes it from me and studies the text before scrolling up, probably to get some context. When he sees his photo at the top of the email, realization dawns in his eyes. "This is from the guild."

"Yes. I'm really sorry for flirting with you last night. That kind of stuff happens all the time in the film industry, and I hate it. I don't want to do it to someone else. Especially not you."

He considers me for a moment. “I don’t think what happened between us last night was like that. I guess some people would view it that way, but I’m different from other cuddlers in the guild.”

“What do you mean?” I ask, still trying to shield my abdomen and nipples from view.

“I don’t know. The cuddler who worked for me when I played hockey needed the paycheck. That’s why most people work, right? I don’t need the money, and I don’t need a good reference either. If you made me uncomfortable, I wouldn’t hesitate to tell you, and if you wouldn’t stop, I’d leave. There isn’t any kind of unbalanced power dynamic between us. If anything, you’re the one who’s more vulnerable in this situation. If I quit, that would put you in a bad position.”

“Oh,” I say, feeling dumb. I really would be in a bad position if he chose to quit. I’d have to convince the casting director to let my moms on set, which is unlikely. Chances are I’d have to go home with my tail between my legs.

Dimitri holds out his arms. “Come here.”

Despite my half-naked state, I climb onto the bed and let him pull me onto his lap.

“I promise I’m not going to leave. I want to be here, and I don’t mind the flirting. I would tell you if I did.”

His arms are warm and cozy. I want to spend the rest of the day right here.

“You’re an amazing cuddler. If I was a cat, I would purr right now.”

He laughs. “You’re not so bad yourself. Why don’t you go put on a shirt, and we can make some breakfast?” he says.

I make a face. “Breakfast isn’t really my thing. My stomach doesn’t like anything but tea before noon.”

“Well, breakfast is my thing, so I’m going to make some eggs. I’ll put the kettle on too.” He releases his hold on me and pushes the blankets back. His morning wood is still prominent.

“You’re staring,” he says, but he’s smiling, so I don’t think he minds.

“You’re just... a lot.”

He slides off the bed and stands up. From this angle, the curve of his erection is more obvious. It strains against the opening in his boxers, and a sliver of veiny skin is visible.

What I wouldn’t give to see more of that skin—of him.

“A lot as in too much?” he asks.

I shake my head rapidly.

He leans forward and gently grasps my wrist, guiding my hand away from my chest. He does the same with the hand covering my stomach until my upper body is completely exposed. Slowly and deliberately, he drags his gaze over my body. I can almost feel the weight of his eyes on me.

“You are so fucking beautiful,” he says. “The world is going to fall in love with you.”

He turns around and walks toward the bedroom door while I watch dumbly, too scared to ask the question that will probably haunt me all month: if he thinks the world will fall in love with me, does that include him?

My phone buzzes. I glance down to see a text from Tom, my agent.

Call me when you wake up.

I navigate to his contact page and call him immediately.

“Hey, Evan. How are you doing?” he asks.

“That depends on why you’re calling.”

There’s a long pause on the other end. My heart sinks.

“They decided to move forward with Grayson Bloom. I’m so sorry.”

I clench my jaw and do my best to fight the tears threatening to spill out. Amber prepared me for this possibility, but I still feel like a trap door has opened underneath me and I’m plummeting toward the center of the earth.

“The studio will still pay part of your contract, and they’ll be covering your plane ticket home. All the flights are canceled because of the storm, but I’ll book you a flight to Montana as soon as things clear up. Your professional cuddler is supposed to stay there with you until we can get you back to your moms...”

Tom’s words start to run together as the tears finally come.

It’s over. They’re sending me home.

DIMITRI

I promised myself I wouldn't make things complicated for Evan, and less than twelve hours later, I'm ogling him while showing off my boner. But God, the slender, wiry muscle of his arms and the smooth definition of his chest and stomach are enough to power a hundred wet dreams. How will I manage to cuddle with him day and night when I have the image of him half-naked burned into my brain?

I'm sitting at the dining room table in front of a plate of eggs and two cups of steeping tea when Evan finally emerges from the bedroom wearing a hoodie and sweatpants. His eyes are pink and puffy, and his head is lowered.

"Is everything okay?" I ask.

His lip trembles. "They're, um... going with Grayson Bloom."

Anger coils in my gut. Evan flew all the way out here and memorized his lines. He even missed burrowing season with his family for this role. They shouldn't be able to oust him because of a little snow.

"Is your agent going to fight it?"

He shakes his head. "My contract stipulated that I would only get the role if Grayson couldn't do it. There's nothing to fight." He seems so fragile standing there in his sweats on the verge of tears. I want to scoop him up in my arms and tell him everything is okay. But I understand that's something a boyfriend would do, and we don't have that kind of relationship. Instead, I walk across the room and hold out my

arms for a hug. The moment his cheek presses against my chest, he starts crying, quietly at first, then big sobs that tear through his body.

I know this isn't the same as when my doctor told me I'd never play hockey again. His acting career isn't over. But Evan has big dreams, and those dreams almost came true. That's the kind of experience that leaves someone broken and bitter.

Like an athlete who tears his ACL at the height of his career.

"You'll be okay, Evan," I say. "Now your foot is in the door. You'll get another chance." But my words sound empty. What do I know about Hollywood? I probably sound like the reporter who visited me during my recovery and assured me that I'd be playing again in no time.

Evan pushes away from me. I can hardly blame him. I'm doing a terrible job reassuring him. He looks up at me with glassy eyes, his cheeks wet with tears. "Can we take the pin out now?"

"The pin? What do you..." I trail off as I realize what he's saying. All the reasons we shouldn't kiss or have sex with each other are gone now.

"Unless you're not interested anymore," Evan says miserably.

I hook my hand behind his head and crash my lips to his. He kisses me back with a ferocity that leaves me breathless. This isn't the timid and sweet Evan who blushed after admitting that he knew how much I bench pressed. This Evan is hungry and demanding. He pushes my lips open with his tongue and devours my mouth, letting out a guttural moan. I become weak in the knees, so I step back toward the couch, bringing him with me, until the back of my calves finally hit the cushion.

He pushes me down onto the couch, and climbs on top of me, straddling me with a confidence that shocks me. I thought Evan would be pliant and submissive in bed. I wasn't

expecting this dominant, ethereal creature claiming my mouth again like he owns it.

Our kisses are sloppy and almost violent. I slide my hands down his back, pausing for a moment before cupping the soft curve of his ass. This seems to wake him up from some kind of trance. He breaks away from the kiss, staring back at me with horror in his eyes. His beautiful lips are swollen, his white hair tousled. I don't think I've ever seen anyone so beautiful in my life.

"I-I-I'm sorry. I don't know what came over me. I'm not... I haven't ever..."

I press my thumb over his lips. "Shhhh. That was the hottest thing that has ever happened to me."

He blushes. "Really?"

"Oh, yes. Don't you dare stop."

He bites his lip, clearly nervous now, which is a shame. I wonder if there's anything I can do to bring back the confidence he had just a few moments ago. It seemed to be fueled by lust, so I grab the neck of my T-shirt and yank it over my head. Evan's gaze lowers to my chest, which is covered with thick salt-and-pepper hair. He lifts his palm to touch it, then pauses. "Could I? I mean..."

I cover his hand with my own and press it to my body. He swallows hard, his eyes burning with desire. "You're so perfect. I want..."

I lean my forehead against his. "You can have whatever your heart desires. Just tell me."

He snaps out of his trance again. "You don't have to do this because you feel sorry for me. I know we talked about having sex after the filming was over, but I would have been a movie star then."

"Did you think I wanted to have sex with you because you were going to be famous?"

He withdraws his hand and looks away from me. "I don't know. You thought I was going to be someone."

“You already *are* someone.”

He shrugs. “I think I’m just a puck omega now.”

I don’t know how to respond to that. Contrary to popular belief, most puck omegas are fun and intelligent people. So what if they want to fuck around with hockey players? Most of us enjoy fucking around with them too. As long as everyone is honest about their expectations, what’s the harm?

But I understand what Evan is saying. He feels insignificant. Probably because the film studio treated him that way. Maybe a dose of reality about my current situation would help him realize he isn’t the insignificant one here.

“I’m thirty-two, Evan. Much too old for you.”

He shakes his head. “That doesn’t matter.”

“Yes, it does. When your moms select a mate for you, they’ll choose someone twenty-three or twenty-four. Possibly twenty-five or twenty-six, although that’s reaching. Once you reach your midtwenties it’s harder to get a bond to form between arctic fox shifters.”

“Well, yeah. But you won’t bond to a fox shifter, right? You said in the interviews that you planned to take a grizzly shifter mate.”

I’m surprised he remembered that detail. Only one journalist asked me about it, and that must have been five years ago.

“Yes. But most grizzly shifters bond to their mates by the time they’re twenty-two. Twenty-three, if they’re struggling to connect with someone. That’s why grizzly hockey players choose a mate before they’re drafted into the NHL. Waiting is frowned upon. And I’m only half grizzly, so... I’ll be lucky to find someone willing to bond to me.” It’s hard saying the truth out loud. It’s a truth I haven’t wanted to face since I came home, a truth that will only get worse the longer I put off dating.

“But you’re Dimitri Cross. Lots of guys want you.”

“Yeah. Lots of guys want me for a night but not longer than that.”

My dads kept introducing me to guys every time I came home, hoping I would meet someone who sparked my interest. But I’d seen how unhappy most of the bonded players were. They desperately missed their omegas while they were on the road, and their children grew up barely knowing them. It was a terrible situation for everyone.

“That isn’t fair,” Evan says.

“It’s what I chose. And if I had to go back and do it all over again, I wouldn’t change a thing. I wasn’t ready for a bond when I was your age. I was too focused on my career.”

“So... if I wanted you longer than a night...” he trails off, probably scared to finish the sentence. It isn’t a good idea for him to get into a relationship right now. He’ll be burrowing with his intended in a year or two. It will be harder to form a bond with his mate if he’s still emotionally attached to someone else.

“Who is feeling sorry for who now?” I tease.

“No, I just think—”

I press my thumb to his lips again. “What if we don’t think right now? This doesn’t have to lead to anything. It can still mean something to both of us and be temporary. How long do we have before you fly back home to Montana?”

“I don’t know. There are no flights because of the storm. I’m stuck here until it stops snowing.”

“Then be mine until it stops snowing. We can be boyfriends, lovers, whatever you want to call it, but only while the snow is still falling from the sky. Then we go our separate ways.” It’s a terrible idea for someone with a grizzly heart, but how long could it possibly keep snowing? A day? Two days? Evan can’t completely claim my heart in that amount of time.

He kisses my thumb, which is still poised in front of his lips. He locks eyes with me and takes it into his mouth, sucking on the tip. Fucking hell. The sight of his lips around my thumb takes my mind to the dirtiest of places.

“Then you’ll knot me?” he asks in a whisper, swiping his tongue along the length of my finger. He releases my thumb and presses his mouth to the center of my palm, licking the sensitive skin. I shiver.

While arctic fox shifters aren’t as sexually conservative as other fox shifters, they are particular about a few things. For instance, knotting isn’t something you do casually. Grizzly shifters are the same way, which is why I’ve never knotted a sexual partner before. I’ve accidentally popped a knot during sex, but I pulled out before my knot finished expanding.

“I haven’t ever...” I start to say, but Evan releases my hand and lowers his lips to my chest. I completely lose my train of thought.

He presses a kiss to my sternum. “I like how hairy you are.” His lips make a trail toward my right nipple until I feel his hot breath on the sensitive nub. “Do you want me to lick you here?”

“Yes,” I rasp out. I think I want him to lick me everywhere.

A loud beeping noise sounds through the cabin. For a second, I think it’s the oven timer or something. It isn’t until Evan straightens and slides the phone out of his pocket that I realize it’s a ringtone.

The name on the screen is Amber Stent. Evan doesn’t bother to apologize for taking the phone call because we both know how important it is. “Hello?”

I hear a faint female voice on the other end, but I can’t understand what she’s saying. Evan is listening intently, his whole body tense. A bright smile spreads across his face.

“Really? How long?” he asks.

It must be good news, then. Evan listens for a few more moments, nodding, even though Amber can’t see him.

“Thank you so much. You have no idea how much this means to me. I thought it was all over.” He stops suddenly as emotion creeps into his voice. “Sorry, I’m just so relieved.”

That means Evan isn't out of the running.

"Thank you again. Bye." He ends the call and squeals, clapping his hands together.

"What happened?"

"She's pulling out of the project if they force Grayson Bloom to fulfill his contract. I guess she talked to him, and he's worried about relapsing if he has to work so soon after getting out of rehab, so she doesn't want to be involved with the film if the producers insist on using him. She just told them, and they're still making a decision. She said Grayson is a bigger name than she is, so they may still decide to hire a different director."

What a roller coaster. One minute he's out, the next minute he might be in.

"When will you know?" I ask.

"She didn't say."

I want to be excited for him, but I'm not sure if I should be. What if he gets his hopes up only to have them crushed all over again?

"Where were we?" he says playfully, kissing my chest. I want nothing more than to let him continue. Now that we've already kissed, it seems foolish to stop. What would be the point? This is already complicated.

But it isn't as complicated as it could be. We haven't made love yet. I haven't knotted him. Being boyfriends for a few days is very different from doing it for a full month.

"Stop," I say softly.

The playful smile fades from his face. "Why? We don't know if I have the part. We could just mess around until we know one way or another."

"I'm sorry, but I can't. Once I start making love to you, I won't be able to stop."

I hate the hurt I see in his eyes. I want to kiss it away and promise him everything he wants, but like my alpha dad

always said, my intention doesn't matter. It's my impact that I need to worry about.

“How about we limit it to kissing?” I suggest. “Just until we know if you have the part. If you do, we'll keep it at that, but if you don't, we can go back to nipple play and knotting, okay?”

His playful smile returns. “Kissing, huh? As in, I can kiss you anywhere?”

Good God, if Evan isn't temptation personified. He looks up at me with his full lips and pleading eyes, and I know this is a losing battle. I won't be able to tell him no for long.

“You can kiss me anywhere you already have, but let's leave it at that for now.”

He pouts the prettiest pout I have ever seen. There's something confident about that pout too, like he knows how cute he is. Goddamn it.

He places both his hands on my chest. “What about touching? Are there any rules about that?”

I don't want him to move his hands away. I like the way his cool skin feels against my chest.

“The same rules for touching. You can touch me where you already have, but let's leave it at that.”

He grins. “That means you have to keep your shirt off since I've already touched your bare chest.”

“Is that right?” I tease, even though I should definitely put my shirt back on and stop encouraging him. At this rate, I'll be balls-deep inside Evan by midnight.

That doesn't alarm me as much as it should.

EVAN

Confession: I have seen Dimitri shirtless before. I'm not proud to admit it, but I may have visited a website called Hockey Hotties a few times when I was a teenager. It was mostly comprised of basic stats and information about the sexiest players, but they also did interviews and photo shoots with players who were willing to humor them. Mark Donoghue, the cocky dragon shifter who still plays for the Chicago Dragons, posed nude for them. His junk was covered in all the shots, which was a great disappointment, but there was an epic shot of his muscled ass that I may have looked at a few times. Or maybe many times. It's a very good ass.

Dimitri's photo shoot was tame in comparison. He posed in a tight white T-shirt and jeans, only taking off his shirt for the last few shots. I stared at the hard ridges of his washboard abs for a long time in the privacy of my bedroom. Even compared to Mark Donoghue, he had the body of a god.

The Dimitri underneath me is a different man. That photo shoot was seven years ago, when he was still training with the Dragons. His shoulders are just as huge as they were back then, and he's still muscular, but his stomach is softer, and the curves of his muscles are less defined. I like that. This Dimitri isn't a photoshopped heartthrob in a magazine. He's a real man with a real body.

I want to touch that body everywhere. I won't because he asked me not to, but I want to.

He didn't seem to mind the way I demanded what I wanted while we kissed. I like sex, and I can be aggressive about what I want when I'm comfortable with someone. Not all alphas like that, though. Which is why I usually hold back the first few times I'm with a guy. I don't mind letting my lovers take control now and then. It can be hot, and it helps me figure out if the alpha is someone I can let loose with. I don't know what happened with Dimitri. I guess I got emotional about losing the role, and I stopped caring what he thought of me.

That, or I could tell he was into it.

"If we're sticking to what we've already done together, I guess I could take off my shirt," I say, gauging his reaction. Instead of discomfort, he stares back at me with hunger in his eyes.

"You probably shouldn't." His voice is breathy and uneven. He wants me, even though he won't allow himself to have me.

I reluctantly take my hands off his hairy chest and tug at the neck of my sweatshirt. Getting it off isn't as smooth or as sexy as I'd like. I end up prying the wrists free before I turn my attention back to him.

He's staring like he did before when I was shirtless in the bedroom, only this time I know what it feels like to have his tongue in my mouth and his hands clawing through my hair. And this time he's shirtless too, which means I could feel his body hair against my own chest if he were to allow that kind of contact. I'm not sure he will.

I think he might allow something else, though.

"If I can touch you anywhere I've touched you before, that means you can touch me anywhere you've touched me before too, right?" I say.

He nods dumbly, still too focused on my body to process what I'm saying. I take both of his hands and very slowly bring them to my ass, where he touched me before Amber called. His touch felt like fire against me. What I wouldn't

give for a little squeeze, or better yet, a little rocking motion to bring our hard-ons into contact with each other.

Dimitri swallows hard and finally meets my gaze. “Evan.”

I don’t move a muscle. I worry he’ll say this is too much or take his hands off my ass. He doesn’t. He simply sits here with me, drunk on lust and the magic that’s building between us. I feel it too, and I don’t want to break the spell.

Slowly, so slowly I wouldn’t spook a wild animal, I lean forward. When our faces are only an inch apart, I wait, giving him a chance to pull away or say no. Then I brush my lips against his.

It’s a gentle kiss—very different from our first. I savor the simple sensation of his lips pressing against mine. The chemistry between us is so wild, this chaste kiss is enough to make my body come alive. I don’t know how long we stay there, barely kissing, before Dimitri tilts his neck and increases the pressure. My cock hardens, and I long to have him between my legs. He inhales deeply through his nose, his fingers digging into the flesh of my ass.

I whimper and melt against him.

This causes the skin of my chest to finally come into contact with his hairy stomach and my aching cock to brush against him through the fabric of my sweatpants and underwear. A low moan rumbles from Dimitri’s lips. He spears his tongue into my mouth and kneads my ass, his hips rolling underneath me.

I gyrate against him, slicking into my underwear as I feel the heat of his hardness press against my own. He tears his mouth away from mine to bury his nose in the crook of my neck, where my scent gland is, and inhales deeply. His breath is deliciously ragged.

“Oh, Evan. I... I want...” He squeezes my ass again, making it clear exactly what he wants.

I gush slick. The scent is unmistakable and powerful. I hate how easily I slick for a man once I’m turned on. Guys have called me slutty. One of them teased me for being “a little

too eager” but not in a fun way, in a mean way that made me uncomfortable.

My roommate says I shouldn't waste my time worrying about what guys like that think of me. They aren't worth it. But once I get physical with an alpha, I feel vulnerable. I can't help it. I want them to think I'm sexy and desirable, not slutty or overeager.

“Is that your slick?” Dimitri asks, his voice thick.

It's my turn to duck my nose into his neck. I nod against him, hoping he won't be upset. He said we shouldn't take things further. This is a circumstance when my eagerness to have sex could be genuinely bad. I don't want to make him uncomfortable after he clearly communicated his boundaries.

His forefinger, which is still gripping my ass tightly, rubs back and forth on my inner ass cheek. The path of his fingertip makes me wild with yearning.

“I can feel how wet you are. God, you're soaked.”

My face burns with embarrassment. “I'm sorry.”

“No, Evan. That's not something to be sorry for. You have no idea how badly I want...”

“Then take me,” I say, even though I shouldn't.

He stares at me for a long while, lifting his right hand from my ass to stroke my cheek. “You're perfect, did you know that?”

Is this his way of trying to let me down gently? I think it is. Here I am, gushing for him, and he's complimenting me so I don't feel bad when he rejects me.

I remind myself that he tried to give me boundaries, but I didn't listen. This is my fault. I should have had more self-control. Why did I let myself get carried away?

“I said the wrong thing, didn't I? I've hurt you.” He touches my cheek so gently, it makes me want to cry all over again.

“No, it’s my fault. You told me you didn’t want any of this.”

He sighs. “I told you I *did* want this. It just isn’t a good idea.”

“Right, I understand.” I climb off his lap, but he grabs my wrist. I try to pull away, but he won’t let me go.

“Let me listen to you,” he says.

I turn back to him uncertainly. “What do you mean?”

“Go inside the bedroom and... please yourself. I want to listen. That wouldn’t complicate things too much, right? It’s just noise.”

“You want me to jack off in the other room while you listen?”

He shakes his head. “I want you to... finger yourself. I want to hear the sound of your slick while your fingers move inside your body...” He lets out a ragged breath, that’s how much the idea of it turns him on.

Goddamn it. I want it too.

“Do I get to listen to you too?” I ask.

“Listen to me... finger myself?”

That also sounds hot, but it isn’t what I had in mind. “Listen to you jack off. With lube.”

“I don’t have any lube.”

Neither do I. I’m never in short supply of slick.

“I don’t have any lube either, but I have... something else.” My cheeks burn as I realize how filthy that suggestion is, even if I didn’t completely articulate it.

“What?” he asks, still not following.

“You know...” If he doesn’t guess it, I don’t think I’ll be able to say it out loud. It’s too much.

His mouth drops open as he pieces together what I’m offering him. He drags a hand through his hair and swallows hard. “Wow.”

It was such a stupid thing to suggest. What is Dimitri going to think of me now? Having sex is one thing, but offering him my slick as lube is on an entirely different level. What's wrong with me?

"Sorry, I'll just go." I try to move toward the bedroom door. He still doesn't let go of my wrist. Instead, he tugs me toward him. What does he want?

"I'm wet for you too, you know," he says, hooking his arm around my waist and pulling me back onto his lap. "It's just different." He slides his fingers under the waistband of his jeans. I watch them disappear with rapt attention. Does he want us to masturbate in front of each other now?

He pulls his hand out and shows me his first two fingers that are indeed wet, just like he promised. I'm embarrassed by how badly I want to smell them. How am I supposed to react here? Should I simply nod and feel reassured that I'm not the only one dripping for it? What am I allowed to want?

He lifts his fingers to my face, hovering them just under my nose. The musky smell of him is heady and wonderful. It makes me forget myself for a moment. I stick out my tongue to lick the precum off his fingers. He tastes of salt and man. I want more.

"Fuck, Evan. You're so..." He sinks the fingers of his other hand into my hair and pulls me closer to dive his nose into my neck again. This time he doesn't just smell me there, he closes his mouth over the sensitive skin and sucks. It's such an intimate thing. Alpha arctic fox shifters usually suck on that skin when they're inside me. I'm not ready for the onslaught of sensation as he sucks harder, and the tiniest hint of pain makes the pleasure sharper. He releases the skin and presses a gentle kiss to it. "I don't know if I can resist you. Would I be a terrible man if I didn't resist? If I made love to you right here and now?"

Something loud beeps behind us, something familiar. My phone is ringing again.

I pull it out to silence it, then I see who's calling me. It's my alpha mom. I was supposed to call them last night. I was

supposed to call them this morning too. Guilt overpowers the raw yearning I feel for Dimitri. I'm already gone for burrowing season, and now I can't even bother to call my moms? Is that the kind of son I've become?

Dimitri glances at the name on my phone and mouths, "Go ahead."

I press Answer and bring the phone to my ear. "Hey, Mom."

DIMITRI

The second Evan climbs off me, I yank on my shirt and head for the door. It's freezing outside, but that's a good thing. Maybe the cold will knock some sense into me.

I was about to have sex with Evan. I came here to help him—to show that I could do something meaningful with my life now that I can't play hockey anymore—and this is what I do? Fuck the guy I'm working for?

The trees and road are covered in a thick blanket of white snow. It's the heavy kind of snow that turns to slush and ice on the roads, and it's up to my ankles. It's so cold, my breath comes out as white fog. If I wasn't half bear shifter, I'd have no choice but to hurry back inside.

The studio may have to delay filming for more than another week.

I fold my arms across my chest and wait for my body to calm down, my cock in particular. What are we going to do? There's no way we'll get through the next month without having sex. He knows how badly I want him, and I can still smell how badly he wants me. I need some guidance on how to handle this situation.

My fingers tremble as I slide my phone out of my pocket. I can't call the guild because I'm pretty sure they'll send me home. That would be devastating for Evan, and honestly, I'm not ready to go home yet. I could tell Laura, though. She might know what to do. I find her name in my contact list and call her cell number. She answers on the second ring.

“Well, if it isn’t my new cuddling protégé. How the hell have you been? Are you enjoying the gig?” Her voice brings me back to all the times she hugged me in the middle of a game to get me through and the nights we spent curled up on the couch under a blanket, talking about hockey. She was everything a cuddler should be, and I was a better hockey player because of it. Evan deserves a cuddler like her.

“I fucked up,” I say.

“What do you mean?”

“I almost had sex with the guy I’m supposed to be cuddling with this month.”

The silence on the other end feels eternal. “Him? I thought you were cuddling with a female director.”

I forgot that I never told her about the contract change.

“This film studio bought my contract, so I’m cuddling with a male omega who’s—”

“A male omega? The guild allowed that?”

“Not exactly. The studio threatened to hire another actor if I jumped ship. I didn’t want Evan to lose the role—”

“And you didn’t tell me any of this?”

“I thought you would advise me not to do it.”

“So let me get this straight. The guild told you not to do it. You didn’t contact me because you knew I would tell you not to do it. But then you up and did it anyway?”

“Yeah, basically. Stupid, right?”

At this point, my whole body is shaking from the cold. I should have brought a coat. Back when I was playing hockey, I was a meticulous planner. I had each day, week, and month mapped out. Now I just take every day as it comes, and I end up in situations where I’m stuck outside without a coat or stuck in a contract that might ruin someone’s life. I can’t keep living like this.

“You’re not stupid, Dimitri. You just have a big heart, and those studio executives took advantage of that.”

I don't feel like a good guy anymore. I feel lost and messed up.

"I need to make this right, Laura. Evan's an amazing actor. He doesn't deserve to have this blow up in his face. He's also twenty-two. He'll probably burrow with his mate next year. I don't want things to get emotionally complicated between us. It might affect his ability to form a bond with someone else. How do I fix this?"

"I don't know, kid."

I smile. She always calls me kid, even though I'm easily three times her size.

"What would you do if it were you?" I ask.

She sighs. "Well, you can't back out. That will leave him without a cuddler, and based on how the studio roped you into this, I don't think they'd handle it in a way that would be fair to Evan. You have to figure out a way to stay and not cause any problems with his life."

That's easier said than done.

"Every time I touch him, it feels sexual, even if I don't mean it that way. Evan feels it too. If I go back in there without a plan, we'll end up having sex. The chemistry between us is too intense."

She thinks about that for a minute. "Let me share something with you that a more experienced cuddler once told me. There's a reason arctic fox shifters burrow with their intended mates. Having sex with someone during burrowing season is a very intimate experience for them. Their skin hunger heightens the physical connection and makes it extremely intense. That's why cuddlers should only be paired with cuddlers of the opposite gender."

Laura's words make me wish for something I didn't know I wanted. What if Evan and I were simply two guys who had been set up by our parents to burrow together this year? My dad always said that dating was better than an arranged fox shifter bonding, but I don't know. Burrowing with a mate who experiences skin hunger too sounds wonderful.

I guess it doesn't matter now.

"Where does Evan live?" Laura asks.

"LA, I think. He moved there for work. Why?"

"So you won't see him again after this job?"

"No."

"Then I think Evan will be okay. People have sex and go their separate ways all the time. I think the trick is to not be a distraction for him while he's working and to make it clear that your fling with him will be over at the end of February. That will give him a full year to move on before he burrows with his mate."

That should make me feel better. I don't want to cause problems for Evan. But the reality that I won't cause problems for Evan because I won't matter to him in the long run reminds me of my hockey career. Fans have already moved on. They're talking about the new cheetah shifter who's taken my place without so much as mentioning me. I signed up for this job because I wanted to make a difference in someone's life. I thought that would feel meaningful.

"Good luck, kid. I'm here to chat whenever you need me, okay? My cuddlee is at practice most of the day, and even then, he isn't as clingy as you were." I hear the smile in her voice as she teases me.

"Oh, c'mon. I was your favorite. Admit it."

She laughs. "I don't play favorites. You're like my children. I love you all the same."

There's enough of an age difference that she probably could be my mom. Maybe that's why cuddling with her felt so comforting. If only I could offer that kind of comfort to Evan.

"I'll talk to you soon, okay? I gotta go."

After she hangs up, I shiver on the porch for several more minutes before I open the door and retreat back inside.

Evan is standing next to the couch waiting for me.

EVAN

I lie to my moms. I don't know why exactly, but I don't tell them my cuddler is Dimitri Cross. In fact, I don't mention my cuddler at all, which is a huge lie of omission. I also don't tell them the studio might drop me. I only mention the snow and the filming delay.

Maybe it's because I'm ashamed of what I did to Dimitri. I know he says it isn't sexual harassment, but it still isn't right. He wanted me to stop.

"I need to go," I say. It's another lie. We won't be filming for another week, and I already know the script by heart. I could easily spend more time talking with them.

"Is everything okay?" my alpha mom asks.

"Yeah, of course."

"How are things with your cuddler? They were supposed to show up yesterday, right? Are they still not there?"

Leave it to my omega mom to guess what's bothering me.

"He's here. It's fine."

"He?" My alpha mom asks.

"Yes, sweetie. The director couldn't find a female cuddler, remember?" my omega mom says.

"No one ever told me they hired a male cuddler for you."

"I need to go," I repeat. I'm not in the mood to smooth this over with my alpha mom. She has every right to be upset, but I

just don't care anymore. The director should have found a female cuddler for me, but they didn't. It is what it is.

I end the call before they can argue, which is rude. My moms will probably be hurt and upset. The guilt weighs on me as I change into other clothes and try to figure out what I should do. The studio wants to go with Grayson Bloom anyway. Maybe it would be better if I went home.

Dimitri is still outside after I've changed, which is concerning. He didn't take a jacket out there. I stand in front of the couch, where I basically forced him to make out with me, and consider going after him.

The door opens. Dimitri stands on the porch, his arms dotted with goose bumps and his nipples balled under his T-shirt. He was clearly freezing his ass off out there.

"I'm sorry," I say.

He steps inside and closes the door behind him. "You don't need to apologize. This isn't our fault. I called Laura, my old cuddler, and she said that attraction between arctic fox shifters is always off the charts during burrowing season. There's nothing we could have done. She even suggested that we stop fighting it."

I'm not sure what I expected from Dimitri after he stayed outside for so long, but it wasn't that. The idea of giving in to our desires is thrilling to me. But Dimitri seems sad, not ready to strip my clothes off. Something is wrong.

"Are you sure that's a good idea?" I ask.

He walks up to me and reaches for my hand with his freezing fingers.

"Woo! That's cold!"

He grins and wraps his equally cold arms around me, pulling me into a shockingly frigid hug. "This is one way of cooling things down between us."

I relax into him, relieved to be enveloped by him again, even if he's cold. It feels right to be wedged between his arms and chest like this.

“I’m sorry,” I say again.

“Shhhhh, no more apologies. How about we make some tea and go over your script. Then, when things heat up between us again, we’ll let ourselves enjoy it.” There’s still a sadness in his voice that concerns me. Maybe talking with his cuddler reminded him of playing hockey or something.

I wriggle out of his arms. “Tea sounds nice, but we don’t need to go over the script right now. I have a full week, and I think running lines will make me obsess over whether I have a part or not.”

He follows me into the kitchen. “Then what should we do? Neither of us want to watch hockey, which is what arctic fox shifters do during February. It’s still weird to think of going through a burrowing season without it.” His voice trails off, and he gets this distant look in his eyes.

What if I couldn’t act anymore? I’d be haunted by the memory of it too. I wish I could take away the pain of his memories.

“We could play board games,” I suggest. “That seems like a good burrowing activity.”

“Do they even have board games in this cabin?” he asks.

“I don’t know. Probably. Or we could do a puzzle. They might have puzzles somewhere.”

He wanders into the living room. “Maybe they’re in that cabinet under the TV.”

I fill the kettle with water as he wanders into the living room and opens the cupboard. He crouches down in front of it, and the view of his round ass is nice.

If we’re no longer going to fight our attraction to each other, that means we’ll have sex soon. Probably today. I’ll get to touch Dimitri everywhere, get to have his cock deep inside me.

Suddenly, the tea and board games seem like a silly distraction.

Dimitri returns to the kitchen with a stack of boxes in his arms. “They have Operation,” he says, setting the box down. “I loved that game as a kid. I was terrible at it, but it was the best.”

The box is dented and ripped on one side. I lift the lid to see if the game itself survived. The board with the cartoon of a naked man who has holes all over his body seems fine, but I don’t see any of the pieces. I remove the board from the box and check underneath. All I can find is the tiny white wishbone and a rubber band.

“Damn it,” he says. “Why did they keep it if most of the pieces are missing?”

I place the board back inside and replace the lid. “We should throw this away so no one else gets excited about it only to have their Operation hopes crushed.”

He slides the box across the table until it tips over into the trash at the end of the counter.

The next box is a thousand-piece puzzle of a teddy bear.

“What do you think the chances are that all the pieces are still in here?” I ask.

“Not good if it’s anything like the Operation game.”

I set the puzzle aside to reveal the next box. This one has two red foxes snuggling on the cover with the words *Burrowing Bliss*. Unlike arctic fox shifters, red foxes only need to burrow when they’re trying to form a bond with their mates, and they do it during the month of January instead of February. This game must be intended for that.

Dimitri turns the box over. The same red foxes are pressing their noses together on the back. The text reads: “Questions to ask your burrowing partner if you want to build a bond that will last a lifetime.”

“I guess they need questions from a box to get to know their mates,” Dimitri teases. “Probably helps them suffer through the blue balls, huh?”

Red fox shifters follow a strict schedule that limits their physical contact during burrowing season. On their first day together, they're only allowed to touch hands, the next day they can only kiss once, and so on. They don't get to really cuddle with each other until the third or fourth day. That isn't practical for arctic fox shifters who need more physical contact on day one. My alpha mom says the whole schedule strategy is nothing but superstition anyway. Like she's one to talk. She has a pair of lucky socks she wears every time she watches a Dragons game.

"I think it's kind of cute they have a burrowing board game." I say, easing the lid off the box. Inside there are two pads of paper, a stack of cards held together with a rubber band, and a collection of mismatched pens.

Dimitri snatches the cards. "Let's see what kind of questions they ask each other."

I pick up the list of rules tucked underneath the pads of paper. There are several ways to play the game, but they're all similar. Player one picks a card and chooses a question. There are four categories of questions: goals, childhood memories, favorites, and sex. Each player writes down their answer to the question and guesses what their partner's answer will be. The person with the most correct guesses wins.

Dimitri draws the first card and scans it. "What is your favorite position? Wow. Red foxes ask each other sexual questions for days before they're allowed to get it on. That has to be frustrating."

I'd like to get it on right now. My body is keyed up again and ready to pounce on Dimitri. How long do we have to wait before things can "heat up again" as Dimitri put it?

"Well, what is your favorite position?" I ask, hoping that will lead us in the right direction.

He looks down at the card, then back up at me. "I, uh... like to be on top of my partner and sort of... not crushing him, per se, but I like it when he's on his stomach underneath me and not able to move. I like it when he has to take it, you

know?” He drags a hand through his hair. “That sounds bad. I always ask permission first. It’s all consensual.”

An image of Dimitri holding me down and fucking me hard from behind plays through my head. How do red foxes play this game and manage to keep their hands off each other?

“Um, I think whatever you just described is my favorite position too. I haven’t even done it yet, but I’m pretty sure,” I tease.

Dimitri doesn’t smile. He stares back at me with a heat in his eyes that makes my mouth go dry.

“Then you don’t mind a guy taking charge a little bit?” His voice is throaty and deep.

“Um.” That’s it. All I can get out is an *um*. Maybe I could talk if Dimitri stopped looking at me like he was going to eat me. Or if I didn’t want him to eat me.

“I’m a big, strong guy. Do you think you could take it from me?” he asks.

I nod dumbly. The scent of my slick is suddenly pungent in the air. Dimitri takes in a deep breath through his nose.

“You smell so good, Evan. I want to spend every waking second of the next month buried inside you.”

I want that too. That’s when I realize the flaw with letting our lust take over. I only have one condom with me. I remember how ridiculous I felt packing it, but I figured it was better to be safe than sorry. Now I realize I didn’t pack enough. Maybe Dimitri has a big box of them in his bag, and I shouldn’t worry.

The tea kettle hisses. Dimitri walks around the counter and reaches behind me to flip the burner off. “I liked it when you took control too,” he says.

“Yeah?”

He leans in closer until our faces are only inches apart. “Yeah. There’s nothing wrong with taking turns, right?”

I grab the stack of cards from him and step back. “Okay. We can take turns.”

He rolls his eyes because we both know he meant sex instead of this silly red fox shifter game. There’s something about knowing Dimitri wants to have sex with me right now and playing hard to get that is way too much fun. I have every intention of letting him take me right here on the counter if he wants to, but building a little anticipation never hurt anyone.

I scan the next card until I find the question I’m looking for. “What is your biggest sexual fantasy?”

He smiles at me and slowly rests his elbows on the counter behind him. The position accentuates the bulge at the front of his pants. “You want to play games, huh? Why don’t you answer the question first this time. It’s only fair. Tell me, Evan. What is your biggest sexual fantasy?”

The question is laughable while he’s showing himself off like this because he was the center of my sexual fantasies as a teenager. Fragments of those fantasies flash through my mind. Just yesterday, I would have been mortified to confess any part of them to Dimitri, but now I’m tempted.

“There was this famous hockey player that I had a few wet dreams about in high school,” I say, biting my lip playfully.

He smiles wide. “Is that right? What did that famous hockey player do to you in those dreams?”

“Aren’t you supposed to guess what my answer is? That’s how the game works, right?”

He lifts himself off the counter and takes a step toward me. “Maybe you could give me a hint.”

I place my hand on his cheek, which is now clean shaven but still slightly prickly. “Okay. Your stubble used to play a role.”

He grabs my wrist and drags his face against my palm. “Where did you want to feel my stubble, Evan?”

“Guess.”

He releases my hand and runs his fingers down my torso, stopping for a maddening second on the bulge at the front of my pajama pants. Then he slides his hand in between my legs. I take in a sharp breath as his fingertip brushes along the fabric behind my balls.

“Here?” He smacks my ass with his other hand. He doesn’t hit me hard enough for it to hurt, but it’s still surprising. “Or here?”

“Yes,” I whisper.

He leans in until I can feel his breath on my ear. “The card asked what your biggest fantasy was. Surely, that wasn’t the biggest one. Tell me, Evan. What was the dirtiest, naughtiest thing you imagined me doing to you?” His hand is still between my legs, tracing my taint. I can barely think.

“Guess,” I say.

He presses his mouth to the sensitive skin underneath my ear. His lips are demanding now, making their way down my neck. “You want me to guess?”

I moan as he grabs my ass. He squeezes my flesh, digging his fingers in between my ass cheeks.

“You know what I think you wanted?” he says, stepping away from me quite suddenly, then flipping me around. He pushes me against the counter with his body, letting me feel the outline of his hard cock against my ass. “I think you wanted this splitting you open.”

I melt into him, wishing he would pull down my pants and take me now. “Yes.”

“Tell me, how did you want it? Describe your fantasy to me,” he says, his breath hot on my ear. He grinds his erection against me, leaving me weak with desire.

“Guess,” I repeat, too lost in my lust to say much else.

He yanks down my pants and underwear in one swift motion. They pool at my feet. Suddenly, I’m half-naked, my ass and cock exposed. I glance back to check his reaction.

Dimitri stares at my ass for a long beat. Does he like what he sees? I'm sure he's been with plenty of men. Do I measure up to what he's used to?

He slips his fingers between my legs again. "Slick is running down your inner thighs."

"I'm sorry—"

"Shhhhh. We talked about your biggest fantasy, so we're going to talk about mine." His fingers run along my taint, his thumb pressing against my hole. I truly am dripping at this point, and it's embarrassing.

"I've always wanted to fuck an omega in heat," he says. "I imagine him naked and presenting on a bed for me, slick gushing down his legs. The way you slick is the stuff of my fantasies, Evan."

I'm not in heat, though. Does he understand how humiliating it is to gush slick outside of a heat, how alphas treat an omega who is always dripping for it?

Dimitri pushes the tip of his finger inside me. I drop the deck of cards into the sink. He clamps his mouth onto my scent gland and sucks as his finger delves in deeper. It's thick and solid, almost too much to handle all at once. Most guys have much smaller hands.

But I don't want him to stop.

He nips at my neck, then takes my earlobe into his mouth and sucks. My knees buckle, and I grasp onto the edge of the counter to stay upright. His finger sinks all the way inside me, and my ass clamps down on it hard. I whimper, completely overwhelmed by the rush of pleasure that pulses through me.

"Fuck, Evan. Did you just come?"

I shake my head, even though I don't actually know. Orgasms are supposed to be these clear, solid things that are easily discernible. I do have orgasms that fall into that category, but I also have moments of intensity where my ass contracts or I ejaculate just a little bit. I once explained them to my doctor, who is an alpha, and he told me they didn't count

as orgasms. “That’s just part of being an omega,” he said. “Your body gets a little confused sometimes.”

The thing is, I don’t think my body’s confused. I think I have different kinds of orgasms, and my doctor didn’t consider that because *he* doesn’t have more than one kind. But I’m sure Dimitri doesn’t want a play-by-play of all the weird things my body does.

He kisses my ear. “I want to feel your ass squeeze my cock next time. Do you have condoms? I have one in my wallet, but I didn’t come prepared for this.”

My heart sinks. Of course he didn’t come prepared. Neither of us were expecting to have sex this month.

“I have one too. Only one,” I say.

He leans his forehead on my shoulder. “Fuck. We only have two between us. How long will that last us?”

“Not long.”

“We could go get more,” he suggests.

“The roads are a mess, and I’m sure the plows won’t be coming this far out of town. Besides, won’t everything be closed anyway?”

He slowly slides his finger out of me. The loss of it is strangely emotional like when I get weepy during my heat. I don’t know why everything is so intense with him.

“We could still do it two times, right?” I turn around, inadvertently giving him a full view of my dick in the process. It’s weeping an inordinate amount of precum, probably from my mini orgasm. The liquid is thick and white like regular semen.

“You did come,” Dimitri says.

“Sometimes I come just a little bit. Don’t worry about it. I can come again.”

He searches my face for a few moments. I’m not sure what he’s looking for. Does he think I’m lying?

“Evan, you don’t have to hide your body’s reactions to me. It’s okay if you slick. It’s okay if you come.”

“But I can come again. It doesn’t mean anything,” I repeat.

He scrubs a hand across his face. “Fucking hell. You came, of course that means something.”

I open my mouth to argue with him, but then I close it again. Normally, I don’t explain my different orgasms to my lovers because I’ve never had a serious relationship, and alphas tend to be weird about my extra slick anyway. I figured I’d explain it to my future mate when we burrowed together, but I didn’t owe anyone else an explanation.

With Dimitri, it feels different. We’ll probably only have a few days together. A month, tops. But I feel connected to him in a way I’ve never felt with an alpha before. Maybe it would be nice to tell him. He might understand.

“I, uh, don’t have a normal refractory period. I can usually come as many times as I like. Some orgasms are more satisfying to me than others, but they’ve always come easily for me. I often orgasm three or more times when I have sex.” I don’t look him in the eye as I explain. I’ve never laid it out so candidly before. Not even with my doctor.

I wait for Dimitri’s response for what seems like eternity. I thought he would be chill about the whole thing. After all, he’s probably slept with hundreds of puck omegas. Am I really such a freak that no other omega out there is like me?

Dimitri places his hands on my hips. I dare to glance up at his face, afraid of what I’ll find there.

“Here’s the thing I don’t get,” he says.

I look away because that isn’t how I thought he’d respond. I expected compassion and understanding, not confusion.

“You tell me this amazing thing about your body, but you act like it’s something to be ashamed of. I mean, fuck, Evan. I wish I could orgasm four times during sex. That’s incredible.”

I meet his gaze again. “I’ve never told anyone that before.”

“Then I feel honored.” He presses a soft kiss to my lips.

We simply kiss for a while. I'm half-naked, and the way his lips move against mine makes me want to throw all caution to the wind and pounce on him. But there's a magic between us in this moment that I don't want to mess with.

Maybe it's because the kind of intimacy I'm experiencing with Dimitri is much deeper than his cock in my ass. It's the kind of intimacy I don't think a condom can protect against.

That doesn't feel as scary as it should.

DIMITRI

All families have secrets. I didn't learn my family's secret until I was thirteen years old.

My brothers and I grew up obsessing about hockey. The players in the NHL—especially the grizzly shifters—were like gods to us. We memorized their stats, knew how many teeth they'd lost, and agonized over every trade. And yet, I never wondered why my alpha dad wasn't among them. He talked about his college hockey games all the time, but he never explained why he didn't go pro.

I remember the day my omega dad told me the story like it was yesterday. We were at the local ice rink preparing for a school fundraiser. Several of the teachers and parents had agreed to play each other in a game of hockey to raise money for the renovations of the library. The strange thing was, my alpha dad didn't sign up.

"Why isn't Dad playing tonight?" I asked as I pulled out the legs of the folding table where we planned to sit and sell tickets.

"Because he can't," my omega dad said.

"What do you mean? Does he have some kind of injury?"

My omega dad shook his head. "No, he's perfectly healthy."

"Then why?"

He stood there motionless for a long time before he sighed. "I suppose you're old enough to know."

“Know what?”

He pulled out the last two legs, and we flipped the table over.

“Do you know how arctic fox shifters form a bond?”

That was a question every arctic fox shifter child knew the answer to. “They burrow with their intended for a full month of winter.”

“Did you know that doesn’t work if your mate is another type of shifter?”

I didn’t. It had never occurred to me to wonder about that.

“They say grizzly shifters only fall in love once. That’s why your grandmothers think hockey players shouldn’t leave the reservation until they’ve bonded to a mate. But your alpha dad didn’t make time for that. He claimed his one true love was hockey, and he worked tirelessly to make it to the NHL. That’s why I fell in love with him. He was driven in a way other players his age simply weren’t. He never went out partying, and he kept his grades up. I was the team’s tutor, and we spent a lot of time together.

“It wasn’t until his senior year that he confessed his feelings for me. Initially, I resisted, even though I loved him too. He was a grizzly shifter, and I was a fox shifter. I knew we didn’t have a future together. But love finds a way. A few months later we traveled to the reservation and asked your grandmother for a magical tie.”

Even my clueless thirteen-year-old self knew what a magical tie was. It allowed a couple who wouldn’t normally be able to bond to find that connection. Usually, magical ties were created between ice dragon shifters because no one else could afford them. Magic is expensive.

“As you know, your alpha grandmother is a warlock, so she agreed to do the spell without monetary payment. But every spell has a price, Dimitri. We had to make a sacrifice that was equal or greater to what we were asking Magic for.”

“But he couldn’t... he didn’t...”

“He did. Your alpha dad gave up playing hockey for me.”

The rest of that day was a blur. My omega dad explained that they didn’t want to tell people about the sacrifice. As far as anyone knew, my alpha dad experienced an injury that made it impossible for him to play again. My omega dad said a lot of other things too while we sold tickets and pretended everything was okay, but I don’t remember any of it. I just remember lying in bed that night and wondering what could have been if my parents hadn’t fallen in love.

That’s why I’ve never had sex with an omega more than once. Ever since I was a teenager, I understood that I could have love *or* hockey, a happy family *or* the NHL. Even during the last few years of my career when I felt lonely and longed for a real connection with an omega, I never tempted fate by allowing myself to develop feelings for the men I slept with.

This kiss with Evan feels dangerous. It’s tender and slow—gentle and sweet. I’m not cuddling with him right now, which is supposed to be my job, but we’re not fucking either. Sure, I promised to be his boyfriend for a few days when we both thought he’d lost the role, but this might go on for a month.

I’m in trouble here, and I know it.

Evan breaks the kiss and takes my hand, guiding me wordlessly to the bedroom. He leaves his pants in a pile on the kitchen floor, like all of my good intentions.

“Sit,” he says, gesturing to the bed.

Evan stands in front of me and unbuttons his pajama shirt. Truth be told, I’ve done this hundreds of times before. I couldn’t have a boyfriend, so I had sex. Lots of it. During my third year playing for the Dragons, I stopped keeping track of how many guys I’d slept with. I shouldn’t be holding my breath as Evan opens his shirt and lets it slide off his body. This shouldn’t feel special, but it does.

I hold out my hand to Evan. He comes to me, trying to climb onto my lap, but I stop him.

“Wait,” I say.

I run my hands over his lovely shoulders and along his smooth chest. I touch his stomach and his delicate hip bones. The sense of rightness as I caress Evan is overwhelming. It reminds me of how my alpha dad described ice skating for the first time. *I belonged there. There's no other way to say it. Skating on that ice was where I was supposed to be.*

As my fingers glide along Evan's shoulder blades and back, I know this is where I'm supposed to be. It sounds like some kind of fated mate bullshit, even though fox shifters never have fated mates. I don't know what's wrong with me. Maybe I'm simply latching onto the first guy I've been with since retirement.

"Is everything okay?" Evan asks when my hands pause just above his ass. I lean forward and kiss the center of his chest, adjacent to where his heart beats. Its rhythm pulses against my lips. Laura warned me that having sex with the person I'm burrowing with would be intense. Is that all this is? Good, old-fashioned chemistry mixed with burrowing season?

"I like you, Evan. More than I should," I say.

"I like you too. *Way* more than I should." He smiles at me as if we're two kids in the school yard instead of grown adults who will have to pay the price if we fall for the wrong person.

But the thing is, I can't play hockey anymore. The sacrifice I was so terrified of as a teenager isn't even possible now. What more do I have to lose?

I know things with Evan will be temporary, but I'm no stranger to loving something that won't last forever. That's the life of an athlete. We can only play the game for so long before our bodies give out on us. The temporary nature of my dream was drilled into me my entire childhood. They told me to have a backup plan. They warned me about injuries, careers cut short, and the inevitability of slowing down with age. I didn't listen. If I had, I would have held a part of myself back.

Even now, I can't bring myself to regret that. During those two decades when my life revolved around hockey, I truly lived.

Maybe I should let myself live now.

EVAN

Dimitri rises from the bed to tower in front of me—all six-foot-five of him. We stand there for a while, drinking each other in. Something between us has changed—something important. I don't know what it is, all I know is that this isn't just sex.

I'm not sure it ever was.

Dimitri grabs my waist without warning, and suddenly I'm airborne. I land on his shoulder, my upper body dangling from his back like a sack of potatoes. This particular fantasy of mine isn't something I've ever told anyone. My inner omega stirs as Dimitri flops me onto the bed, rolling me onto my stomach.

He told me this was his favorite position, and I joked it was mine too. Now we're actually doing it. A wild thrill shoots through me. Is this the part where he holds me down and pounds me into the mattress?

I sneak a glance behind me as Dimitri takes off his shirt. The size of his naked body felt different when I was on top of him. Now that he's standing over me, I have an appreciation for how intimidating he must have been to his opponents on the ice. The width of his shoulders reminds me of the GI Joe doll I played with as a kid, and his arms are large enough to be tree trunks. He could rip me apart with his bare hands if he wanted to.

He hooks his thumbs under the waistband of his sweatpants and slides them down, revealing a thick salt-and-

pepper happy trail. His cock springs free, and I'm unprepared for its size. It makes me wonder if there are valid reasons why interspecies shifter relationships are frowned upon. I don't know if I can take something that thick. The regular-sized condom in my suitcase certainly won't be big enough.

"If you're looking for a second career, porn is a viable option," I say, trying to keep my tone light, even though the whole "pound me into the mattress" idea is terrifying with what he's packing.

He climbs onto the bed and lies next to me, resting his head on his hand. "Are you afraid of my massive cock?" The smirk on his face is shameless.

I grab a pillow and throw it at his head.

He laughs and chucks it back at me. "There are two things in this world I am very good at: hockey and getting men ready for my dick."

I roll my eyes. "Is that right?"

"Yeah. I even stretched out an alpha enough to take me once, and we don't have springy assholes like you do."

His nonchalance about that confession shocks me. The NHL is so rife with toxic masculinity, alpha/alpha relationships are still considered controversial.

"My asshole isn't springy," I say, trying to mimic his casual demeanor. "It just has better elasticity than yours."

"Tomato, tomahto. I promise I'll take good care of it. I'm very fond of your asshole. Wouldn't want anything bad to happen to it." He smacks my ass playfully.

"I don't know. If there was only one alpha who could handle your cock..." My tone is still playful, but I'm curious.

He smiles at me knowingly. "I only tried it once. I'll try anything once. There was this one time an omega asked if he could pee on my head—"

I cover his mouth with my hand. "Nope. I don't need to hear that story."

Dimitri grabs my wrist and pulls it away from his face. “It wasn’t that bad. He was a wolf shifter, so it was a marking thing. Honestly, it was kind of hot. The grossest thing that’s ever happened to me during sex was when this one guy wanted me to fuck his face. I’m always eager to please, so I was enthusiastically going at it, but apparently I got carried away, and he threw up. Chunks of spaghetti everywhere. It was disgusting.”

That’s a mental image I didn’t need.

“The guy helped me clean it up and everything, but after that, I can’t handle the sound of gagging. No more face fucking for me. You can fuck *my* face, but I’m not going to fuck yours. Washing spaghetti vomit off my pubes is an experience I do not want to repeat. The little noodles clogged up the drain.”

I shudder. “Thank you. I appreciate the graphic detail you included in that story.”

“There was also this time that an omega had a huge zit right by his asshole, and he wanted me to rim him. But I wasn’t sure what to do about the—”

“Nope. I don’t need to hear that story either. How many gross sex stories do you have?” I ask.

He narrows his eyes. “Hmmm, let’s see. There was the time an omega wanted to top me, but I just ate a lot of nachos. You can probably guess what happened. And the time—”

“Never mind. I’m sorry I asked.”

He sighs. “This isn’t turning you on, is it?”

“Surprisingly enough, stories about your former lovers vomiting on you do not turn me on.”

He smiles and leans in to kiss my cheek. “It’s okay, you know. Other guys have passed after seeing the beast.”

I bust up laughing. “The beast? Are you referring to your dick?”

“Yeah. You have a name for your dick, don’t you?”

“No!” I can’t stop laughing. “Of course I don’t.”

“Your loss. Naming your dick can be empowering.”

“Well, sure. If you name it something like the beast.”

Dimitri pushes my shoulder gently. “Roll over.”

“Why?”

“I have to see your dick if I’m going to help you name it.”

“We are not naming my dick.”

He pushes at my shoulder again, more insistently this time. The grin on his face is contagious. It reminds me of these candid photos of him and his teammates at a party four years ago. In his official portraits he was always calm and professional, but the photos at that party captured a wild joy in him that I found fascinating when I was a teenager. Somehow, I’ve found that part of him this morning. I want to hold onto it for a little while longer, so I relent and roll onto my side.

He looks down at where my cock is flaccid and leaning against my thigh. Compared to his, it’s tiny. I wonder what he thinks about that. Personally, I like to frot with a guy who’s a lot bigger than me. Lining up our cocks side by side when there’s a significant size difference is hot. But some alphas think that’s weird.

“You could name your dick Simon,” Dimitri suggests.

“What? Why?”

“He could be a bossy dick. Simon says touch me. Simon says make me come.”

I grab the pillow and hit him with it again. He shoves it away and wraps his arm around me, bringing me in for a kiss. His lips are soft and gentle. He slides them back and forth before gently pressing his tongue into my mouth. We’re naked and in bed together, but his kisses stay slow and patient.

Somehow, despite the ridiculous size of his dick, he still manages to make me feel safe.

When I try to deepen the kiss, he breaks away. “It’s okay if anal sex with me is too much. I wasn’t joking when I said

other guys have changed their mind after seeing my dick. We could frot or suck each other off. There are lots of ways we could feel good together.”

Off in the distance, a phone rings. It must be mine. I think I left it in the pocket of the sweatpants I took off in the kitchen.

“I’ll go get it,” Dimitri says, jumping out of bed, completely comfortable running nude through the cabin.

“No, I should answer it.” I follow after him.

It could be Amber or my agent. Either way, I’m nervous about what they have to say.

EVAN

With trembling fingers, I fish my phone out of my sweatpants. The number is unknown, but I answer it anyway.

“Hello?”

“Is this Evan Garrett?” The voice is deep and male. He sounds like a narrator of an epic science-fiction film.

“Yes. Who is this?”

“Don Reynolds, the producer for *Forest Hearts*.”

He says that as if I don’t know who he is—as if every actor in Hollywood doesn’t know. When I found out he was producing *Forest Hearts*, I had to keep my inner fanboy in check.

“Um, hello,” I manage to squeak out.

“I’ll be real with you. As much as I like Grayson Bloom, I think you’re a better actor than he is. Your screen tests were moving.”

Don Reynolds thinks I’m a better actor than Grayson Bloom? My brain completely short-circuits, and I crouch on the kitchen floor in silence for a full fifteen seconds before I realize I should respond.

Dimitri’s standing next to the counter completely nude, which is not helping with my focus.

“Thank you. Sorry, today has been a bit of a roller coaster.” I wish I could take the words back the second I say

them. The last thing I want is for Don Reynolds to think I can't handle the pressure of this role.

"I can only imagine. Listen, I'm calling because I want to convince the board that you're right for this role, but your following on social media is minimal at best."

My heart sinks. I rarely log in to my professional social media accounts because it's a soul-sucking experience. There's always some other actor with more likes or comments. The only time I went viral on TikTok was when I filmed a video in my bathing suit. I'm not ashamed of my body, but I want to act in serious roles. My agent warned me against making a name for myself with thirst traps.

"I could do better on social media," I admit.

"Yes, I think you could. It's my understanding that Dimitri Cross is your professional cuddler?"

"No," I blurt out. "I mean yes, he's my cuddler, but I can't post about it. It's against the rules."

Dimitri narrows his eyes. He mouths, "Put it on speaker."

I don't know how Don Reynolds will respond to that, but it's a reasonable request, isn't it? We're talking about Dimitri. I switch the setting to speaker mode and hold my phone out in front of me.

"That's too bad. I think people might be interested in Dimitri's story. It's not every day an NHL player turns pro cuddler, right? Maybe you could leak the information if you can't post about it openly."

They say you should never meet your heroes. I guess that's true.

"With all due respect, I don't feel comfortable leaking the information either. Professional cuddling is still a little controversial among arctic fox shifters. It wouldn't be fair to Dimitri."

Don Reynolds laughs. He fucking laughs. I wish I could tell him he's being an asshole, but if I did my career would be over.

Sometimes I hate this industry. Not acting. I love that with every fiber of my being. But the people who decide who gets the opportunity to act are usually awful.

“Listen, if you can’t help me sell this movie, I can’t do anything for you. It doesn’t matter how talented or pretty you are, Grayson Bloom is a better bet. He’s rocking it on social media, even in rehab.”

What kind of rehab is letting Grayson post while he heals? Probably a rehab who caters to the rich and famous. They understand how damaging a month away from the internet could be for someone like Grayson.

“I’ll post about it,” Dimitri says.

“Am I on speaker?” Don asks, and no, he does not sound happy.

“Yeah. That’s on me, not Evan. I answered his phone for him,” Dimitri lies. “I’ll post about going into professional cuddling and tag Evan. My account hasn’t been active since I retired, but that shouldn’t be a problem. My fans are eager for an update.”

I shake my head. He’s offering to throw his reputation under the bus so a jerk like Don Reynolds will give me a job. I don’t want that.

Dimitri crouches next to me and presses a silent kiss to my forehead. God, if that doesn’t make my heart break. He’s letting his affection for me cloud his judgment.

“That’s perfect. Once you tag Evan, we’ll move forward with him as the lead. We can start filming in six days. Amber will send you the schedule. We’re planning to film the indoor scenes first to give the snow time to melt.”

There’s a click on the other end, and Don Reynolds is gone. No *goodbye* or *thank you for sacrificing the legacy of your hockey career for my film*. He has no idea what he’s asking of Dimitri, and he doesn’t care.

I stand up and toss my phone onto the counter. “I won’t let you do this.”

“It isn’t your decision to make.”

“Don is using you.”

Dimitri shrugs. “If it gets you the job, then who cares?”

“I care. You’re a fucking god in the arctic fox shifter community. Are you really going to throw that away?”

He stands and leans his hip against the counter. “If I don’t do this, Don will give the part to Grayson Bloom.”

“So what? I can get another part. You don’t have to do this for me.”

He shakes his head. “The part is perfect for you. My career is done, Evan. Yours has just begun. I won’t be the reason you were passed over for this role.”

He walks away from me, and I don’t stop him. What else could I say? He understands the stakes in this situation, and he’s made his decision. But what am I supposed to do? The idea of Dimitri Cross becoming a disgrace on my behalf makes me sick to my stomach. There has to be some kind of middle ground here.

How can Dimitri admit to being my cuddler without losing the respect of his fans?

DIMITRI

I haven't been on social media in nine months. I know my fans want me to be. My agent said they were begging for information about my recovery. I didn't post anything because I couldn't handle all the well-wishers who wouldn't understand that getting back on the ice was impossible for me. My doctor said I would have problems with the stability of my leg as it is. I couldn't even serve as a pallbearer at my grandfather's funeral. There was too much of a risk that my knee would give out under the weight of his coffin.

I could try posting about being Evan's cuddler and not read the comments. I was notoriously bad at that when I was posting regularly, so the chances of success aren't great, but maybe it will be easier now that I know many of the comments will be nasty.

I sit at the edge of the bed and open up TikTok for the first time since my ACL snapped. The app needs an update so I get it started.

Evan walks into the room wearing his sweatpants. "We need to talk."

I can't believe he doesn't understand the necessity of this. He's acting like talent and skill are the only things that matter in this world. I wish that were true, but I know in my heart that it isn't. The contracts I signed with the Dragons were heavily influenced by the backing I got from the arctic fox shifter community. Very few of them lived in Chicago, but the stadium was always packed with white-haired fans screaming

my name. The merch with my number on it sold like hotcakes, and my sponsors got plenty of sales from the advertising I did for them.

If you want to make a movie or play hockey, someone needs to pay the bills. Fans are the people who do that. You can't make it in this world without them.

"Talk," I say, waiting for TikTok to update.

"Every arctic fox shifter in the United States and Canada knows your name."

"Perfect. Soon they'll know your name too."

He sits next to me. "I don't even like hockey, and I loved watching the games you played. You were an inspiration, Dimitri—an arctic fox shifter who lived everyone else's dream. You mean something to people."

"Why can't I continue to mean something to them if I tell them I'm a professional cuddler?" I ask.

He takes in a deep breath. "Maybe you can."

Now he isn't making any sense. "Do you want me to do this or not? I thought you were against it."

"I am," he says. "I don't think it's okay for Don Reynolds to expect this of you, but if you are going to do it, I think you should do it in a way that will be meaningful."

"It *will* be meaningful. I'm doing it so you can get the role, remember?"

He hands me his phone. On his screen is the photo I took with Laura. It's the one from the guild's email. I remember that photo shoot. The guild was thrilled to have me take part. I think they expected me to refuse, even though they provided me with an incredible cuddler for nine years.

"The only reason you're my cuddler is because all the female cuddlers were taken. If you hadn't agreed to do it, I would be out of luck."

"You want to complain about that?" I ask. "Publicly?"

“No, of course not. But if you mentioned there was a shortage of cuddlers, and that you stepped up to do your part, people might be inspired by that in the same way they were inspired by your hockey career. There aren’t enough people willing to do this job, which means some arctic fox shifters have to give up on their dreams.”

I stare at the photo of Laura and me for a long time. I was lucky she was willing to come back every year. Sure, the money was good, but she also had to put her life on hold in a lot of ways. There aren’t many people who would be willing to do what she did for me.

“When Don Reynolds asked me to post about being your cuddler, I don’t think he was referring to a recruitment campaign for professional cuddlers,” I say.

Evan elbows me playfully. “That’s the best part. Technically, we’re doing what he told us to, but in the process we’re helping other arctic fox shifters.”

TikTok finally finishes updating. I have countless notifications and even more new followers. If I post a video of Evan and me, it will reach thousands, possibly millions of people. Those people will ask what I’m planning to do next, and I don’t have the answer to that question yet. I’m not afraid of arctic fox shifters judging me for being a professional cuddler, but I am afraid of facing the next chapter of my life.

“What do you want me to say?” I ask. “Maybe you could write something for me? I don’t know what I’m doing here.”

Evan looks over my shoulder. “You have six million followers. You definitely know what you’re doing.”

“They’re hockey fans. Most pro athletes have a lot of followers on social media.”

“So what if they’re hockey fans? They’re still interested in you. What’s your most popular video?”

I scroll to a video that ended up with a lot more views than the others. I’m not sure why TikTok’s algorithm liked it so much. The video is of me giving a little boy a high five with my full hockey uniform on. It’s less than ten seconds long.

“Aw, that’s cute,” Evan says. “We could do something that’s just as short.”

“How? Don’t you want to bring awareness to professional cuddling or something?”

“Yeah, but it wouldn’t take much to do that. We could get a fire going in the fireplace, then take a quick video of us cuddling in front of it. Everyone will wonder who I am, which will make them look at the comments. You could tag me and write something like, ‘he’s not my boyfriend, he’s my cuddlee.’ Then you could put something more in depth underneath like ‘I had a professional cuddler when I played for the Dragons. Paying it forward.’”

That wouldn’t be too bad. Just a short video and some text.

“Okay. Let’s do it.”

I wonder how Laura would feel about me posting a slideshow with photos of us. She’s not an arctic fox shifter, so I don’t think it would be as taboo for her. That might add some context. A video of Evan talking about his acting dreams might be good too. My mind spirals with ideas.

It’s kind of exciting. Not hockey game exciting or making out with Evan exciting, but still exciting. It feels good to be doing something exciting again.

EVAN

Dimitri is carrying firewood shirtless.

I could offer to help, but I don't. There are some things in this life that are meant to be savored. The view of him walking past me with a pile of wood resting on his shoulder is one of those things. Do I worry he'll get splinters? Yes. Am I fairly certain he's risking splinters to show off his body to me? Also yes. Will I allow him to flaunt his hairy chest and big arms anyway? Absolutely.

We started filming three hours ago, which is why we need more firewood. In the beginning, we were both wearing shirts. We filmed a cute fifteen-second video of us smiling in front of the fire in our pajamas. Dimitri fiddled around with the text for a few minutes, then posted it. I thought I was going to die from the suspense. If it had been up to me, we would have stared at his phone screen all day, waiting for the response. Instead, Dimitri started working on a slideshow of photos featuring him and Laura from when he was playing for the Dragons. He sent it to her first for permission, then posted it without even checking on the reactions of his first video.

Being the neurotic creature that I am, *I* checked the reactions. Both of the videos went viral almost immediately.

But Dimitri wasn't done. He wanted me to film him pouring hot water into two mugs with tea decanters. Shirtless, of course. He posted the video with the caption, "Professional cuddler at work."

While he went outside to get more firewood, I checked the reactions on that video too. It's already more popular than the first two. Most of the comments are something along the lines of, "If professional cuddlers look like that, I want one too" or "Come cuddle with me, Dimitri." There are a few inappropriate comments questioning if Dimitri is getting paid to do more than cuddle, but his fans swarm on these comments like a hive of angry bees.

"I was thinking we could do one more video," he says, unloading the firewood in the grate next to the fireplace.

"Another one? But you've already posted three in the same day."

He plops down next to me in front of the fire. "Sure, but after this one we can be done for a few days. Which means we would have time for other things." He leans in and gently brushes his lips against my cheek.

I didn't think it was possible for a man to turn me on with nothing but a kiss on my cheek, but clearly, I was wrong.

"Okay. What did you have in mind?" I ask.

He shrugs. "I thought I could say some stuff."

"Some stuff?" That's incredibly vague.

"Yeah. Let's film it, and you can tell me what you think."

That makes me a little nervous, but maybe he's trying to get my raw reaction to something. That wouldn't necessarily be bad, depending on what I'm reacting to.

"Okay. Do you want to do it here?"

"Yeah. We have a good set up," he says.

Neither of us brought a tripod, so we built a structure of pillows and random cooking utensils from the kitchen to hold his phone for our first video. He places his phone at the center of the structure and looks at me.

"Are you ready?"

"Aren't you going to put on a shirt?" I ask.

He shakes his head.

“Okay.” I don’t know how I feel about being part of another thirst trap, but I remind myself he’s doing this for me. I should try to be open-minded.

He reaches forward and presses Record.

“Hey, everybody. This is Evan.”

I wave at the camera.

“I’m his professional cuddler until the end of February.” Dimitri launches into an explanation of professional cuddling and arctic fox shifters’ needs during burrowing season. So far, so good. We haven’t covered any ground I feel uncomfortable with.

“But here’s the shitty thing. Cuddlers are supposed to be paired with cuddlees of the opposite gender. Unfortunately, there’s a shortage of cuddlers, so Evan got paired with me. It’s a raw deal for him because we’re both extremely attracted to each other, and we’re not supposed to act on that.”

I swallow uncomfortably. Dimitri wants to tell the world about our attraction to each other? I’m not sure that’s a good idea.

“Imagine meeting your ideal man or woman—someone who is your exact type in every way. Then imagine if you had to spend the next month cuddling with them for hours every day and sleeping next to them at night, but you weren’t allowed to kiss them. That would be torture, right?”

I place my hand on his forearm. “Dimitri, it’s okay. It was you or no one. The studio made the right call.”

“But what if I quit?” he asks.

My stomach sinks. “You want to quit?”

“What if I called the studio and said I didn’t want to be your cuddler anymore because I wanted to be your boyfriend instead?”

I freeze, unsure of how to react. My heart wants to go along with his suggestion, but my mind is worried about my

role in *Forest Hearts*. What would Don Reynolds and Amber Stent think about this?

“I was hoping you’d let me offer you a different kind of contract. This one wouldn’t involve the film studio, just you and me.” He takes his hand in mine and brings it to his bare chest. “I’d like to offer you my heart for a month.”

Being honest about my feelings for Dimitri would be the sweetest form of freedom. We could spend the next few weeks enjoying our relationship as a couple instead of fucking in secret and lying to the world about it. Besides, Don Reynolds wanted publicity, didn’t he? Being Dimitri Cross’s boyfriend would give me that. It’s definitely not why I want to be with him, but the exposure might placate our bosses.

Dimitri’s heart beats under my palm. *Thump-thump, thump-thump, thump-thump*. It’s steady, just like him. Safe. I think I’ll be okay if we take this leap together.

I lean forward and kiss Dimitri with my hand still on his heart. It races beneath my fingertips. The heady realization that I affect him as much as he affects me makes me bold. I grab his other hand and bring it to my own chest so he can feel the way my heart is hammering too.

“Yes,” I whisper against his lips.

It’s like flipping a switch. He devours my mouth with a greedy tongue, releasing my hand on his heart to grab the back of my head and deepen the kiss. He blindly reaches for his phone and shuts it off while planting kisses down my neck. “I need you.”

He pushes me onto my back with a force that thrills me and yanks my pajama bottoms down so hard they almost rip. I kind of want to hear the sound of the fabric tearing, but the rumble of his growl as he jerks them off my legs is even better.

My inner omega recognizes the predator in Dimitri. Grizzlies can take down prey two or three times their size, and they mercilessly destroy anyone who harms their young. A little fox like me wouldn’t stand a chance against Dimitri in his bear form.

The same part of me that's always loved big jocks is wildly aroused by that.

I arch my back when he pushes a finger inside me. I'm slick enough for him to get in, but this has all been so fast, I'm not completely lubricated yet. The stretch burns a little, and I want it to.

"Fuck, you're so tight." He keeps his finger still for an agonizingly long time. "I'm going to make you come over and over again." He finally circles his finger, and my body lights up with pleasure. Slick leaks onto the blanket underneath us. "God, yes." He withdraws his finger and pushes it in again. I take in a sharp breath.

"You like that, huh?" He moves his finger in and out in a circular motion, which hits my prostate with an intensity that I'm not prepared for. I cry out, gushing onto his hand. He ramps up the speed of his circles, and the squelching of my slick echoes through the room. "C'mon, baby. I want you to come for me." He encircles my cock in his hand. It's rock hard and weeping at the tip. He squeezes it as he jabs my prostate.

"Dimitri!" I scream. My ass clamps down on his finger, and I spurt cum all over my stomach. I'm still panting and blind from the pleasure when he adds a second finger. His hands are so big it feels like three. I force myself to relax and bare down so my body doesn't tighten up again.

With his other hand he lifts my left knee up. "Let's get you ready for me." He twists his fingers, and God, that's intense, not bad but very intense.

"Too much," I mutter.

He starts to withdraw his fingers. I grab his hand. "Don't stop. I'm sorry if I'm being confusing. It's too much, but I want it. I'll say red if I need you to stop."

This is another fantasy of mine, but I've never had the courage to try it. Most alphas see me as a cute, innocent arctic fox shifter. I don't know how they'd react if I asked for something kinky. But Dimitri said he liked taking control, and

he said he was willing to try anything once. He even let a guy pee on his head, and admitted that he liked it.

I still hold my breath as I wait for his response.

“We’re using a safe word, huh?” he says, his eyes glazing over with lust. “Fuck, baby. That’s hot.”

Relief rushes through me. I think I could ask for anything I wanted in bed, and Dimitri wouldn’t shame me for it. Everything about him is safe, and it sets me free in a way I’ve never experienced during sex before. I’m allowed to desire anything. I’m allowed to show my body’s genuine reactions to his touch. I’m allowed to be myself.

He twists his fingers again, but with more force.

I shake my head. “Oh, I can’t.”

“Yes, you can.” He pulls his fingers out almost completely and shoves them back in. I arch my hips, overwhelmed by the blend of pleasure and pain.

“You’re too big,” I whine.

He starts those damn circles again. They’re maddening with his second finger. I buck my hips, not at all self-conscious as my slick pools onto the blanket, making obscene noises as Dimitri finger-fucks me. My body climbs higher and higher. I’m just about to come again, but he slowly withdraws.

He pushes back inside with a third finger. It’s too much at my rim. I briefly consider safewording. The stretch causes a sting I’m not accustomed to, and he’s only ventured in with his fingertips. He starts stroking my cock again, which helps. I finally relax around his fingers, and he eases them deeper. Just a little at a time. So slowly, I’m more focused on my cock than how wide he’s opening me up.

“That’s right, baby. Look at you. Taking me so good.” He now has three fingers all the way inside me. He kisses my knee. “If you can handle three of my fingers, I think you can handle me.”

Can I? A part of me still isn’t sure, but I want to find out.

He pauses, staring at me intently. I think he needs some kind of verbal confirmation that I want to take things to the next level.

“Okay,” I say.

“I’ll go get a condom.” He starts to withdraw his fingers.

“Wait.” I slide my hand along his prickly cheek. “We only have one condom that will fit you anyway. Unless you only want to have sex with me once...”

He narrows his eyes. “You want to go bare with me?”

I nod. “We’re already...” I trail off as I realize I don’t know how to finish the sentence. We’re already risking far too much to be together? That isn’t a very good argument for taking yet another risk.

“I was tested six months ago. I’m negative,” he says. “I haven’t had sex in over a year.”

Dimitri, with all his wild sex stories, hasn’t slept with anyone since his life drastically changed nine months ago. I’ll be the first to sleep with him as a retired hockey player rather than the star of the NHL. That’s a big deal.

“It’s been three months since I was tested. I’ve had sex with one person since then. I wore a condom with him.”

Dimitri bites his lip. “Are you on birth control?”

“Yeah. The shot.”

“I’ve never gone bare with anyone,” he says.

“Then you don’t have to. We’ll figure something out.”

He gently pulls his fingers out of my body. I wait for him to stand up to get a condom, but he lowers his pants instead, baring himself to me. This time I’m prepared for the sight of him, and his size is arousing instead of scary.

Well, maybe it’s a little scary, but I think I like that.

He locks eyes with me and bunches up the blanket underneath us, using it to prop up my hips. My inner omega rises to the surface again as we stare into each other’s eyes.

Something about Dimitri speaks to the deepest recesses of my being.

I release a slow breath as he lines himself up. He rubs his tip against the wildly sensitive skin of my rim like he's holding a paintbrush—first, up and down, then around in a tantalizing circle.

He closes his eyes and presses another kiss to my knee. “Fucking hell. I’m nervous. I’ve fucked so many guys I’ve lost count, but I’m suddenly worried about messing up. Jesus.”

“Dimitri, look at me.”

He opens his eyes.

“It will be okay. Unless you don’t fuck me soon. Then it won’t be okay.”

He lets out a breathy laugh. Then he pushes inside, just slightly, enough for me to be very aware of his size. Maybe it won’t be okay.

He watches me closely as he inches in further. I try to relax and let my body accept him. His brow glistens with sweat, his whole body tense with control. I know he’s not trying to overwhelm me, but he’s simply too wide for me to handle. My body panics and tries to clamp down, which just makes the situation worse.

“I’m sorry—”

“Don’t pull out. Give me a second.”

“But it’s just the tip. If you can’t—”

“I can. I haven’t said red yet.” I take in a deep breath and let it out.

Dimitri slides in deeper, but it isn’t so bad now. I feel a sense of fullness instead of panic. Until he keeps going. His dick seems endless.

“Oh my God. How much more of it is there?”

He glances down at where our bodies are joined. “A few more inches.”

I remind myself that once I adjust, it will be easier to handle his girth.

“Okay. Keep going.” I close my eyes and bear down again. Dimitri slides in easier, and he’s clearly unprepared for that because he pushes the rest of the way in all at once.

My body tries to reject him with a painful spasm. That spasm transforms into a shock of pleasure for just a moment before switching to discomfort again. It feels like he’s impaled me all the way to my stomach, even though I know that’s not anatomically possible.

The warmth of his fingers close around my cock. I am unprepared for the sensation, and my ass squeezes him painfully.

“Dimitri, I can’t.”

“Okay—”

“I didn’t fucking say red.”

He moves. Jesus fucking Christ, he moves. One moment, it’s too much, and the next moment, the delicious friction from his huge cock makes me tremble.

“Fuck me,” I say.

“Evan, I—”

“Fuck me right now. I know my body. Just do it.”

He slides out and inches back in ever so slightly. Combined with his grip on my cock, it’s heaven.

“Dimitri,” I whimper.

He pulls out further and thrusts back in. I am impossibly full, uncomfortably so. I can feel every inch and curve of his cock inside me. He starts a slow and gentle rhythm that builds and builds until it isn’t slow or gentle at all. All the while, he stares into my eyes.

When I was a teenager, I imagined having sex with Dimitri Cross plenty of times. Just the idea of him was enough to make me wet. But I never imagined how connected to him I’d feel, how emotional it would be to take him inside me. The

intensity in his gaze is something that touches me to my very core.

I'd like to offer you my heart for a month.

When my orgasm crashes over me, I take Dimitri with me. We cry out together, careening over some invisible precipice. I dig my fingers into his shoulders because this is unlike any orgasm I've had before. My orgasms in the past were always just mine. This orgasm is half Dimitri's; it's wrapped around his body and his soul. He claims my mouth with his own as he snaps his hips a few final times, and I completely surrender to our bodies coming together, to his deep moan against my lips.

The warmth of his seed inside me is a surprise. I didn't think I'd be able to feel it. The sensation is frighteningly intimate, like the last barrier between our hearts is gone. My inner omega reaches out to Dimitri, and his inner alpha emerges to meet him. The two of them wind around each other in a way I know isn't normal. This isn't supposed to happen between two lovers who plan to go their separate ways after February is over.

Dimitri takes in a sharp breath. "But I can't. It isn't possible."

Then he knows. Maybe he's read the poetry out there by fox shifters describing what the tentative beginnings of a bond over burrowing season feel like. Some call it a winding of the souls. Others say it's a dance that ties the hearts of an alpha and an omega together. For the average fox shifter, that dance is a sign that the mate your parents chose for you is the right match, and you'll get to spend the rest of your life with them.

For Dimitri and me, it means something quite different.

DIMITRI

I hold Evan after it's over. The emotions warring for dominance in my heart are confusing. My inner alpha is preening. He doesn't seem to understand that we don't get to keep Evan. He thinks he's found his mate.

That doesn't make any sense. While it isn't uncommon for fox shifters to feel a connection like the one I just shared with Evan during burrowing season, I'm too old for that. I'm also only half fox shifter. Sure, we've been holed up alone in this cabin, and we even played that burrowing season game, but it still shouldn't be possible. The reason fox shifters let their parents select a mate for them is because the chance of a successful bond is much higher if both parties don't know anything about each other before they meet. Evan knew a lot about me. He even knew how much I could bench press. Also, it's only been a few days. From what I understand, it normally takes a week for a bond to begin to take hold.

"Can I call my moms?" Evan asks. His voice is soft and tentative. This must be shocking for him too.

We're lying naked on the ground together. It isn't the most comfortable position for a phone conversation. I gently slide out of him and rise to stand on shaky knees. After thrusting into Evan without much padding underneath, my right knee in particular is unsteady.

"C'mon, let's go to the bed."

Evan grabs both of our phones and walks into the bedroom in a daze. That bothers my inner alpha. He wants to feel close

to Evan. I follow him into the room and sit next to him on the edge of the bed.

“I won’t video call them. I just need to understand what’s happening,” he says.

“Okay.”

He unlocks his screen and navigates to his contacts, selecting his omega mother. Then he presses Call and switches the sound to speaker. She answers on the second ring.

“Hi, sweetie. It’s wonderful to hear from you. How is everything going?”

Evan bites his lip, his eyes glassy with tears. “I, um, think I messed something up.”

“What do you mean?”

“My cuddler, he’s, um... an alpha? And we just... We didn’t mean to, but things got out of control, and now... We’re alone in this cabin together, Mom. We’re alone, and we had sex, and my inner omega...” Tears slide down Evan’s cheeks.

Evan isn’t happy about our connection. I guess that makes sense. This will make it harder for him to form a bond with someone else, and it isn’t possible for him to form a bond with me. In order for a proper bond to take hold, we’d have to be alone for a month. That can’t happen with the filming schedule of *Forest Hearts*.

“I’m not sure I understand, sweetheart. Are you saying that your inner omega emerged when you had sex with your cuddler?” Evan’s mom asks.

“Yes. I think... I don’t know. It felt like... the beginning of a bond.”

“Oh dear. That must be hard.”

“I didn’t mean for this to happen,” Evan says, his voice breaking with emotion. “But he’s so wonderful, Mom. If he wasn’t so wonderful...” His shoulders shake with quiet sobs. This isn’t how things were supposed to go. I never wanted to hurt him.

I wrap my arms around him. “I’m sorry.”

“Is that him?” Evan’s mom asks.

“Uh, yeah. Mom, this is Dimitri. Dimitri, this is my omega mom, Clarice.”

The omittance of my last name makes me want to cry too. I’m not just a famous hockey player to him anymore. He wants his mom to know me only as Dimitri.

“It’s nice to meet you, Clarice,” I say, even though we aren’t really meeting.

“It’s nice to meet you too. I assume you’re a fox shifter of some sort?”

“Yes, ma’am. Well, half.”

She’s silent on the other end for a few moments. “It sounds to me like your bodies think you’re burrowing with a mate. That makes sense, right? If you’re both young—”

“He’s thirty-two,” Evan tells her.

“Oh. That’s unusual. Especially if Dimitri is only half fox shifter. The two of you must have a very special connection.”

Evan rests his head on my chest. “Filming starts in a week.”

He sounds as miserable as I feel. If it was possible to stay in this cabin until a bond could properly form between us, I would do it in a heartbeat. The idea of spending my life with Evan—of waking up next to him every day and having a family together—makes my chest ache with longing.

“Maybe you could explain your situation to the director,” Clarice suggests.

“It wouldn’t matter, Mom. We’re talking about millions of dollars here, not to mention everyone’s schedules. They have some big names working on this film. They won’t wait around while I burrow with Dimitri.”

I have millions of dollars. If it was just about the money, I’d pay it to be with Evan. But none of this was ever about money.

“I’m sorry, Evan. This must be heartbreaking for you.”

“What should I do? I can’t just walk away. I don’t know what Dimitri wants, but I’m not ready to give him up.”

What I want? That doesn’t matter right now. This month is about Evan’s dream, not me.

“Sweetie, I need you to really think about this before you make a decision. You’ve worked so hard to get where you’re at right now. There will be other alphas, but an opportunity like this might not come around again.”

“There aren’t any other alphas like him. He’s perfect, Mom.”

“He must be pretty special if you’ve started to form a bond with him already, but no one is perfect. One thing I’ve always loved about your alpha mother is that she brought me closer to the things I wanted in life, not the other way around. It’s difficult to have a happy bond if you have to give up a piece of who you are to be with your mate.”

That hits me hard. If I were to be selfish and beg Evan to stay inside this cabin with me for a full month, he would be sacrificing his dream to do it. Just like my alpha dad sacrificed his dream to be with my omega dad. I never wanted a bond like that. I’ve gone to great lengths to avoid it.

“We can’t stay in this cabin, Evan,” I say. “Even if you backed out of the film, they wouldn’t let us hole up here for the rest of the month. Your replacement would need to stay here.”

“It sounds like the two of you have a lot to talk about. I’m so sorry. The film studio should not have paired you together.”

“What are we supposed to do?” Evan asks. “We’re stuck here for another week before filming starts.”

“I think all you can do is make the best of it. You might not feel your inner alpha and omega emerge again while you’re together anyway. Lots of fox shifters experience the beginnings of a bond. It’s unlikely your bond will take hold properly. But even if it does, physically meeting another

person will make your connection snap. When filming starts, be prepared for that. It may be uncomfortable.”

She’s a kind woman. If the situation were different, she could have been my mother-in-law.

“Thank you, Mom.”

“I love you, sweetie.”

“Love you too. Talk soon.”

He ends the call. We sit there in silence for a long time with the weight of what could have been between us.

“I won’t post that TikTok video,” I finally say.

He nods absently.

“If it was possible, I’d want to bond to you, Evan.” I told him that before, but I don’t know if he really heard it.

He nods again, still despondent. I hate seeing him so disconnected and unhappy.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t realize this would happen.”

He finally meets my gaze. “It isn’t your fault. It’s just a lot to cope with.”

“We still have a week together, right?”

He gives me a small smile. “Right.”

If only one week were enough.

EVAN

It's the little things that make me fall harder for Dimitri every day. I love the way he kisses my cheek first thing every morning and how much he enjoys watching me act, even when it's only the two of us running through the script rather than a real performance. I like eavesdropping on the phone calls he makes to his nieces and nephews. He once put the call on speakerphone while he was cooking, and I heard a high-pitched voice chatting happily about her brand-new ice skates with rainbow laces.

“In just a few weeks I'll come to your house and you can show me,” he said to her.

That was a good reality check. In a few weeks, Dimitri won't be mine anymore.

We make love because we can't help it. Every good morning kiss on the cheek is followed by other kisses and the wonderful fullness of Dimitri's cock inside me. Every time we finish going through the manuscript, I climb onto his lap, and we make out lazily until we end up frothing on the couch. Every meal we cook involves groping each other in the kitchen. He likes to finger fuck me until I'm loose and wet before fucking me over the counter or against the wall. I can't get enough of him, even though I'm perpetually sore.

Each time we make love, his inner alpha winds around my inner omega. Each morning we wake up next to each other, I feel our connection solidify. Each kiss, laugh, and tender moment only clarify what should have been obvious from the

start: Dimitri is the perfect alpha for me. No one else will ever compare. I'm supposed to burrow with some guy my moms have selected for me next year, but what is the point? I already found the man I'm meant to be with.

Don Reynolds calls twice. Once to assure me that I still have the part. The second time he calls is the day before we have to go back on set.

"Hey, Evan. How are you?"

"I'm fine," I say. "How are you?"

"I'm finally in Washington. Looking forward to getting started tomorrow. We need you to be on set at eight in the morning. We already sent over the details. I'm just calling to clarify that we don't want Dimitri to film any TikTok videos on set."

"Of course. I understand."

"Great! I'll see you bright and early."

Dimitri is standing in the kitchen holding a steaming kettle with a hot pad. "What was that about?"

"He doesn't want you to film any TikTok videos on set," I say.

"I figured." Dimitri has done three more TikTok videos in the last week. Two were with me. We talked about how we ended up burrowing together and the shortage of cuddlers in one. In the other we lip synced to a Harry Styles song. He also made a video on his own discussing his recovery and the fact that he won't be returning to the NHL.

He was sad that day, so we spent the afternoon naked in bed. I worshiped his cock with my mouth, and I think I was able to make him feel better. At least there's that.

I'm wearing Dimitri's sweatshirt this morning. It drowns me in his scent, which I like a little too much. I like everything about Dimitri too much.

"What do you want to do today?" I ask.

“I don’t know. There’s a Dragons game tonight.” He pours the hot water into our mugs nonchalantly like we’re talking about the weather.

“You mean a hockey game?”

He sets the kettle back on the stove. “Uh, yeah. Unless you don’t want to watch it. I know you aren’t a huge fan of hockey.”

Dimitri wants to watch hockey with me? I didn’t know he was ready for that.

“I watch hockey with my moms every burrowing season,” I say. “I don’t mind.”

“I, uh, hear the new forward is pretty good. He’s a cheetah shifter, right?” Dimitri played forward. He’s talking about his replacement.

“Yeah, they call him Rocket. He’s really fast.”

“First cheetah shifter in the NHL,” Dimitri says. “That’s exciting.”

“The first arctic fox shifter was pretty exciting too.”

He looks away from me. “Yeah. Game starts at seven eastern time. I was thinking of watching some highlights to catch up on how the team is doing.”

“Okay. Can I watch them with you? I haven’t been keeping track of how they’re doing this year either.”

Dimitri slides a steaming mug across the counter. “We can also go over your script.”

“I’ve gone over the script a million times. Let’s watch some hockey.”

“Are you sure? It’s your last day to practice.”

“Yeah,” I say. It’s also our last day alone together. After today, my inner omega will never wind around his inner alpha again. I don’t want to spend the day reading a script where I have to pretend to fall in love with someone else.

Dimitri and I settle in on the couch. He pulls up a channel on YouTube that does hockey game summaries. The YouTuber is a middle-aged omega named Alex Harper with a white receding hairline. Dimitri scrolls down to the beginning of the season and selects the first pre-season game.

“Welcome back to Hockey Highlights. Today I’ll be going over the highlights of the Dragons’ first game since Dimitri Cross retired. I don’t know about you, but this game was a hard one for me to watch. We lost a legend.”

I grasp Dimitri’s hand in mine and squeeze it.

“But we have a lot of new and exciting players this season. The first is a rookie named Khalil Johnson, or ‘Rocket.’ The Dragons have a reputation for drafting different shifters, and this year is no different. Johnson is the first cheetah shifter. We also have Alice Hitchens, the NHL’s first rhino shifter. In fact, there are only three ice dragon shifters on the team this year. That number is unprecedented for any team in the NHL. It raises the question of whether ice dragon shifters will continue to dominate the sport in the future, or if they’ll only own the teams.”

Dimitri sits straight as a board as he listens to the commentary. After the first video is over, he goes on to the next and the next. With each one, he loosens up a little more, until he finally pulls me into his lap and holds me close. We spend the morning like that, watching an overview of the Dragons’ spectacular season. Despite my mothers’ reservations about Johnson’s size, Alex Harper’s analysis of each game is centered around him.

“You see Johnson sprinting across the ice again. No one can keep up with him. And he scores yet another goal. This is why I think Johnson has changed the game forever. Unless the other teams draft someone who can skate as fast as Johnson, they won’t be able to win against the Dragons. Gone are the days when big shifters like grizzlies can play forward. I think next year’s draft will include plenty of fast, lightweight shifters, particularly omegas. There aren’t any other cheetah shifters playing at the college level right now, but I predict that

we'll see a falcon shifter and a hare shifter in the NHL next year, possibly a kangaroo shifter too."

Dimitri nuzzles my ear. "Watching this is so much easier with you in my arms. Thank you, baby"

"Do you want to stop?" I ask.

"No. I want to finish."

By the time we get to January's games, Dimitri is kissing my cheek and running his hand down my back. My clothes are gone by the time we hit mid-January, and he's inside me once we've made it to last week's game. I'm straddling him, my back to the computer screen, but I can still hear Alex Harper as I ride Dimitri.

"I thought the Dragons would be lost without Dimitri Cross this year, but I think his absence inspired them to take risks that have really paid off."

I cover his ears with my palms, but he gently grasps my wrists and lowers my hands. "No, baby. Let me hear it while I'm inside you. You're like my little oxy pill. You take the pain away."

That makes me want to cry.

"Hopefully I'm not as addictive?" I say, trying to tease him, despite the lump in my throat.

He kisses the tip of my nose. "Oh, you are. I'll never get enough of you."

I love the way he grabs my hips like he owns them and thrusts into me. I love the tenderness in his kisses after we come, and how he wipes away my tears, even though I'm supposed to be comforting him. I love his musky scent, how his cum feels inside me, and his reticence to leave my body, even when he's soft and sated.

It's the little things that I'll miss about Dimitri Cross. But when you add them all together, those little things feel impossibly big.

I have no idea how I'll get by without him.

EVAN

Dimitri grips my hand hard as we walk down the steps of the cabin. The snow is mostly gone now. Slivers of white are tucked underneath bushes and along the roots of the trees, but otherwise the only hint of winter is the fog of our breath and the frost on the grass that crunches underneath our feet.

So much has changed in the last week. When I first arrived at our cabin, I was eager to get on set and prove myself. Now I'm sure I want to be on set at all. The connection I have with Dimitri has grown from something that scared me to something I can't imagine living without.

"Maybe we're making a mistake," I say. "What if we call Amber and ask her to move us to a different cabin? We could make the transition in the middle of the night to avoid running into anyone. I'm sure they could still get Grayson Bloom—"

Dimitri shakes his head. "No."

"If I explained what happened, and how badly I want you to be my mate, I'm sure Amber would understand. Maybe I wouldn't be able to get high paying jobs like this, but—"

"No," he repeats. He doesn't even try to explain why, he just keeps on walking.

I stop in the middle of the trail. He tries to pull me forward, but I resist.

"Evan, we have to go."

"Not until we talk about this."

He sighs. “Have you ever wondered why our souls connected so quickly? You and I are two sides of the same coin. You love acting as much as I loved hockey. That’s why I can’t allow you to sacrifice this opportunity.”

Tears burn in the corner of my eyes. “What if I want you as badly as I want to act?”

“You’ve known me for a week. You’ve been acting for your whole life.”

“Are you saying that you know what I want better than I do?” I ask.

“I’m saying that I’ve seen you rehearse the script of Forest Hearts dozens of times, and this part was made for you. If you give it up, it will haunt you forever. And if I let you, it will haunt me too.”

Tears slide down my face as we stand there, letting the silence stretch between us. I don’t want to give up Forest Hearts, but I don’t want to give him up either. It’s an impossible choice.

“I love you,” I say.

“I know. I love you too.”

Those words should make me feel better, but they only wrench at my heart.

“How can that not be enough?”

“I don’t know, baby. But it isn’t. Not this time.” He stands there, waiting for me to accept the reality of our situation. I want to convince him that I’d find a way to be happy, even if walking away from this film destroyed my acting career, but I finally understand that it doesn’t matter.

Dimitri a good man. That’s why he won’t let me give up my dreams to be with him. Even if I insisted on it, I think this lost opportunity would haunt him even more than it would haunt me. His guilt would be unbearable.

I have to let him go.

When he tries to pull me down the trail again, I let him. We walk for what feels like eternity, and I startle at every subtle sound. I'm bracing myself for the loss of our connection, for the end of this beautiful happiness that's grown between us.

Dimitri holds on to my hand tight, the circulation is leaving my fingers, creating the sensation of pins and needles. I wonder if my heart will ache for him the way my fingers ache for blood or if I'll feel nothing but an absence, an empty pit in a space that was once satisfied and full.

Amber Stent emerges from a copse of trees. I see her smile in slow motion, watch her wave her hand in our direction like the replay of a goal during a hockey game. Her voice calls across the space between us, and my inner omega recoils, terrified of what comes next.

Then I feel it: the snap of the tether connecting Dimitri's heart to mine. It happens all at once like the crack of a whip. One second our souls are bound together, and the next, they aren't. The change is sudden and sharp. I gasp for breath, suddenly desperate to fill my lungs.

Dimitri's grip on my hand stays firm. He pulls me forward, his gait steady, even though I know he's in pain too.

"Wave back at her, baby," he whispers. "Pretend that everything is okay. It's better if they don't know."

I do as he says. When Amber gets closer to us, I greet her with a fake smile on my face. I play the part of an actor on the set of his big break instead of an omega who's just lost an alpha who was so perfect for him, their bond formed despite all the reasons it shouldn't have.

Dimitri struggles to keep up the façade. He isn't an actor, he's an athlete. I notice the tears he wipes away discreetly as we follow Amber to the set. I wish I could wipe them away and give him a hug. It kills me to see him hurting like this.

We follow the trail to a rusty trailer surrounded by lights and people in coats. This is where Jason in *Forest Hearts* finds

the man he falls in love with. Amber chats about a costume delay as we approach the trailer.

The door opens, and Liam Genova steps out. I've seen him in too many movies to count. He was just as prominent as Dimitri in my fantasy life as a teenager. I imagined playing the cowboy he fell for in the westerns he starred in or the sleek omega who lured him into a life of crime in the mobster movie I had to get permission from my moms to see in the theater because it was rated R.

Liam nods in my direction and walks past me before I get the chance to say hello. Dimitri is right. Doing a make-out scene with Liam will make me famous. It's strange to think about. It's even stranger now that Liam is right in front of me.

This is really happening. I'm doing this. The enormity of what this film means for my career and life hits me all at once. It's not like the snap of losing my connection to Dimitri, but it's overwhelming all the same.

"I need you in wardrobe," Amber says. "The studio decided to keep your white hair, so they need to make adjustments."

"I won't be wearing a wig?" I ask. Normally I have to unless I'm playing a minor character. There aren't a lot of films about shifters with white hair unless they're set in Alaska.

"They decided to make Jason an arctic fox shifter because of your TikTok videos about your professional cuddler. Good work on those, by the way."

A woman holding a lightbulb approaches us, and they start talking about the lighting. She gestures toward a large cabin in the opposite direction of the trailer. According to the info they emailed me, that's where wardrobe is. I'm officially dismissed.

As we walk toward the cabin, the excitement of being on a new set for the first time helps numb the pain. I can see the awe in Dimitri's eyes too. He appreciates the magic of all this. Once again, I feel understood by him. Only this time it isn't

comforting. It's a reminder of how special he is, and what I've lost.

He holds my hand the whole time. Even when I have to change into several different outfits, he stands just outside the dressing room. Everything is a bit rushed and hectic because I'm a last-minute replacement for Grayson Bloom and the snow set us back a week, but as we go through wardrobe, makeup, and finally, a light check, my heart settles a bit.

I love this. Making movies is what I've always wanted to do ever since I was a little kid. It isn't just the acting—although I love that too—it's stepping into a physical world created to tell a story. Liam Genova has been transformed into a sad widower, this rusted trailer in the middle of the woods is now his home, and I'm a park ranger about to knock on his door.

I give Dimitri a long hug before the first take. At least I don't have to say goodbye to him yet.

Even with all the movie magic around us, I still wish Dimitri could have returned to the cabin with me.

If only his guilt could have melted as quickly as the snow, I think we could have been happy together.

DIMITRI

They need Evan on set until midnight. I hold him in my arms between takes, careful to keep his makeup intact. We have to be back on set at five in the morning, and the process starts all over again. Wardrobe, makeup, light check. Hours of waiting, repeating the same scene over and over again, then a short break for food. More waiting. More repeating the same scene. We keep going until eleven at night. Evan is so exhausted he can barely walk back to the cabin.

On the third day, it's the same. There is no space for conversations about our lost bond or what we're going to do after burrowing season is over. There is only work and waiting and holding Evan every chance I get. We get into a rhythm of survival that's familiar to me. It reminds me of how February used to be when I was playing hockey.

During burrowing season, arctic fox shifters want warmth, safety, and a physical connection to the people they love. Hockey is the opposite of that. The ice radiates cold, the game is violent, and the only time I got to touch someone was when I was pushing them out of the way. Every fist fight I got into during a game was in February. Every time I mouthed off to my coach was in February. I was a different player that month. I had to fight against an innate part of myself to keep going.

Now I don't have to fight anymore, all I have to do is be there for Evan. But I see the fight in him. The entire crew is tired, but they aren't arctic fox shifters working in the cold during burrowing season. His exhaustion is on another level.

Evan is the lead too. The pressure is enormous. But he doesn't complain, and he gives each take everything he has.

On the fourth day, I have a hard time waking him up. I resort to shouting in his ear because nothing else works. On the fifth day of working nineteen hours, Evan falls asleep while walking back to the cabin. He literally starts falling over on the trail midstep.

I sweep him into my arms and keep walking.

"Let me down," he says while simultaneously curling his body into me. "I can walk."

"You're tired. Save your strength for tomorrow."

"Down, Mitri. I go down." He's so exhausted, he can't even say my full name or a complete sentence.

"I'll let you down once we're in the cabin."

He doesn't respond to that. Instead, he becomes lax in my arms. The poor guy is asleep. He can't carry on like this. This filming schedule is insane.

I carry him back to the cabin and help him get his clothes off. He cooperates with his eyes closed. I don't think he's awake, but his body keeps going because he's worked past the point of exhaustion so often this week. I cover him with blankets and kiss the top of his head.

"Mitri hugs," he mutters to me absently as I crouch down next to the bed to find his phone somewhere in the pile of his clothes.

"In just a bit," I say.

"I have no hugs. Please hugs, Mitri."

I can't help but smile. That's my little spider monkey, begging for cuddles. I plug his phone into the charger on the nightstand. "Do you want me naked or should I put on some pajamas?"

"Mmmm. Naked hugs."

I take off my clothes and turn off the light. Climbing into bed with Evan feels right in such a bone-deep way. I know we

lost our bond a few days ago, but sometimes I have to remind myself of that fact. My feelings for him haven't lessened at all. If anything, I feel more protective and possessive of him. I'm not sure what to do about that.

I pull him into my arms. "Is this better?"

"Mmmhmm. Now sex."

I laugh. "You can't even stay awake. I can't fuck you if you're not awake."

His eyes flutter, but he can't keep them open. "Three days," he murmurs.

That's how long it's been since we've had sex. It was just a quickie right before bed, but even that would be too much for him right now. It's hard, because we only have two weeks left together, and I want to make love to him too, but not like this.

"Sleep sex," he says incoherently. "Somnasex? Somna... something."

"Somnophilia?"

He nods slowly.

"That's when someone gets off on having sex with a person who is asleep and can't respond. I'm the opposite of that. I get off on knowing I'm making you feel good."

"Mmmhmm. Feel good." He twists in bed and wriggles his ass against me. Despite the fact that he can't walk because he's so tired, I can feel the wetness of his slick against my thigh. I almost laugh because it's so typically Evan. I almost cry too. His constant need for physical affection and sex is something I've grown used to satisfying. What will I do when he stops asking for my touch?

I run my finger along Evan's spine—all the way down his elegant back—until I reach his crease. "I'll make you a deal."

He pushes back into my touch, always eager, always wanting.

"I'll make love to you right now if you let me pretend I get to have you forever. Just for a few minutes. Just until we

come.”

His eyes remain closed. “Few minutes. You come. Inside.”

He doesn’t understand what I just said. He’s too tired to know what I asked for, and that’s good. I shouldn’t have said it out loud.

I slip my fingers into his crease and find the place where he’s wet for me. His mouth opens, and he leans his head back. If I was truly into somnophilia, Evan would be the last person in the world I’d want to have sex with.

Slowly, I slide one finger inside. He’s hot and already a little loose with arousal. He lets out a loud breath.

“You’re already ready for me. I love that about you.”

He rocks his hips. “Ready. Love you too. Forever.”

I know he isn’t coherent right now, but hearing him say that still makes my heart race. I push another finger inside him, trying to memorize what his body feels like, inhaling deep so I can imprint his scent on my memory. The longer I spend with Evan, the more I realize I can’t imagine spending my life with anyone else.

I withdraw my fingers and line up my cock. I’ve done it so many times with him it’s easy. My body knows Evan’s body. I know how slowly I need to go as I thrust inside, how he’ll reach for me when I’m balls-deep, how he’ll relax when I start moving. It reminds me of playing hockey with the same teammates for years. I understood innately how they would move on the ice, and there was a magic to that I never took for granted. We won two Stanley Cups with that magic.

I roll us over until Evan is beneath me. He moans in appreciation.

Instead of fucking him hard into the mattress the way he likes, my strokes are slow and deep. He whimpers every time I bottom out. I can get really deep inside him from this angle, and he doesn’t have his knees spread, so I’m sure I feel really big right now. If he was anyone else, I’d be worried he couldn’t take it, but Evan can handle me.

“Knot me,” he whispers.

I stop, unsure if I heard him right.

“I think I’m too big to knot you, baby.”

“Don’t care.”

I drive into him harder and he grasps for the sheets. “Dimitri! Oh my God. Oh, you’re so deep inside me. You’ve never been this deep.” He gushes slick. It pools where our bodies meet. I rock back and slam into him again.

His back tenses, his shoulder blades drawing together. “Don’t stop.”

“Do you want me to separate your knees?”

“No. Just fuck me. Fuck me so hard I can’t see.”

He sounds more awake than he has since we started walking back to the cabin. I wrap my fingers around each of his biceps for leverage, and then ram my cock inside him. He whines, from the pleasure or the pain I’m not sure. I do it again and again until I’m gasping for breath, until our bodies are sliding from the slick and sweat, until he clamps down on my cock, and I can’t move.

But his orgasm only lasts for a moment, so I keep going.

“Knot me. Please knot me. I need it. I’m awake. Please knot me. I’m awake,” he pleads.

I know how roughly I need to fuck him to pop a knot, so I push his knees out, and I lose control, jacking into him with rapid, brutal strokes. He sobs, and again, I would stop if he was anyone else. No one should be able to handle the weight and power of my body at this angle. I’m definitely hurting him. But he wants me to, and I’m not going to stop.

When my knot starts expanding, Evan screams my name. I shove it deep inside him, lifting his hips off the mattress until he’s suspended in the air in my hands.

“Oh, I can’t! Oh my God!” he cries as my knot stretches inside him. He lets out a guttural moan, and his ass squeezes my knot. “You’re too big, you’re too big!” He cries out again,

and his cum spurts all over the bed, his ass squelching as it pulses on my knot.

I come so hard I have to release him back on the bed. I shake uncontrollably as pleasure rushes through every inch of my body. Evan's ass keeps milking me, keeps me blind with sensation. He's scrabbling at the bed covers now, desperate and feral. He screams at the top of his lungs, then he starts rocking his hips.

That's when I lose all control. I dig my fingers into his hips and grind my knot deeper into his body. Deeper and deeper. He's moving with me, our bodies in tandem. Faster and faster. Then his whole body seizes up and his ass clamps down on me with an intensity that almost hurts. Somehow, I come again.

Now I'm the one sobbing. The pleasure is too much. He's milking my dick again, and I can't take it. He reaches back and claws at my chest, and that's what does it. I hurtle into an orgasm, and everything goes black.

EVAN

I'm floating, stretched open wide by Dimitri's knot and trapped beneath his weight. My body lets go of all the stress and anxiety building from the last few days. I no longer care if I'm good enough or if my skin hunger will make the hours on set impossible for me. The self-doubt and pressure are completely gone.

At some point, I'm aware Dimitri has woken up. He's apologizing. Later, his knot is gone, and I feel empty inside, but I'm nestled in Dimitri's arms. When I finally wake, the sun is shining through the windows, and Dimitri is no longer sleeping next to me.

I sit up and search for my phone. We were supposed to be back on set at five in the morning. Did I sleep through my alarm? Where is Dimitri?

My phone is on the nightstand as usual. When I press the home button, I see a text from Amber.

Filming postponed until ten. Get some sleep.

Thank God. The clock says it's nine, which means I got a full night's rest. I feel it too. Last night, I was dragging on set. Maybe that's why Amber let us sleep in. I hope she isn't disappointed with me.

I climb out of bed and walk into the bathroom. I'm naked, and my face is still dirty from yesterday's makeup. Last night I didn't bother with my skin care routine. I don't remember getting to the cabin, but I remember what came after. Dimitri

knotted me. I can't believe my ass took his knot and feels somewhat fine this morning.

I shower and do my morning skincare routine. By the time I get out and put some clothes on, it's almost nine-thirty, and Dimitri is still nowhere to be seen. I venture out into the living room and find him sitting at the dining room table in front of a laptop.

He smiles at me. "Good morning." There are dark circles under his eyes. He doesn't look rested at all. If anything, he seems more exhausted than he did last night.

"Did you get any sleep?" I ask.

"Uh, yeah. A little bit. I want to talk to you about something."

That sounds ominous. "About what?"

"I love you, Evan. I don't want this to be over when burrowing season ends."

I'm not surprised to hear him say that. I feel the same way. But we already destroyed our bond. What does he want to do? Live our lives together without one? Shifters rarely stay happy in relationships that aren't solidified with a bond.

Maybe he's suggesting that we have a temporary relationship after burrowing season ends. I suppose I could put off burrowing with my future mate for another year. That would be worth it if I could have more time with him.

I approach the table slowly and sit across from him. "I love you too."

"There's a way we could still bond," he says. "My parents did."

I wondered about that, but Dimitri never brought it up, so I didn't ask. I figured there was a reason why they could bond and we couldn't.

"Did they bond the grizzly shifter way?" I ask.

"No. Grizzlies bond by performing a hand fastening ritual before their friends and family, then living together for a year."

“That sounds a lot like fox shifter burrowing.”

Dimitri shakes his head. “It’s completely different. Grizzlies choose their own mates, and the hand fastening ritual is a big deal. There’s a huge party with lots of food and dancing. Hand fastening parties happen during the summer, so I went to a lot of them growing up. They’re loud and crowded and not at all like burrowing. That’s the problem. My dads never could have formed a bond naturally. My alpha dad needed a big, loud party to bond to a mate, and my omega dad needed an arranged bonding in a quiet cabin. It was impossible from the beginning. That’s why they used a spell. My grandmother is a warlock.”

Now I understand the circles under his eyes. Magic is dangerous and usually requires a horrible sacrifice. It’s also very expensive.

“What kind of spell?” I ask.

“A magical tie.”

“Okay. Would we have to make a sacrifice for a magical tie?”

“Uh, yeah. We would.”

“What kind of sacrifice?”

“My alpha dad sacrificed his ability to play hockey.”

My stomach clenches. I had no idea Dimitri’s father ever played hockey. I only knew he coached.

“Was he as good as you?” I ask.

Dimitri swallows hard. “Uh, yeah. Maybe better.”

And he had to give that up? That’s heartbreaking.

“But there are other options,” Dimitri says. “Some people sacrifice things like a hand or a foot. A foot wouldn’t be that bad. I could wear a prosthetic.”

The idea of Dimitri cutting off his foot to be with me makes me want to throw up. He can’t be serious.

“Maybe we could try something that feels a little less like torture from the Middle Ages?” I suggest.

He looks away from me, clearly hurt. I guess that makes sense. He offered to cut off his foot for me, and I acted like it wasn't a big deal.

I get up and carry my chair around the table, setting it down next to him. “Is there any chance I could get some cuddles before we leave?”

He reluctantly holds out his arms. “Yes. Get over here.”

When I try to sit on the chair, he pulls me onto his lap instead.

“Thank you for offering to give up your foot,” I say. “I'm just not comfortable with that. It's like you being uncomfortable with me giving up my career. It's too much.”

He turns his laptop in my direction. He has a website pulled up called *Understanding Blood Magic*. The page he's on is titled *Ideas for Personal Sacrifices*.

“Is there anything here you'd be comfortable with me sacrificing?” he asks.

“Why are you the one doing the sacrificing? I want to be with you too.”

He kisses the tip of my nose. “This is my idea, so it has to be me.”

It would have been my idea earlier if I thought he'd go for it, but I don't argue with him yet. Instead, I scan through the list of possible sacrifices. Quickly, I understand why Dimitri's alpha dad gave up hockey. The other options are heartbreaking or macabre—major organs (they specify a kidney isn't enough), vocal chords, a shifter's ability to take their animal form, thirty IQ points, a great passion.

Then I find something I think I could live without.

“What about sacrificing our fertility?”

He shakes his head. “I've always wanted to be a dad. Now that my hockey career is over, I could stay at home with our

kids. I think that's what I want to do next, not pursue another profession."

That warms my heart. I love the idea of Dimitri being a stay-at-home-dad. He's so nurturing and affectionate. I think he'd be an amazing father.

"Sure, but we could adopt. There are lots of kids who need homes."

Dimitri sighs. "Yeah, you're right. I just... want to make a baby with you. I want to go to the doctor's appointments and the ultrasound. I want to see you pregnant with our kits. And then there's the nesting."

Alpha fox shifters nest with their omegas. That usually translates to being overly protective and buying expensive gifts for their mates. My alpha mom bought my omega mom a luxury car just before they had me. She also bought her an embroidery sewing machine, a huge closet organizer for her craft room, and a pair of diamond earrings from Tiffany's. My omega mom still wears them every time they go out on a date. Omega fox shifters treasure the gifts they received from their alpha during pregnancy for the rest of their lives.

If we adopted, I wouldn't ever know what Dimitri would buy for me just before the birth. That's a little sad, but it's way better than amputating one of his feet.

"How about this?" I say. "I want to be with you. After I get done filming *Forest Hearts*, we can talk about how we're going to do that. The idea of you sacrificing a foot is too much for me right now, but we can discuss it later when I'm less stressed about work. Put a pin in it, so to speak."

He gives me a fierce hug that forces all the air out of my body. "Okay. As long as I get to keep you, I'm good."

Damn if that doesn't melt my heart. With the discussion about potential amputation and loss of major organs, I didn't let myself process the reality that I'll get to keep Dimitri. I don't have to worry about my mate never living up to Dimitri's greatness or forcing myself to fall in love with a lesser man. I'll never need to say goodbye.

I close my eyes and revel in the strength and warmth of his arms.

DIMITRI

February goes on for what feels like forever. Evan works around the clock, which means I work around the clock too. When March finally comes, I go with him to the set at first, but it becomes clear pretty quickly that our need to cuddle with each other isn't as strong as it used to be. A part of me is sad about that. I enjoyed his neediness. But the passion and connection that remains between us is comforting. This isn't some fling brought about by the intensity of burrowing season. I still love him just as much.

On the fourth day, Evan gets up with his alarm at four thirty like usual. I stay in bed, rather than rushing around to put on my clothes. When Evan returns from the shower in nothing but a towel, I'm still under the covers, looking at my phone.

"You're not coming?" he says.

I shake my head. Burrowing season isn't a cut and dry thing. It normally starts on the first of February every year, but when it ends depends on the arctic fox shifter. Some of us need a few extra days of cuddling. Others stop experiencing skin hunger before the end of the month. I think Evan's need for a professional cuddler is over.

"I want to visit my grandmas today. They live in Tacoma. It's a one-hour drive from here."

Evan eyes me skeptically. "Your warlock grandma?"

"Yeah. I think it would be a good idea to talk about our options with her."

He thinks about that for a long time. If we weren't so happy together, I'd worry he was having second thoughts about bonding, but Evan wears his heart on his sleeve. I know he loves me.

"Don't make any sacrifices without me there," he says.

"I promise I won't. This trip is for information only. And because I haven't seen them in a year. I owe them a visit."

The health insurance I had through the Dragons was only valid in Illinois, and I own a house there, so I stayed in Chicago for my recovery. I could have moved back to Washington and paid the medical bills out of pocket. I have enough money. But I wasn't ready to give up my life in Chicago yet. My friends are there. Not only my buddies from the team, but my neighbors and the small arctic fox shifter community I found there. It was my home for nine years.

In retrospect, it probably would have been better to spend my recovery with my family. I miss them. A year is too long to go without seeing my grandmas.

"Will you at least consider fertility as the sacrifice?" he asks. "I know it wouldn't be exactly the same to adopt, but I don't need to be genetically related to our kids to love them. Also, my moms were saying that when they looked into fostering, there was a huge need for Indigenous families who can adopt. The foster system doesn't like to place them in families outside of their tribes, which makes sense."

"Okay, I'll consider it," I say, even though I don't want to foster. Evan's career is taking off, and most of my TikTok videos about professional cuddling are going viral these days. Our life is far too public for children in the foster care system. Their pictures would end up all over the internet. But I promised Evan we wouldn't discuss this until the filming for *Forest Hearts* is over, and I intend to keep that promise.

"I need to go. Have fun in Tacoma. I'll miss you." He bends down and gives me a quick kiss. I sweep my arms around him and pull him onto the bed with me, melding our mouths together. He softens against me and lets out a little moan. I know he doesn't have time for a full-on quickie, but it

doesn't take much to make him come. I yank his towel away and wrap my hand around his hardening cock.

“Oh, Dimitri, I can't.” His breath catches as I stroke him.

“I'll make it fast,” I promise.

“Okay. Oh, yes. God, you're so—”

I lower my mouth to his scent gland and suck hard at his sensitive skin.

“Dimitri!”

He's completely hard now and gasping for breath. I reach around his body with my other hand and graze my fingers along his crease.

“If I run to the set, we have time,” he says.

I chuckle. According to my spider monkey, we always have time.

He pulls down the covers and finds my cock. I just woke up, so it's a little stiff. He takes it in his delicate hands and squeezes it. “Fuck, you feel so good. I need you inside me.”

He swats my hands away and crawls on top of me, his knees resting on either side of my chest.

“Baby, you need prep. You can't just—”

He bends forward and grabs my shaft, lining it up with his entrance.

“Evan, slow down—”

He eases his body back, forcing the tip of my cock inside his wet heat. He's so fucking tight. He throws his head back and moans. Slick spurts from his hole, and the scent of it is intoxicating.

I will never get used to how sexy this man is. I'm completely under his spell.

He lifts his hips, careful to keep the tip of my cock inside, and then he lowers himself onto me slowly. He's squeezing me so tight I worry I'm hurting him. He stops when I'm halfway inside him. “I don't know if I can...”

“Take your time,” I say. Even though we don’t have time.

He sinks the rest of the way down. He closes his eyes and opens his mouth in what looks like agony or pleasure. I can’t tell which one.

“Are you okay?” I ask.

He nods rapidly. His ass is like a vise around my cock. He clearly isn’t ready. But God, does it feel amazing.

“Don’t move,” he says. “Please don’t move.”

“I won’t.”

His erection is flagging. I tentatively run my fingers along his shaft, waiting for a reaction. He doesn’t tell me to stop, so I close my hand around his length. His ass spasms around me.

“Ugh. That’s...” he trails off, and his ass spasms again. A small amount of cum spurts from the tip of his cock.

He’s coming. He barely had an erection a second ago, and he’s already coming. That’s so fucking hot.

More slick leaks from where our bodies are joined. He shifts his hips forward. The tiny amount of friction is enough to make a flash of wild pleasure shoot through me. He shifts back, and I have to stop myself from flipping him over and fucking him senseless.

He plants his hands on my chest and looks me straight in the eye. “I want you to use me like a Fleshlight. Do you think that’s possible? I want you to move my body up and down on your dick like I’m a toy.”

My man has the dirtiest mind. Sex is supposed to be more exciting with a stranger, but no stranger I’ve slept with has ever compared to Evan.

I grab his ass, squeezing the globes of it in my fingers, and lift him up until only the head of my cock is inside him. I run my finger along his entrance where our bodies are joined. His rim is tight and still oozing slick. He tries lowering himself back onto me, but I dig my fingers into his flesh, stopping the movement.

“Toys stay still and let themselves be used,” I say.

I love the way his eyes glaze over with lust in response to that.

Normally, I like to thrust up in this position. It gives me good leverage to fuck him rapidly. But I bring his ass down on my cock instead, like I would with a Fleshlight. His groan is deep and guttural like it usually is when something hurts in a good way. He’s still very tight. I climb backward on the bed until I can rest my shoulders against the headboard. The angle makes it easier to use my upper body strength to lift him again, quicker this time, and let gravity bring him back down onto my cock.

“Is that too much?”

He shakes his head. “I want to beg you to stop. Don’t listen to me unless I say red.”

That’s my Evan right there. Only a sub for a few minutes, and even then, he calls all the shots. But I know what bringing in a safe word means. Evan needs it hard and fast, and he wants to feel overwhelmed.

I grip his hips and do exactly what he wants—use him as a Fleshlight. Lifting him up and slamming him back down. He relaxes, letting his body bob up and down like a rag doll, and crying out for me to stop every time I slide home.

“You’re too big. Stop, Dimitri. Oh my God.”

“You can take it. You’re nothing but a toy.” I start using my hips for leverage to slam harder into him. He wails, his cries becoming unintelligible, and then he goes rigid, throwing back his head as he spurts all over my stomach without needing me to touch his cock. His ass grips me hard, and I lose control, fucking into him as my orgasm rushes through me.

I don’t want to come with anyone but him ever again. He’s the man I’m meant to be inside.

Hopefully, I’ll be able to think of a sacrifice Evan can live with.

DIMITRI

When I was a kid, I didn't know my grandmas lived on an Indian reservation. I knew other Puyallup grizzly shifters lived there and Puyallup humans too, but they were the minority. My omega dad's parents called the area Tacoma instead of the Puyallup Indian Reservation. It seemed like a regular city, complete with highways and big shopping centers rather than the poor reservations some of the NHL players talked about growing up on. Even my alpha dad didn't call it a reservation. He said we were "staying with our grandmothers" or "going home."

It wasn't until I got older that I found out the Puyallup Indian Reservation didn't feel like a reservation because it wasn't allowed to be. Much of the land, which was promised to the Puyallup tribe after they were ousted from their real home, was stolen by the US government in a badly explained treaty. The end result was a reservation where most of the population was white.

I look white too. When I visit my grandmothers, that's what people assume unless they recognize me as Dimitri Cross.

My grandmothers live on a five-acre plot of land a few blocks south of where the casino used to be along the I-5. I spent my summers picking raspberries from the bushes that grow along their wooden fence and swinging on a tire hanging from one of their apple trees. My omega grandmother had a large garden, so there were always snap peas to steal and weeding to do. We played with the other Puyallup children

who wandered over during the day, but the white kids gave this house a wide berth.

Rumor has it that my alpha grandmother is a witch. People tell stupid stories about her power coming from the earth or the trees, even though she learned how to cast spells from a Warlock in New York. The other two practicing warlocks in Washington are white ice dragon shifters. I bet no one ever calls them a witch.

I park the rental car on the same dirt driveway I used to play field hockey on as a kid. We used an old tennis ball and a collection of battered-up hockey sticks my grandmas kept in the shed.

Returning to this patch of earth always brings back memories. We spent hours every day chasing after that muddy tennis ball. My oldest brother always won when we were kids, and he lorded it over my younger brother and I with a glee that used to make me so mad. It was hard for me to understand why he stopped playing when he presented as an omega. One day, we were knocking around the old tennis ball from sunup to sundown, and the next, he was reading a book in one of the apple trees. There was a deep sadness in him that didn't lift until years later when he started winning writing contests at school.

It was the same for my younger brother. I asked him why he refused to play with me anymore, and he said that he didn't see the point. Size was everything on the ice. Now that he was an omega, he would never be big enough to compete at the pro level.

As I open the car door and step onto the mud where my brothers' hockey dreams died, I finally understand the depth of that loss. I didn't get it before because I'd never experienced it myself. I wish I had been more compassionate to them in our youth.

The two-story house my grandmothers live in has a brick path that leads to the front steps. I wipe my feet on the grate by the stairs, then take them two at a time. It's a habit from childhood. Once I reach the top, I pause in front of the door. I

didn't call my grandma to tell her I was coming because I wasn't sure how she would react. She once told me she regretted performing the spell that bonded my parents. What will I do if she refuses to do the same spell for me?

I knock on the door and wait.

Feet shuffle on the other side. A soft voice says, "It's Dimitri." The door swings open, revealing my omega grandmother standing in the entryway. Her salt-and-pepper hair is much like my own these days and tied in a ponytail. A big, woolen sweater swallows the upper half of her body. It makes her look bigger than she really is. The size difference between alphas and omegas is larger with grizzly shifters than any other shifter species.

"Good morning. We didn't know you were coming," she says, holding out her arms to me.

I hug her carefully. She smells of honey and hand cream.

"You've come home," another voice says.

My alpha grandmother is still a domineering woman, even at eighty years old. She leans on a cane, and her back is hunched, but she still has the wide Cross shoulders and a piercing gaze. I've never been afraid of her, though. She was the one who taught me to read in the shade of the apple trees and the person I asked about sex when Suzi Adams claimed she did it in the fifth grade. She took the time to listen to me, even when I was telling her things that would only matter to a child. Knowing that a powerful woman like her thought I was worth listening to gave me a lot of confidence.

"Hi, Grandma."

She holds out her arms for a hug too. I brace myself for the crushing embraces she's known for, and I'm not disappointed. She squeezes me hard.

"I hear you're done with hockey," she says.

"I hear you're thinking of retiring," I shoot back.

She waves my comment away. "Nonsense. Just stepping back from bond removals."

Most warlocks specialize in a specific kind of magic. It makes their spells more reliable. Bond magic is my grandmother's focus.

During the summers we stayed with her, desperate people would come to her door begging to be freed from the bond tying them to their mate. Bonds between shifters are permanent, and that isn't always a good thing. She would perform a spell to release them from their bond in exchange for money.

Warlocks are rare, and kind warlocks like my grandmother who haven't gone insane from the power are rarer still. My grandmother could charge whatever she wanted, and people would pay it. But there were omegas who showed up with babies on their hips and bruises on their faces. Their clothes were threadbare, and they often had nothing but a diaper bag to call their own. I don't think those omegas paid my grandmother. She helped them anyway.

"What will you do, then?" I ask.

She raises one eyebrow. "What will you do? I'm eighty years old. No one gets to ask me what I do with my time anymore. You're still young. When are you going to give me great-grandchildren?"

There it is. My brothers returned to the reservation to find their mates among the grizzly shifters. She expects me to do the same.

"I, uh, found someone. So maybe soon."

She gives me a hard glare. "Not that pretty arctic fox shifter you've been making those videos with."

Then she knows. I never posted the video where I confessed my attraction to Evan, but my fans have been making snarky comments about our chemistry. It makes sense that Grandma saw the energy between us too. She knows me well.

"We got snowed in together for a week during burrowing season. A bond started to form between us," I say.

She leans heavily onto her cane and purses her lips. “You fucked like rabbits, didn’t you?”

“Um... We, uh...” What do I say to that?

My omega grandmother smiles. “Well, isn’t that nice. We’re so glad you’ve found someone. I made some bread this morning. Why don’t I cut a few slices, and we’ll have it with a bit of our honey.”

My grandmothers keep bees next to the garden. They’ve never had any other pets or livestock, just those damn bees. I know it’s not fashionable to hate bees anymore because they’re dying, and they’ll take the planet with them, but I can’t stand the things. They’re mean little fuckers.

I follow my grandmothers into the kitchen they haven’t renovated since they built this place in the seventies. The appliances are newer, but the dark cabinets with golden pulls are the same.

My alpha grandmother gets the plates and butter knives while my omega grandmother cuts the bread. I find a jar of honey in the cupboard next to the sink. They keep their honey in a high traffic part of their kitchen like all grizzly shifters. Bears love honey.

I always thought I’d have a jar of honey stored in the cupboard next to the sink when I had kids. It’s such a little thing. If I asked Evan and told him why it mattered to me, he’d probably agree to it without question, but it makes me realize how many of my expectations about my life were predicated on having a grizzly shifter mate. It’s still an adjustment to realize how different my life will be now that I’ve chosen Evan.

“I think he’s lovely,” my omega grandmother says. It takes me a second to realize she’s talking about Evan. “Very poised and well-spoken.”

My alpha grandma eyes her warily, but my omega grandma holds her gaze without apology. The two of them have been bonded for sixty years. They can disagree without saying a word.

I want that someday. I've always wanted a bond like my grandmas.

"He is physically attractive," my alpha grandma admits. "I'll give you that."

My omega grandma glares at her.

"But if he went off to film his movie, their bond has been broken."

My omega grandma holds up her hand. "Not a full bond. A week wouldn't have solidified it. You can still fix it with the right spell."

"Yes. I'm well aware of how bonds work, Kiya."

"Then you know a thirty-two-year-old who's only half fox shifter wouldn't be able to form a partial bond through burrowing unless their connection was fated."

My alpha grandma scoffs. "Fox shifters don't have fated mates."

"Grizzlies do sometimes."

The two of them stare each other down for what feels like eternity. They *are* fated mates. I've heard the story a million times. After they both presented at thirteen they knew, but their parents wouldn't let them be together until they turned eighteen. For five years, they could only send each other letters and meet in secret.

They still have those letters. I've seen them. There are parts I had to bleach from my brain, but wow. What an epic love story.

"These kinds of bonds have a price," my alpha grandma finally says.

My omega grandma flashes her a coy smile. I have never seen so much sass from an eighty-year-old before. "It's a good thing you have those bees, then."

Bees? What is she talking about?

"Those bees are for people in great need."

My omega grandma shakes her head. “I will never understand how you decide who is in great need and who isn’t. Magic has spoken, has She not? They are fated.”

“Now you acknowledge the power of Magic? You said She was evil.”

“I said She does horrible things, and She does. You’ve helped Her do horrible things. But this thing our grandson asks of you is not horrible.”

My omega grandma plates the slices of bread and takes them to the table. That’s normally how their arguments end. At some point, one of them realizes the other is right, and they stop talking about it. That felt very abrupt to me as a child. I wonder what Evan will think of my family. We are an intense bunch. My oldest brother didn’t grow up to play in the NHL, but he’s a bestselling author. My younger brother is neurosurgeon. We don’t do things halfway.

I sit at the table in the dining area that opens out onto the deck. From here, I can see the wooden beehives in their backyard. “What is going on with the bees?”

My alpha grandma looks at my omega grandma for a long beat before saying, “They’re a secret. I will help you, but you cannot tell anyone.”

“Okay.”

“I never told your father this, but the spell I did for him haunted me. Hockey was his passion, and I let him trade it away for an omega. Don’t get me wrong, I love your omega father, but that trade was steep. Too steep for my tastes.” She opens the honey jar and sticks the butter knife inside. “That’s why I went to Vermont two years ago. There are warlocks in Montpelier who know how to do blood magic without a sacrifice.”

She must be telling me this for a reason. Is she implying that *she’s* figured out how to perform blood magic without a sacrifice?

She smears honey on her bread and passes the jar to me. “It’s possible through trapping magic. Warlocks have been

trapping magic for centuries. They normally use precious stones to capture the power of someone's personal sacrifice, specifically rubies. This enables them to use it later. Capturing magic is particularly useful if you have to do a time-sensitive spell because personal sacrifices are messy and slow. The only caveat is that Magic gets angry if you try to store power for too long. That's why so many warlocks go mad. Holding the power of someone's sacrifice in a ruby next to your heart can have side effects if that spell isn't done in a timely manner. It's even worse if the power of multiple sacrifices are stored in the same stone. But the warlocks in Montpelier have figured out a way around all of that. It's called beneficial sacrifice."

My alpha grandma looks at the honey jar pointedly. I forgot she was trying to feed me. I hurry and spread some honey on my bread so she'll continue.

"A client will sacrifice something they don't want. For instance, some omegas don't want to have children, so sacrificing their fertility is a benefit to them. A warlock named Ari traps the power of that sacrifice in a butterfly, and later gives the butterfly to an omega who is infertile and wants to conceive. One person gives up something they don't want, and another person gets to have what they sacrificed."

"That's brilliant," I say.

She smiles. "I thought so too. But Ari has only figured out how to transfer fertility from one person to another. Other warlocks in the area perform different forms of beneficial sacrifice with less success. They use something called an adder stone to trap their power. They prefer adder stones to butterflies because butterflies die. But their spellwork is spotty, at best. I think Magic prefers the power of beneficial sacrifice to be stored in something that is alive. She's always liked time limits, and the lifespan of a living creature is just that—a time limit."

The bees. I finally understand.

"After studying with Ari in Vermont, I took a trip to New Mexico. Many of my clients come from there. New Mexican ridge-nosed rattlesnake shifters bond in a very unusual way.

On the day of the omega's twenty-third birthday they take their snake form and shed the skin of their childhood. After that, the first alpha who touches them will be their mate. The problem is, that bond is always one-sided. Alphas don't reciprocate the bond, even if the snake shifter bonds with someone outside their species. This can lead to some painful relationships. Many omegas from this community don't want a bond at all, but the biological need to shed their childhood skin is overwhelming. That's why I went to them with a proposition. I offered to experiment with a modified version of Ari's spell that would allow them to sacrifice their ability to bond instead of their ability to have a child. I didn't perfect the spell until about six months ago. Right now there are only three bees imbued with the power to form a bond. Some people need access to this magic or they'll die. Are you sure you want to use one of those bees?"

My omega grandmother scoffs. "What? Offer to solve his problem but only with a heavy dose of guilt? At least be honest with him. You have every intention of giving him a bee whether he asks for it or not."

I glance at my alpha grandma to see if this is true. She clenches her jaw. "I get requests for those bees every day. I shouldn't give preferential treatment to my grandchild. But..."

"She's a mother bear. Someday you will understand, Dimitri. They say mother bears are more protective of their young than father bears, but I don't believe it. Your alpha dad loves you as fiercely as any mother bear I've ever seen."

The two of them smile at each other knowingly.

"If I give you a bee, will you give me great-grandchildren?" my alpha grandma asks.

My omega grandmother swats at her. "Stop. We've already established that you're giving him a bee."

"Yes," I say. "I will give you great-grandchildren. That I can promise you."

My alpha grandma looks very pleased with herself. My omega grandma seems equally pleased, although she's trying

to hide it.

“Very well, then. Let’s get your bee, and I’ll tell you how to activate the bond.”

EVAN

It's past midnight when I finally stagger into the cabin. The day was so lonely without Dimitri to give me hugs on set. I know my skin hunger is technically gone, but I like cuddles all year round, and I've been spoiled by having my own teddy bear to snuggle with during the last month.

The whole place is dark except for a sliver of light underneath the bedroom door. I kick off my boots and bolt toward the bedroom, eager to get a hug from Dimitri. When I open the door, I find the room very different from when I left. The bed has been pushed to the far wall, blocking off the door to the bathroom. Dimitri is sitting at the center of the room on a pile of pillows and blankets. Next to him is a small basket lined in netting with a bee buzzing around inside.

"What's all this?" I ask.

He holds out his arms to me. The smile on his face is radiant, his eyes twinkling. I don't think he's ever looked so handsome.

I step into his nest of pillows and blankets and sit directly on his lap. He envelops me in his warm arms. A deep sense of relief washes over me.

"God, I missed you today," he says.

"I missed you too. I know burrowing season is over, but I still need you, Dimitri. I don't know if I'll ever stop needing you." That scares me a little bit because I don't know if I'll get to keep him. It's something we both want, but not if it will require Dimitri to sacrifice a foot or something.

“If you could bond to me tonight, would you?” he asks.

I lift my head to look him in the eye. “What do you mean? We never decided on a sacrifice.”

“What if we didn’t need to?”

I’m not sure I follow. “How?”

That bright smile returns to his face. “My alpha grandma is a genius. I can’t say much about how it works, but if we take our animal forms and hold each other close, a bond will form once the bee is released from this basket.”

I glance over at the bee who is making very loud buzzing noises. It doesn’t seem possible that such an angry creature could create a bond between two people. What did Dimitri have to do in order to bring this bee home?

“Did you make a sacrifice you’re not telling me about?” I ask.

“No. I promised you I wouldn’t do that. This spell is a gift, Evan. It won’t cost us anything, and no one else suffered to cast the spell.”

A gift? That isn’t the right word. This is a miracle. It doesn’t seem real.

“So if you release that bee, we can bond by just cuddling with each other?” I ask.

He laughs. “Yeah, I guess so. In our animal forms, though. We have to shift first.”

The idea of seeing Dimitri in his bear form fills me with longing. Shifters rarely show their animal form to anyone but their families and their mates after the first few years of childhood. Most of us would rather be naked in front of a stranger than shifted.

“My grandma suggested I take my fox form first. She’s never tried this spell with a mixed-species couple. But I’d like to show you both sides of myself tonight if that’s okay,” Dimitri says.

“Of course it’s okay. Oh my God, I can’t believe this. We get to bond, just like that. No horrible sacrifices. No saying goodbye.” Tears stream down my cheeks. I want Dimitri more than anything in the world, but the option to be with him forever has always felt like an unattainable dream.

Dimitri wipes the tears off my cheeks. “I know, baby. We’re so damn lucky. We get to have it all.”

We each remove our clothing slowly while watching each other. We toss our jeans and shirts and underwear to the edge of the nest Dimitri has made. Maybe that’s a part of the spell too. After we’re both naked, he takes me into his arms again, and it feels like we’ve escaped into a fictional world where love always works out and dreams come true. It’s almost as if this small space is the set of a movie, only I don’t have to pretend to be someone else to belong here. This nest is for Dimitri and me.

I shift first because I’m eager to show Dimitri my fox. I’ve always liked my animal form, and I rarely have an excuse to take it these days. The strange sensation of shrinking has never been my favorite, but I love the silky fur that sprouts all over my body and the tail that grows poofy and long behind me. When I’m fully shifted, I lift my nose and do a little tail swish to show off. After all, a little confidence never hurt anyone.

Dimitri stares at me in wonder. I nuzzle his hand, wishing I had mentioned that I love being petted before I took my animal form.

He chuckles. “Even as a fox, you are very needy.”

I whine in protest because he’s still not petting me.

He strokes his large hand down my back. “God, you are beautiful. You’re stunning as a human too, but wow. I could look at you all day.”

I push my head into his hand. Being petted by him is just as good as being held in his arms. For a moment, I forget why we’re doing this, then Dimitri starts to shrink too. As a fox, he’s mostly white except for a few black speckles on his back and a patch of exposed skin along his cheek where his scar is.

He's tall and majestic in this form with big ears and a wide chest.

He rubs his snout along my neck, and I'm surprised by how sensual it feels. It's strange to interact that way with someone in my fox form.

Dimitri trots over to the bee's basket, which is now as large as he is. I worry that it will be too complicated for him to open because he no longer has opposable thumbs. He bites down on a metal knob in the bottom right corner and the top of the basket pops open. The bee flies out, buzzing and circling in the air.

This is it. The moment I get to bond to Dimitri.

He turns his head to look at me. Butterflies dance in my stomach as I stare at his handsome fox face and powerful legs. If this was a traditional burrowing season with a mate selected by my mothers, I would have been thrilled to be paired with such a fox. But this is Dimitri. He's not just handsome, he's kind, funny, and generous in bed. He loves how much I slick, and he's supportive of my career. I couldn't dream up a more perfect man.

He walks toward me with the sleek grace of a fox. It's odd because Dimitri is a graceful man. I noticed it plenty of times while he was playing hockey. But in our everyday lives I sometimes forget because of his size. He lies down in front of me and lifts his front paw in a silent invitation.

I twist around and slip underneath his paw. He lets the weight of his leg rest along my shoulders. His fur is soft and warm, even cozier than his human arms. He rests his snout against mine, and my heart races with anticipation, but I also feel safer than I ever have in my life.

My inner omega emerges. Dimitri's inner alpha rises to greet him. This time when they wind together, a barrier I didn't sense before dissolves, and our essences join. It isn't a fast thing. Nothing about a bond between fox shifters is, I suppose. We lay there, awash in our connection, for a very long time. Dimitri licks along my ear. I close my eyes and purr.

At some point, I am vaguely aware that Dimitri is getting larger. But he isn't getting any less furry, so my subconscious mind doesn't care. It isn't until I'm lifted off the ground that I realize Dimitri is shifting into a bear. He keeps growing, his fur switching from white to brown and the tips of his fox ears rounding off. The black eyes that stare back at me are still unmistakably his. His brown fur is shiny and thick, and his amazing size is as overwhelming as always.

He holds me to his chest, and I bury my nose into his fur. There is so much of him in this form. I like that. Maybe that's why he made a nest of pillows for us. I'm not sure a human bed could handle his weight in his grizzly form.

Dimitri rolls onto his back, taking me with him, and closes his eyes. We should probably shut the light off or figure out where the bee is. I can still hear it buzzing. But it's been a long day, and Dimitri is my mate now. We can sleep in our animal forms if we want to. It's nice after spending a whole burrowing season as a human.

I close my eyes too and drift off to sleep.

DIMITRI

Seven months later...

The morning light pours into the guest bedroom of my grandmas' house. Evan lies on his side next to me, still fast asleep even though it's past nine. I can hear my dad's talking downstairs. They must have arrived from the airport. I should wake Evan and go down to greet them, but I'm not quite ready yet.

Evan's belly is swollen with our kits, and the light is hitting his face at exactly the right angle. He looks like an angel fallen from heaven. I want to take a picture, but he made me swear to stop taking photos of him while he sleeps. He thinks he's fat, which is technically true. He wasn't taking limiters when he got pregnant, so he's carrying five kits. But I love his belly. If he let me, I would touch and kiss it all the time. I don't wish it was smaller, and I certainly don't wish he were smaller. I am wildly attracted to him at this size.

I slip my fingers underneath the pair of my sweatpants he has adopted as his own when we're in our room alone. They're big enough to accommodate his belly. Underneath he's completely nude. He stopped wearing underwear to bed about a month ago under the guise that it's "too constricting," but I know better.

Pregnancy has made Evan constantly horny, and he knows I can't resist him when he's going commando. There's something about knowing that all I have to do is lower his pants to fuck him that is irresistible to me.

Sure enough, when I slide my fingers into his crease, he wiggles against my touch, even in his sleep. I press the pad of my finger on his pucker, and it weeps slick for me like a dream. I push one finger inside, and he rocks against me.

While one of my fingers is up his ass, I know he'll let me touch his belly. Apparently, I can't worship his belly when he's not aroused, but when he is, it's no longer annoying. I run my fingers along the side of it, cupping it along the bottom. It's so round and full.

"Those are your babies, Dimitri," he whispers. I don't know if he's awake yet. This has become automatic for him. He knows how much it turns me on to think about my children growing inside him.

I slide in a second finger next to the first. He's wet now, and probably loose enough that I could take him if he was completely awake. He's not, though, and I don't want him to wake up overwhelmed.

"You ready for me to put more inside you?" I say softly in his ear. Evan may not like the everyday discomfort of pregnancy, but he loves the idea of me breeding him. Especially now for some reason. I have no plans to analyze this or figure out why. It's hot as fuck, and I plan to give him *exactly* what he wants.

"Mmm, yes. Don't prep me more. Put it inside."

There's a knock at the door. Evan freezes in my arms.

"Your alpha dad and I are here, sleepyheads." Fuck, it's my omega dad. He wants to see Evan. The two of them have been thick as thieves ever since I introduced them.

He wants to see me too, but I'm not pregnant with his grandbabies. I know my place in this situation.

"Give us a few minutes. We're not dressed!" I call out.

"Okay. We'll be in the kitchen."

I hear his footfalls walking in the direction of the stairs.

"You're still going to fuck me, right?" Evan whispers.

I slide my fingers out of his ass and line up my cock, which is hard and ready for the job. “Of course I am.”

If Evan doesn't get his morning fuck, he's uncomfortable all day. That won't do.

I ease in slowly, giving him time to adjust to me. He lets out a contented sigh when I'm all the way inside.

“The only time I don't feel empty is when you're inside me,” he says. “I wish I could keep your cock warm all day.”

“If we got our own place, you could. We're only here because you wanted to follow arctic fox shifter cohabitating traditions. My grandmas aren't even arctic fox shifters. They would understand if we wanted our own space.”

Technically, the tradition only dictates that we live with each of our families for three months in the year after our bonding, and we've almost been here that long.

He rolls his hips, taking in a sharp breath as his ass spasms around me. I grab his hips and drive into him.

“I... want... them... to... like... me.” He chokes out each word between my thrusts. I suck at the delicious skin of his scent gland, and he freezes, clamping down on my dick and turning his head into his pillow to scream.

“They fucking love you. You're carrying five of their great-grandchildren. You could literally burn down a hospital, and they would still think you hung the moon.”

He bucks his hips back into me, which is my cue to get going again. I take breaks when I can. Between Evan's belly and his orgasms, it's hard to keep my own orgasm at bay.

“I don't want to take any shortcuts because I'm pregnant or because they're not arctic fox shifters. We'll do all the grizzly shifter traditions too. I need them to know how much they mean to me.”

Goddamn it. This man. Some days I still can't believe I get to keep him.

I grab his cock, which is already messy with cum, and start pumping him.

“Oh, Dimitri. Give it to me really hard for thirty seconds. Everything you’ve got.”

“But they’ll hear.”

“Use a pillow.”

If I put a pillow between our thighs, it muffles the noise a little bit. Not much, but enough that we won’t be putting on a show up here. Evan uses four pillows to sleep these days, so I reach down and snatch the one he usually holds in his arms at night and shove it under his thighs.

This time when I slam into him, it isn’t quite as loud. Evan bites the pillow as I fuck him again and again in rapid succession. I give him longer than thirty seconds, longer than a minute. I wait until his body seizes up and his ass squeezes me so tight I can’t help but follow him into a surge of pleasure that leaves us both trembling and breathless.

I kiss his sweaty neck, nuzzling the soft skin. “Do you think they heard that?”

“Yeah, I imagine they did. Goddamn it.”

I laugh. That’s all we can do at this point. Evan smiles at me ruefully. “I’m really trying to make a good impression here.”

“You’re doing fine, baby. They love you. Even if you weren’t pregnant, you make me happy.”

I never thought I’d be happy without hockey, and here I am. My family can see that. Evan doesn’t need to worry about my family disapproving of him.

“Let’s get cleaned up and go downstairs,” I say.

DIMITRI

Evan and I venture downstairs holding hands. Even in the middle of October, he always wants to be touched. I find comfort in how he yearns for me, even in nonsexual ways. My grandmothers are sitting at the table with my dads, eating honey on toast. My omega dad, who doesn't have the same fondness for honey as the rest of us, only has butter spread on his piece of bread.

“Good morning,” my alpha grandma says. “From what we could hear, it was a very good morning for the two of you.”

Evan's face flushes a deep pink.

My omega grandmother swats at her mate. “Don't tease him. As you may recall, I was frisky during my pregnancies too.”

The two of them share a heated glance I wish I hadn't seen. I admire their bond and everything, but no one wants to imagine their grandmothers having sex. Ugh.

“Most arctic fox shifters are insatiable during their pregnancies,” my omega dad says. “It's a sign the kits are healthy. Bless you for following through with the cohabitating traditions anyway. I respect that.”

Evan smiles at my omega dad. Until I introduced Evan to my family, I never realized how hard it must be for my omega dad to be the only full arctic fox shifter. My brothers bonded to grizzlies, and my omega dad's parents died last year. It isn't that he doesn't love my grandmas or the rest of our family, but I think Evan understands him in ways we don't.

“The plane ride was long. I’d like to stretch my legs a bit. Do you want to go for a walk?” my alpha dad asks me.

That’s not a good sign. When my alpha dad wants to go for a walk, what he really means is that he wants to have a conversation about something important. Is he upset about my indiscretion with Evan this morning?

I glance at my omega dad for some kind of hint about what’s coming, and he mouths, “It’s okay.”

“Come sit down and tell Andrew about your new film,” my omega grandmother says to Evan. “The one about the witches.”

Evan has a full schedule starting two months after the kits are due. The paranormal film where he plays a witch is his biggest contract, but there are plenty of others too, including a pilot for a TV show about an arctic fox shifter solving murder mysteries in Alaska. His pregnancy was a huge upset for his career, and I feel really guilty about that. He was on birth control, which is why he wasn’t taking limiters. He shouldn’t have been able to get pregnant.

My alpha grandma says her bee didn’t cause the pregnancy, but I have my suspicions.

Evan says he doesn’t mind, though. Apparently, Don Reynolds is going around telling everyone that he’ll be the next big name in Hollywood, so producers are willing to plan their filming schedules around him. Amber Stent cast him in her next movie too, which will start filming in mid-March of next year. “After burrowing season,” she said. I like her.

My alpha dad stands up and takes his plate to the sink. “Let’s walk through the orchard.”

“Okay.”

We go out through the back door. The morning is cool and the grass is covered with dew. Dad walks past the beehive and down to the gardens, where large pumpkins are growing on the vine and the corn stalks are tall. The crops are growing in neat rows, one for each type of plant. I like weeding the garden in the evening. I find the buzzing of the bees calming now.

Especially when my grandmother comes out to the hive with a new couple in need of a bond. The happiness that radiates off them is contagious.

They're very different from the clients my grandma used to have.

Dad heads for the orchard where the apples are ripe and heavy on the branches. Like the other crops, the trees were planted in rows according to the type of fruit they produce. In addition to the apple trees, my grandmas grow pears, plums, and cherries.

"I'm sorry you couldn't stay with us for your cohabitation period," my alpha dad says.

"It's fine. I get it. Moving to a different state is hard. Are you excited about the job?"

When I was growing up, he worked as an assistant coach. Now he's getting head-coaching gigs from universities with serious hockey teams. I'm happy for him.

Dad stops in front of an apple tree. "Grandma told me about the bees."

Oh. That's what this conversation is about?

"I thought you had sacrificed something big and you didn't want to tell me," he says. "I couldn't stop thinking about it. Your omega dad begged me to let it go, but I couldn't. I had hockey to sacrifice, but you didn't. I worried that you gave up your pancreas or something."

Guilt churns in my stomach. I should have told him about the bees, regardless of the vow of secrecy I made with Grandma.

"I'm sorry."

"No, she said you promised not to tell anyone, and I'm proud of you for keeping your promise. I'm just relieved. I mean, wow. What an incredible bit of magic, huh? I'm happy for you, son."

The guilt only gets worse. Dad had to give up hockey to be with his mate, and all I had to do was give Evan a hug. It isn't

fair.

“It’s too bad she couldn’t have learned about all this earlier,” I say. “I’m sorry.”

Dad shakes his head. “Stop apologizing. I don’t wish my life had been different. I need you to understand that. If I had continued playing hockey after I bonded to your omega dad, I would have missed your childhood. Switching to coaching gave me the chance to watch my sons grow up. There were things about it that were hard, but I never regretted any of it. This is the life I was supposed to have.”

“Don’t you miss playing hockey, though?” I ask.

“Of course I do, but you miss it too, don’t you? Any amount of time on the ice wouldn’t have been enough.”

The weight of that realization hits me hard. Nine years is a decent career for a hockey player, even for bear shifters, who tend to have better longevity on the ice than other types of shifters. But my dad is right. It didn’t feel like enough. Maybe it never would have been enough.

“Besides, I got to see you play, Dimitri. When your kits are born, you’ll understand how special that is. You’ll want them to have the world, and my son was the top-ranking player in the NHL for two years straight. I’m very proud of you. I know your grandma regrets the spell she did for me, but I’m grateful for the magic that allowed me to stay with your omega dad. My relationship with him is the most precious thing in the world to me. That’s the thing about sacrifice. It makes you appreciate what you have because you had to pay for it. I think that’s why Magic requires people to give up something in exchange for what they’re asking for. She wants them to value Her gifts to them.”

I never thought about it like that, but I guess it makes sense. People value what they have to pay for. If something is free, they take it for granted.

“I’m only telling you this because the magic Grandma used for your bond is new. It may function differently in the long term. We don’t know. I think it’s important that you value

this gift. It's a miraculous, wonderful thing. Don't ever lose sight of that, okay? I think if you treat your bond with the respect it deserves, Magic will let you keep it."

I can't imagine taking my bond with Evan for granted, but hearing this from my alpha dad makes me view my childhood differently. I always thought I was living my alpha dad's dream. I never stopped to consider that he was living his own dream, but that dream looked different than it had when he was younger. And that isn't sad; it's part of life. When one dream ends, we need to come up with a new one. We can't fixate on what could have been.

If only I had realized that when I had my injury, retiring would have been a lot easier.

"Thank you, Dad," I say.

He pulls me into one of his bear hugs. I'm grateful that he and my omega dad flew back to Tacoma to spend two weeks with Evan and me during our cohabitation. From what I heard, his new boss wasn't pleased with him for taking the time off.

That's the price he paid to be here. He's always paid the necessary price to be a good dad. I didn't see that when I was younger, but I see it now.

I want to be the kind of man who shows up for my kids like that.

EVAN

Two weeks later...

“We’ve been in the car for fourteen hours,” I say. My back is killing me, and I have to pee. Again. We’ve stopped almost every hour so I can rush to the restroom. It’s ridiculous.

Just two more weeks, then I no longer have to be a walking blimp with a bladder the size of a gumball.

“We’re almost there,” he assures me. He’s been telling me that for over an hour.

“Let’s be real,” I say, taking another sip from my water bottle, even though drinking more liquids will lead to another trip to the bathroom. “I know we’re driving to Bozeman. It isn’t a surprise. We’re obviously in Montana.”

There are some things about this trip that were a surprise. For instance, the fact that we’re going at all. I thought we were staying in Tacoma for the birth. His grandmas have been looking forward to it for months. But yesterday, Dimitri disappeared for several hours and came back with a brand-new Lexus that he bought for me.

Andrew, his omega dad, patted my knee and told me to prepare myself for Dimitri’s nesting phase.

“He has money to burn, and he adores you, so this should be good,” Andrew said.

Dimitri then proceeded to pack up all our belongings, which was not an easy task because of the baby stuff his

family keeps giving us. After that, he announced we were going on a trip. I asked when, and he said, “Now, of course.”

He literally marched out to the car and expected me to follow him. Which I eventually did, but I had to go to the bathroom first.

“Fine, we’re going to Bozeman,” Dimitri admits. “But you don’t know where in Bozeman.”

“What do you mean I don’t know where? We’re visiting my moms. Where else would we go?” I shouldn’t complain or give him a hard time. Living with my moms will be nice. We flew to see them after I finished filming *Forest Hearts*, and they’ve come to visit us twice in Tacoma, but I still miss them. I just wish Dimitri had thought this through a little better. We’ve been surviving on fast food for the past day, and my ankles are already swollen. The salt makes it worse.

“Nope. That’s not where we’re going,” he says.

Is he serious? Fucking hell. This is not a good time for a joy ride.

“We are planning to visit them while we’re in Bozeman, right?” I ask.

“Of course. They’re expecting us tonight.”

“Then why are we... You know what? Never mind. I’ll stop asking questions.”

The longer we drive, the more skeptical I become about his insistence that we’re not going to my parents’ house. He takes all the same roads and even turns onto the quiet street where I grew up. But he drives past it and parks in front of the house next door. There’s a moving van in the driveway, and two burly men are carrying a couch out the front door.

“What is this, Dimitri?” I ask.

“This is our new house!” He beams at me with the same enthusiasm he had when showing me the Lexus.

Oh my God. Dimitri bought the house next door to my moms.

“Hear me out. We can have all the sex we want because no one will be listening through the walls, but we still get to see them every day. Perfect, right? Also, we can remodel it when you’re filming somewhere else. The kits and I can come with you and rent a place nearby.”

I still can’t believe it. Dimitri bought the house next door to my moms.

Tears spring to my eyes. That’s not unusual these days. A toilet paper commercial made me cry yesterday. But this is different. I’ve missed my moms so much since I moved to LA. Now that I’m getting consistent work, I could actually afford to come home and see them between jobs. Owning the house right next to them is perfect. We’ll still have plenty of space, but our kits can grow up next to their grandmas.

I start sobbing. Dimitri unbuckles his seatbelt and reaches over to give me a hug.

“Thank you,” I say between sobs.

“So you like it?”

“Of course I like it. This is the best gift anyone has ever given me.”

He lets me cry for a while. When I’ve composed myself, I realize my moms’ next-door neighbors are in the process of moving because of us.

“How did you do this? The Thompsons have lived there for twenty years.”

He winces. “Well, they’re big hockey fans. So I, um, offered them twice what the house is worth and one of my old jerseys signed by everyone on the Dragons.”

“Wait. You mean the jersey you said you wanted to hang above the mantel in our home when we finally bought a place?”

“Uh, yeah. But I have this hockey stick that’s also signed by everyone, so we can hang that up instead.”

My vision becomes blurry again as more tears stream down my face. I can’t handle this. Dimitri is too good to me.

What did I do to deserve such a wonderful man?

There's a knock on my window. I open my eyes to see my omega mom outside our car. Her eyes are pink and puffy, and there are tears on her cheeks too. Is she okay? Does she know about this? When did she find out?

I open the door, and she envelops me in a hug before I can get out of the car. "Did Dimitri tell you what he did?"

"You mean the house?" I ask.

"Yes. It's too much. You have to tell him we can't accept. And the IRA account isn't necessary either. We're grateful, but we've been saving for our own retirement."

It takes me a second to process what she's saying. "You aren't talking about this house, are you?" I ask, pointing to the Thompsons' home.

She steps back, confused. "No. The Thompsons sold their house a few days ago. I'm talking about our home. Dimitri paid off the mortgage and set up a retirement account for us. It's too much."

The waterworks start again. That's always been my dream. I told Dimitri that when I got enough money, I wanted to pay off my moms' house. I didn't make enough from *Forest Hearts* to do it, but I got close. I figured I'd get there with my next film.

Now Dimitri has already done it. My alpha mom can retire.

"Is that okay, Evan? I know you wanted to pay for it. I just thought—"

"Yes, it's more than okay. I love it. My mom's right, it's too much, but I'm so grateful, Dimitri."

He rubs his hand up and down my arm while I cry.

"Sorry to interrupt, but what other house did you think I was talking about?" Mom asks.

"The... house... next... door," I say, between sobs. "He... bought... it... for... us."

“Oh my. That is wonderful! I need to go tell your mother. She’s going to be so excited! We get to live next to our grandbabies!” My omega mom, who is sixty-three years old, skips like a schoolgirl back to her house.

The reason I’ve always wanted to pay off their house is because they took out another mortgage to pay for my degree in theater. They believed in me when everyone else in the neighborhood said my passion was nothing but a pipe dream. And now they retire comfortably like all of their friends.

“Are you okay, baby?” Dimitri asks.

I wipe away the tears and take in a deep breath. “Yes. I’m more than okay. I’m just a little overwhelmed.” I try to give Dimitri a hug. My belly and the seatbelt get in the way, but that only makes him smile.

“Should we go look at our new house? I told them we’d be stopping by. They’re nice people. They didn’t seem to mind.”

I don’t imagine they did. Dimitri just gave them twice what their house was worth.

“Do I want to know how much you spent on of all this?” I ask.

“Uh, no. But you probably shouldn’t get pregnant again anytime soon. Let’s just say that.”

I laugh. “Oh, believe me, this is the one and only time. Hopefully, the Thompsons will let me use their bathroom. I need to go again.”

I unbuckle my seatbelt and climb out of the car, which is no easy feat at this point. I haven’t showered yet today, and my feet resemble marshmallows, but the people on this street know me. I don’t have to make any good first impressions.

Dimitri rushes around the car and joins me while I waddle toward our new home.

“Did you tell your grandmas you bought this house?” I ask.

“No. They’re going to wonder why I didn’t buy the house next to theirs.”

“That’s a good question. Why didn’t you?”

He shrugs. “They have a big family, and my brothers live nearby. Your moms only have one kid. I think it’s our responsibility to be here, don’t you?”

“You’re going to make me cry again,” I say as I step onto the porch.

Dimitri holds out his hand to me and helps me up the steps. “We can visit my family often. Maybe spend a few summers with my grandmas?”

“That sounds nice.”

“Good, because I had to promise that we would before my alpha grandma would let us leave. She’s still very angry that we won’t be there for the birth.”

I smile. It’s not a bad thing to be wanted by so many people. I’m grateful that our kids will grow up knowing that they’re loved.

Dimitri and I step into our new house. I can already tell that these walls will be like my mother’s earrings from Tiffany’s.

I’ll treasure them for the rest of my life.

DIMITRI

I wake up in the middle of the night, and Evan isn't in bed. He's been getting up several times every night because of his heartburn, so I'm not too worried at first. But I wake again two hours later, and I'm still alone in the queen bed his mothers set up in Evan's childhood room. I put on some pajama pants and a shirt and wander through the house, wondering where he is. I try the living room first because sometimes he watches TV to take his mind off the heartburn, but he isn't there. I check the bathroom next because that's always a sure bet these days. He isn't there either.

Finally, I notice the light under his mothers' bedroom door. Inside I hear whispering, but I can't make out what they're saying, other than the words *tell him*.

Is everything okay? I knock on the door.

"Come in," Clarice calls out.

I open the door to find Evan kneeling on a blanket on the floor and both of his moms sitting on the bed in their nightgowns. Evan's forehead is coated in sweat, and he's clutching his stomach.

"What's going on?" I ask.

"I think I'm in labor," he says.

"What? But you're two weeks early."

"Maybe. The doctors weren't sure because the gestational period for fox shifters and grizzly shifters are different."

“Why didn’t you wake me?”

“I’ll probably be in labor for a long time. I figured you’d need the sleep. My moms woke up because I was moving around the house, so I decided to come in here.” He’s unnervingly calm.

“So you were planning on letting me sleep for the rest of the night while you were in labor?”

“Alpha fox shifters are very protective once labor starts. The doctor told me to wait until I was sure the contractions were regular before I told you. I’m still not sure. I think I’m in labor, but I won’t know until—” He squeezes his eyes shut and clenches his jaw.

I kneel down next to him and rub his back. He takes in deep breaths through his nose and exhales through his mouth. It only lasts for a few moments, and then he opens his eyes again.

My heart beats wildly in my chest. This is really happening. We’re going to be fathers.

The labor is indeed very slow. Evan stays in his mothers’ bedroom for another hour. They chat between contractions while I stay frozen to the spot, except when he’s in pain. I massage his back or his shoulders, trying to keep him as comfortable as possible. Then we move to the living room and watch TV in between contractions. It goes on for another four hours. Evan is extremely calm the whole time. I’m not. There are a million things that could go wrong. Fox shifter births are low risk, so we aren’t even going to the hospital. That seemed perfectly reasonable when we decided on it. The doctor agreed that coming to the hospital wasn’t necessary.

Now it seems like a really bad idea.

When the morning light starts streaming through the windows, Evan tells me to turn the TV off. An hour after that, he takes off his clothes and starts rocking back and forth, moaning. An alarming amount of liquid gushes out of his body onto the blanket on the floor. He doesn’t seem aware of it or of me. He’s in his own world, and something feels right about

that. My inner alpha recognizes Evan's inner omega as he takes control.

I walk around the perimeter of the living room as Evan rocks and moans. It's my job to keep him safe. The sound of cars and voices float through the room, and I decide it would be best to take my grizzly form, just in case. I pull off my clothes and shift into a bear. Walking around the perimeter feels more natural while I'm a bear. If anyone tries to hurt Evan, I can swipe at them with my paws.

I pace back and forth, stopping occasionally to sniff Evan or lick his head. He is crouching now, which I think is a good sign. My mate is doing very well. I huff my approval and take up my post again. In the background, I hear a voice talking on the phone, but it's a good voice. Clarice. She's safe. She's saying something like, "Dimitri's a bear," and "He's guarding Evan."

She knows I'm taking care of her son.

Evan lets out a mighty groan. I notice a small, furry head emerging from him, and I'm quite proud. It's one of our kits, I think. I amble toward him, ready to meet our child, but he is resting again. I chuff in a way I hope sounds encouraging. He doesn't notice. He's too busy with the birth. He cries out again, and this time, an entire creature drops onto the blanket underneath him. The kit is small and dark brown, the way arctic fox shifters always are at birth. I plop down in front of Evan—which causes the ground to shake—and scoop the little one into my arms. She still has an amniotic sac around her, so I slice into it carefully with my claws and brush it off.

She is the most perfect thing I have ever seen with her tiny paws and her pink nose. This beautiful little kit is ours. I'm not prepared for the rush of emotion that hits me like a freight train. I never thought I could love anyone as much as I love Evan, and yet, here she is.

Her eyes are closed, so I bring her close to my chest to smell me. She needs to know her daddy. One of them, that is.

Evan screams and grabs for my paw. A second little one drops between his feet. This one is a little smaller and a boy. I

remove his amniotic sac, like I did to the first, and cradle them both in my arms. The boy is just as cute as the girl. He makes a sweet little grunting noise and squirms against his sister.

My strong mate delivers two more female kits. I now have an armful of our children. The boy is still very wiggly, but the girls are sleeping peacefully. My mate seems a little agitated, rocking back and forth and moaning, even though the fifth kit does not come out. I start to worry when this has gone on for some time. Perhaps my mate needs some assistance. I consider telling Clarice to call a doctor, then Evan shrieks, and the head of a bear cub pokes through. The cub has no amniotic sac. It probably broke in the womb because they were a fox just a few days ago when we went to the doctor. Silly cub. I chuff at them disapprovingly. They can't come out of their father like that. They're too big.

The cub stares at me for a long beat, then shrinks into their fox form, and finally drops onto the floor.

Evan collapses onto the wet blanket, narrowly missing our kit. I gather the kit into my arms with the rest and wander around on three legs, searching for another blanket. I find one on top of the washing machine, and lumber back to the living room. Evan has passed the afterbirth and is lying on the floor. I set the kits down all together so they can keep each other warm and pick up my mate. It takes longer to carry him to the bed in my animal form, but I don't mind. I think my bear calms him. I go back for the children and return to the bedroom where we all snuggle up in the bed.

Evan eventually shifts into his fox, which is nice. We're all furry and warm now. The last kit shifts back into a bear, and that's nice too. That's how they're meant to be, I think. All of it is nice, except for the horrible mess we left in the living room. I'll get up and clean it later. For now, it's time to get some sleep.

EPILOGUE

Fifteen months later...

I stop on the porch of the house Dimitri bought for me and wave at my alpha mom, who is filling the bird feeder hanging from the oak tree in her front yard.

She waves back. “You best get in there. Rory figured out how to slash the bag of rice in your pantry this afternoon, and Dimitri has had a devil of a time cleaning it all up.”

Oh no. The kits’ claws are starting to harden, and the entire house has felt the wrath of that new development. I open the front door, and I’m greeted by a smattering of rice in the entryway. The house is simple and dated like the cozy rambler I grew up in. Dimitri wanted to remodel it, including the oak kitchen with the tile countertops, but I told him to leave it exactly the way it is.

My mothers wasted no time making the kits quilts and cross-stitching little sayings for us to hang on the walls. The one by the door says, “This home is full of love.” They gave it to Dimitri as a housewarming gift, and he was gracious enough to understand that it would be going on our wall.

I navigate carefully past the rice on the floor into the living room, where my moms like to watch hockey with Dimitri on our big-screen TV. He enjoys watching the Dragons play now. I think it’s still bittersweet for him, but he follows their games religiously.

My omega mom leaves a crochet bag here to work on during the games, and Dimitri bought a recliner for my alpha

mom's bad back. I love seeing reminders of how often my mothers are in our home as I walk around the house.

Through the living room is the kitchen, where Dimitri is down on all fours with a broom and a dustpan. Two of our kits are resting on his back, while a third dangles from his shirt underneath his chest. Rory is perched on his head and holding on to his hair for dear life.

Mason, who's in his bear form, is sitting next to Dimitri and running his little paws through the rice.

"It looks like you've had an adventurous day," I say.

Dimitri tries to look up at me, but that causes Rory to clutch his hair tighter, so he keeps his head down. "Do you remember that time your moms warned us to childproof the pantry door, but we forgot to do it?"

"Uh-huh."

"That was a mistake."

I crouch down in front of him and take in the man who has supported my career every step of the way. First, by letting me leave him when he knew our bond would break, then by taking on the role as primary caretaker of our kids after I gave birth so I could continue to work. In the last year, he's braved flights with our five shifter kids to follow me to Hawaii, Minnesota, California, and New York, not to mention the constant back and forth to visit our respective families.

He was an amazing hockey player, but he's an even better mate.

"Here, let me help," I say, taking the broom from him. "You go shower. We're going somewhere special for dinner to celebrate."

He gently pries Rory off his head so he can look at me. "Celebrate what?"

"The Academy called. I was nominated for an Oscar."

His face lights up, his lips spreading into a huge smile. This is as much his award as it is mine because I never could have gotten it without his help and support.

“Oh my God, Evan. That’s amazing! We have to tell my parents. We have to tell your parents. We have to tell everyone!” He climbs to his feet, which causes our children on his back and hanging from his shirt to dig their claws in to avoid falling. He winces in pain. “Why did no one tell me that I’d get more injuries being a father than I did as a hockey player?”

I gather Amber and Jemma in my arms to give his back a needed break. I love the brown fuzz covering their tiny bodies. An arctic fox shifter’s coat doesn’t turn white until they get older, so we don’t know what color they’ll be yet. So far, Mason is the only one who has shifted into a bear, and he tends to prefer that form. During burrowing season, he stayed a bear the whole time. Like father, like son, I suppose.

Amber and Jemma climb onto my shoulders as I reach for Rory. He clutches Dimitri’s hair stubbornly, so it takes longer to extricate him from Dimitri’s head. “You’re going to make your father bald, aren’t you,” I say, nuzzling his furry neck.

“I’m so proud of you. Where are we going to dinner? We should go somewhere nice.”

“Oh, we will,” I assure him and lean in for a quick kiss. “Go get cleaned up. I’ll take the kids over to my moms. They agreed to watch them tonight.”

Dimitri hands me Laura, who is still clinging to the front of his shirt. “We’re staying in, aren’t we? Our home is the special place we’re going.”

I shrug. “We have a babysitter for three full hours. Do you really want to go somewhere else?”

He grins at me with a mischievous glint in his eyes. “That’s how you want to celebrate, huh?”

“Of course it is. Go take a long shower. I’ll be waiting for you in bed when you’re done.”

He almost skips to the bathroom. Being a parent is rewarding and everything, but it doesn’t leave much time for certain things.

I pack a bag with all the things my moms will need to watch our children for a few hours while the kits cling to me. They are more like spider monkeys than I ever remember being. But my mom insists I was the same way when I was little. Mason continues to play with the rice on the floor, and I don't interrupt him. Cleaning up the rice will be a lot easier when I don't have four kits hanging on me. Once I'm all packed, I scoop up Mason and carry them all to the garage, where we have a red wagon for them to ride in.

I place the bag in the wagon first, then set Mason in front of it. Laura climbs into the wagon next. She likes to nibble on the cushion my alpha mom installed into the bottom. Amber and Jemma race down my arms to join her, but Rory stays glued to my right shoulder.

Four out of five isn't bad. Usually I can only get three of them into the wagon. I press the garage door opener and wait.

Sometimes it's strange to walk out into the neighborhood where I grew up with my kits. I figured I'd have to leave this all behind to make it as an actor. As the garage door opens and I roll the wagon onto the driveway, a deep sense of peace fills my chest.

I did it. Even if I don't win the Oscar, and I don't think I will, I still got nominated. That's a big deal. I could stop acting tomorrow, and I would still have a career to be proud of. And yet, here I am, living in the home next to my mothers, with a wonderful man waiting for me inside.

I get to have it all. And I plan to cling to every bit of my wonderful new life with the tenacity of a spider monkey.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

If you're interested in Ari's butterfly magic, you can read about it in [Red Wolf Thrall](#).

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Thanks for reading my book. If you'd like to hang out with me on Facebook where I share sexy teasers of my works in progress and random humorous details about my writing process, you can join my Facebook group: [Amy'sPillow Fort](#).

I have a [website](#). You can sign up for my new release newsletter there. I have a tendency to send free smut to my subscribers.

I also have a [Patreon account](#). My patrons get free ARC's of all my books before they release, early access to chapters of my books as I write them, and exclusive deleted scenes.

ALSO BY AMY BELLOWS

The Alaskan Pebble Gifters Series: A shifter series set in the omegaverse featuring penguin shifters, nesting, and MPreg. Recommended for readers who enjoy low-angst romances and kink. (6 books)

The Nerds Who Knot Series: A nonshifter MPreg series set in the omegaverse. Includes stories about a librarian, a professor, a poet, and a crossword enthusiast. Recommended for readers who are new to MPreg or usually prefer contemporary romance. (4 books)

Lost Red Wolves Series: A high-angst shifter MPreg series about a sanctuary for red wolf shifters. Recommended for readers who love romances that tug on their heartstrings. (3 books)

Burrowing Hearts Series: An MPreg shifter series set in the omegaverse about fox shifters who cuddle with their intended mates for a full month of winter to form a bond. Recommended for readers who want steamy books that feel like a warm hug. (2 books)

Riding Home Series: An MMM shifter romance set in the omegaverse with group sex, a road trip, and Daddy kink. Recommended for readers who like high heat romances and shifter kink. (2 books)

Heron Manor Series: An action/adventure shifter series about the mermen of Rixton. Includes MPreg and kink. (1 book)

Standalone:

Red Wolf Thrall
Of Paper and Wood

Cowrites:

Swept Away (with CW Gray)
Dear Daddy, Please Praise Me (with Luna David)

AMY BELLOWS TROPE CHEAT SHEET

Omegaverse nonshifter books:

Nerds Who Knot Series

Omegaverse shifter books:

The Alaskan Pebble Gifters Series, Heron Manor Series, Lost Red Wolves Series, Riding Home Series, Burrowing Hearts series, Red Wolf Thrall, Swept Away

Egg births:

The Alaskan Pebble Shifters Series, All Revved Up, Omega from the Ocean, Expensive

Daddy kink:

Riding Home Series, The Bookmobile Baby, An Egg for Ansel, A Home for Ben, A Handkerchief for Kade, Omega from the Ocean, Expensive, Dear Daddy Please Praise Me, The Heat Professor (has D/s but no Daddy kink until bonus short story)

Age gap:

Riding Home Series, The Bookmobile Baby, The Heat Professor, An Egg for Ansel, A Handkerchief for Kade, Omega from the Ocean, Expensive, Real, Dear Daddy Please Praise Me, Wicked, Snuggleslut

Friends to lovers:

The Bond-Cut Omega, A Pebble for Lewis

First time:

A Pebble for Lewis, A Home for Ben, Of Paper and Wood, Expensive

Sex workers:

Riding Home Series, The Bond-Cut Omega, The Heat Professor, A Handkerchief for Kade, A Nest for Eli, Of Paper and Wood, Expensive, Red Wolf Thrall, Wicked

Nesting:

The Alaskan Pebble Gifters Series, Burrowing Hearts Series, The Bookmobile Baby, The Bond-Cut Omega, The Heat Professor, Expensive, Red Wolf Thrall, All Revved Up, Wicked

Lace underwear:

The Bond-Cut Omega, An Egg for Ansel, A Mate for Lu, Dear Daddy Please Praise Me, Real, All Revved Up, Wicked

Interracial:

Riding Home Series, The Accidental Everything, The Heat Professor, Of Paper and Wood, Red Wolf Thrall, Snuggleslut

MMM/Polyamory:

Riding Home Series, A Home for Ben, A Nest for Eli

Books that explore gender queer themes within the omegaverse:

Riding Home Series, The Bookmobile Baby, A Home for Ben, A Mate for Lu, Red Wolf Thrall, Wicked

Single dads:

The Accidental Everything, The Bond-Cut Omega, A Mate for Lu

Omega/Omega:

An Egg for Ansel, Red Wolf Thrall (The Riding Home Series and A Home for Ben both have triads with omega/omega dynamics, while a Nest for Eli features an alpha/alpha couple and All Revved Up has alpha/alpha dynamics).

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