

The Male Order Mates

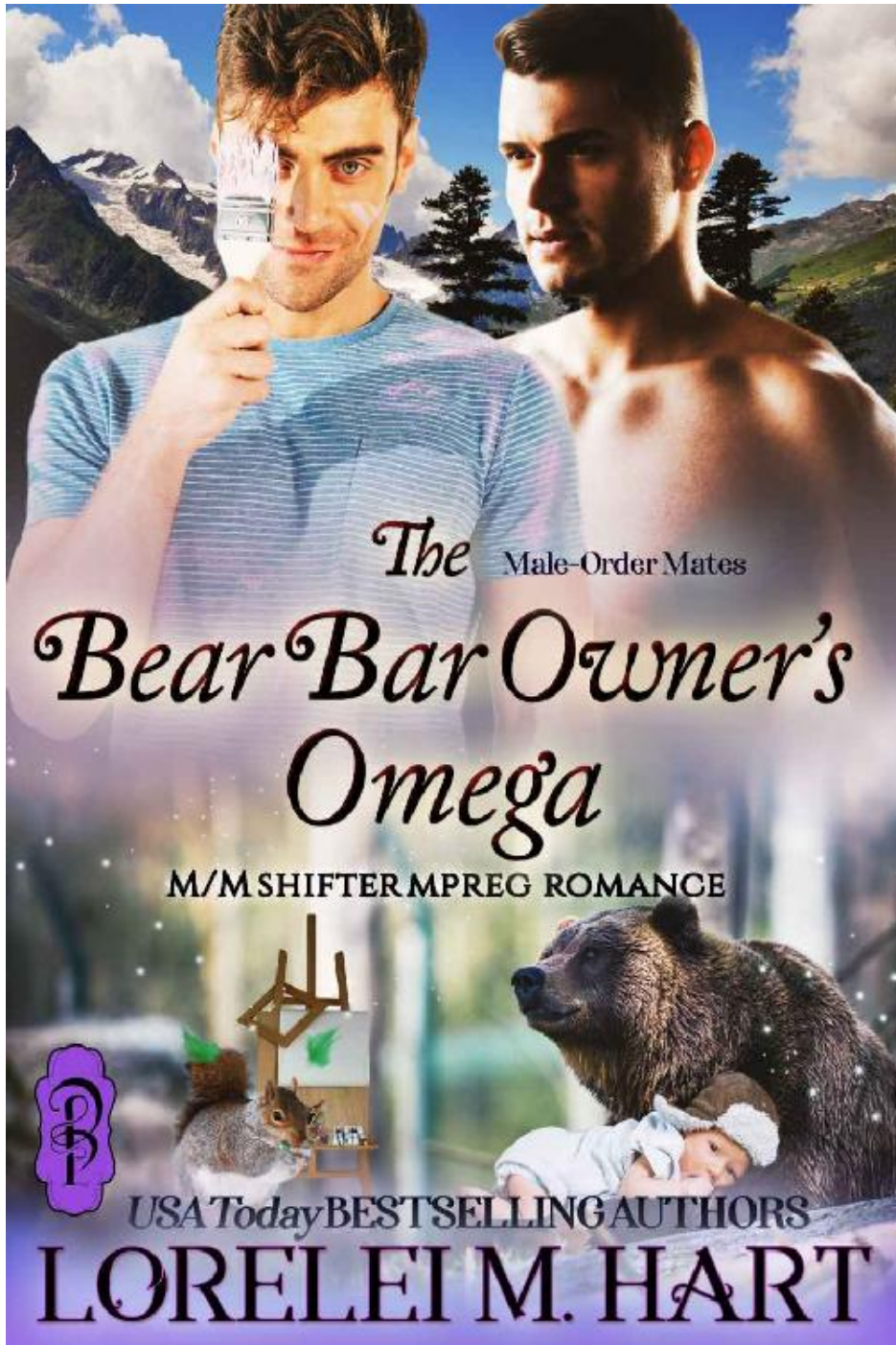
Bear Bar Owner's Omega

M/M SHIFTER MPREG ROMANCE



USA Today BESTSELLING AUTHORS

LORELEI M. HART



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The Bear Bar Owner's Omega

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Pilan

I knew that living in the city as an artist would mean getting on the struggle bus. No one just arrives in town, bumps into someone who could make their career, and then finds fame and fortune. Only, for a while, I thought that was exactly what happened. Julian was rich, huge in the art world, and he wanted to open doors for me. Not only that, but he wanted to take care of me, moving me into his penthouse. I was already in too deep when I saw him for what he was, a human who had a thing for young omegas, tossing them aside once they hit the ripe old age of twenty five—or less.

I can't be with someone like him another minute, but my options are limited. Perhaps the Male-Order Mates app will help me find a true mate—as far away from Julian and his ugliness as possible. Even if they aren't my fated, it will be someone who truly wants a real relationship.

Stefano

My brother means well. I know he does. He sees me as a talented chef who's too shy for his own good. And maybe I am, but he's gone too far with this one. Signing me up for a Male-Order mate without letting me know is unacceptable. I

have no choice but to buy the omega a train ticket back. It isn't fair not to.

But then he bounds off the train, excitement and joy flowing from him, making the town a better place just by his presence, and I find myself sliding the ticket back into my pocket. Maybe my brother was right after all. Maybe I should give this sunshine-filled artist a chance. My bear sure seems to think so.

The Bear Bar Owner's Omega is the seventh book in the bestselling super sweet with knotty heat MM mpreg Male-Order Mates series. The Bear Bar Owner's Omega features a squirrel shifter looking for a way out—an artist about to tap into his potential, a talented but shy alpha grizzly chef, a nosy family, new beginnings, an arranged mail-order mating, true love, fated mates, and a beautiful baby If you like your shifters unusual, your alphas sweet, your omegas hawt, your mpreg with heart, and your HEAs complete with fated mates and bundles of joy, one-click today.

The Male-Order Mates App Series

The Grumpy Grizzly's Omega

The Lonely Lynx's Omega

The Brooding Bear's Omega

The Mistrustful Mountain Lion's Omega

The Uncertain Unicorn

The Resilient Raccoon

The Bear Bar Owner's Omega

The Timid Tiger

The Bear Bar Owner's Omega

Male-Order Mates Book 7

By

Lorelei M. Hart

Chapter One

Giorgio

The baby shower was beautiful. Sidney and his mate deserved everything they received from our friends to help them welcome their new little one, and we here at The Grizzly were more than happy to host their special occasion.

A bar and grill might seem like a less-than usual spot for a shower, but the business that my brother and I built served as more than just a place to hoist a cold one or gobble a burger. No, between the welcoming environment for those who did want to have a beer or a drink and hang out with their friends and the superior dishes prepared by Stefano, we'd become a magnet for many in the area. Shifters in particular.

And the neighborhood was changing. When we opened the doors, most of our customers were single. Over time, many had met their mates and brought them along for an evening out. Couples' date nights were common. Friends celebrating special occasions as well.

Like the baby shower.

A lot of those who had babies at home had headed out after the actual shower activities ended, games and cake and such, but the rest had remained to continue to enjoy adult beverages and the still-stocked buffet. I noticed some others had slipped in as well, although it was supposed to be a private party only until closing. But off-season, the "others" were mostly locals anyway, those who didn't know Sidney well enough to have attended the party. And even they were

blending in as if they had been invited, going up to the head table and offering their good wishes and congratulations before hitting the bar for drinks. And as to eating what was left on the buffet? I made sure the servers let anyone and everyone know they were welcome to enjoy all the goodies my brother had prepared with such care.

And, they were. We would not have many leftovers.

My brother, an award-winning chef who had come with me into the wilderness, had melted away back into his kitchen early on. He'd made an appearance, as he'd promised me he would, but not for long.

Leaving the partying folks behind, I moved into the kitchen to see if he was still there. Since all the cooking for the day was done, he didn't have to stick around, but, of course, there he was, polishing the stovetop to a gleam.

"We have people for that, Brother," I chided gently. "You've been working since before dawn. Maybe take a break?"

"I took one earlier. You saw me eating cake." Bending close, he rubbed at a spot only he could see. "I like doing this."

"I know you do." I leaned on the counter, watching for a few minutes. "Stefano, come out and visit with the guests. They ask for you."

"They don't need me. At least not for more than food. You're the personality of this place. I'm about frying and chopping and boiling."

"You never boil anything!" I protested.

“That’s what you took from what I said?” He glanced over his shoulder at me. “Giorgio, I like my job, and I like that I don’t have to do your job. I’d be terrible at it.”

“You’re no social butterfly, but I’m starting to feel guilty for dragging you out here where you don’t have any life at all.”

“I have a life.” He dropped the sponge and faced me full on. “I keep plenty busy.”

“You know what I mean. Back in the city you, had your friends who went out to dinner with you. Trying out all the new restaurants or visiting their homes for a quiet evening of conversation.”

“Oh, well, I did enjoy that, but I’m fine without, really.”

“You had that one friend, Todd, who I noticed could sometimes get you out to do other things, too.”

His eyes rolled hard. “And think how relaxing it is for me now. He swore he’d get me to skydive.” He turned back to his grill and scrubbed as if he could remove the top layer of steel. “I’m fine here. I’m happy. I like my work. And I like my peace. Don’t you need to get back out there? We still have a pretty full house from the sound of it.”

“We do, and they are gobbling what’s left of your food like it’s free.”

Even he had to laugh at that. “Because it is?”

“That’s right.”

I left him continuing his cleanup, but I remained troubled. Stefano loved his work, but he needed more. Everyone needed

companionship. Truly I enjoyed working the front of the house and mingling with the clientele, but he needed some measure of balance in his life. All work and no play after all.

I walked around the room, chatting with those who remained, making sure they were having a good time, weren't being under or over-served, all my usual things, but when I passed one table, I overheard something that stuck in my head. "You heard that Sidney came via the Male-Order Mates app?"

"So many people are doing just that," his table companion marveled. "I think I'm going to try it myself. What do I have to lose?"

Hours later, I took a look around the bar area with satisfaction. Everything was cleaned up and ready for the next day with hardly a bit of confetti to be found under a chair leg. One sparkly balloon was in the rafters, but that could be dealt with in the morning. Yawning, I flicked off the lights and headed for the back. I'd made a decision at some point in the evening, something I planned to put into effect first thing in the morning. I'd do it tonight if I had the least bit of energy left.

Stefano did not like crowds and did not want the role of host with the most. Fair enough. I had no skills in the kitchen to speak of, and would not want to be asked to pick up a pan and prepare food for our patrons. But he did need something more than work day and night, and maybe it was time that he met his mate. I'd always believed my sweet, kind, hardworking brother was made to be a father. He had so much

patience, and, although I was probably prejudiced, I thought we were both decent looking.

But I had all the social life I needed. And he did not. So the one of us I'd be signing up for the Male-Order Mates app would be Stefano.

And if all went well, he'd be blissfully happy when he found out and not kill me.

Chapter Two

Pilan

I set down my brush, looking at the new piece I'd been working on. It was meh...fine even. But it wasn't my best work, despite the fancy brushes and the paint, two things I never had before I moved here. There was something missing...something I couldn't quite place.

Had I been anywhere but this shared studio space, I'd probably have squirreled out and done some work with my tail. I could only imagine one of the humans who rented space here walking in to see an animal painting away.

Sure, there were places that took advantage of animals, having them hold brushes to "paint" for a spectacle, but this was different. I wasn't just wagging my tail so I could earn a cookie, not even knowing what I was doing. I was trying to share what I saw and felt at the time. There were times when what I was seeing was right in front of me like a tree or a person, but often it was a fleeting image of a memory or just something in my imagination.

Gramps used to say that it was my way of communicating. And when I was a kid, that had been true. I wasn't so great about sharing my feelings with words, but Gramps could take one look at what I drew for him and know instantly what it needed. And really, that might've been Gramps's gift of seeing me more than it was my art, but at the end of the day it didn't matter which. It just was.

“That looks good.” Francine, the new manager of this place startled me. She usually stayed in her office where she worked on her beaded sculptures. She could create the most intricate designs with seed beads and her pieces never failed to wow me.

“Thanks.” I tried to look at it with a different lens. Francine was in your face and honest about her opinions and if she said she liked it, she did.

“You don’t agree?” She pulled up a seat beside me.

Francine was around Gramps’s age and gave off the same parental vibe. True, Gramps wasn’t my parent, but he raised me as his own after my parents died, so he basically was.

“Honestly, it’s fine. But that’s about it. It feels one dimensional or something.” I let out a long breath. “I don’t know. My art hasn’t felt like mine lately.”

“You aren’t going to want to hear this but... is it because it’s Julian’s?”

Julian. I still didn’t understand everything when it came to him. It had been dream-like when I met him. One day in the city, I was checking out the scene when along came this sexy older man who was central to the local art scene and saw something in my work.

And like the star-eyed fool I was, I fell in love with him. Only it really wasn’t love, was it. Or, possibly it was. I don’t even know anymore. But at the time, I was just so mesmerized by his words that I didn’t look that far past them, not that I had a lot of time to. My career took off, my paintings selling at prices I could only dream of. There were shows and events to

attend, often on Julian's arms, a penthouse to live in, and even a few articles in some local publications. By all accounts, I had made it—officially and truly made it.

Only I felt like a fraud. And it was starting to wear on me.

“I don't know—it could be because of Julian.” I pulled up a seat, not loving the pacing I'd started doing. “I feel like a fake. Like I didn't deserve all the attention and maybe... maybe it's just imposter syndrome, or maybe it's because I'm starting to see that I don't mean much to him, or maybe it's just that city life isn't for me. I don't know.”

I babbled on and on, letting everything out, and she stayed there and listened, reassuring me as needed and asking for clarifications when my babbling was incoherent. Francine was so much more than the person who collected our rental fees and figured out the schedule. She was the heart of this place in the short time she'd been here. And I appreciated her more than she could know.

I thought about what she said all of the way home and when I got there, I plopped on my bed. My mind kept wandering back to a run-in I had when I first came to town.

Be careful. There are people in this industry who will use a hot young omega, offering them their dreams in exchange for—other things. Choose who you trust wisely.

He wasn't much older than me, and the way he spoke told me that he was speaking from experience. Was that me? Was I Julian's hot young omega? I was younger than him—that was for sure. And I wasn't too bad to look at, but that wasn't why he helped me...was it? It was beginning to look more and more like it was, and I wanted to kick myself for it.

I took my phone and started to doom scroll, looking for any and everything I could about Julian. Joke was on me. He told me to feel free to do so when we first got together, citing he had nothing to hide and he was who he was. What did my naive butt do? I felt guilty even thinking about doing it, not when he trusted me so.

I typed in his name and boy toy and didn't get any hits.

“That’s what I get for invading privacy.” I went to set the phone down and changed my mind last second, typing in his name followed by boyfriend.

My screen filled with pictures of him with men on his arm or by his side. No surprise. He was significantly older than I was and had never married or mated. Of course he had dates.

But what I didn't expect to see was the man I met that day, the one who warned me to be safe and make good choices, to not let myself be used. His name was Sidney, and the most recent picture I could find was after I had already met Julian—more than met him—I'd already told him I loved him.

“Fuck,” I mumbled and did what any person in my generation would do; I hunted down Sidney's socials.

Chapter Three

Stefano

I wasn't unhappy, not specifically, but I also wasn't happy, either. We'd had such great success with the restaurant, and we were really taking a chance moving out here. I'd never have had the courage to do it without my brother's support. In fact, the whole idea was his, and it had been a good one.

All the years in the city, I enjoyed working as a restaurant chef. Although it paid decently, and I enjoyed the challenges of creating new menu items and being in charge of the kitchen, it had become a grind. The restaurant's reputation great, loved by food critics and its clientele, and the pressure to constantly come up with unique and delicious items had me at my wits' end. I didn't understand how if a dish was incredibly delicious this week, it wasn't worth repeating a second time.

The upscale clientele was jaded. They demanded more and more without stopping to appreciate what it took to make those dishes. The research and trial and error, the exotic ingredients that had to be found. The staff training. Kitchen management of all kinds. There just weren't enough hours in the day to do it all and do it well.

And heaven forbid one of those rich customers get a plate that was less than perfect.

I was getting home later and later, sleeping poorly, eating only at work to taste all the dishes and, worst of all, never finding time to let my bear run. Hard enough in the city, it took

planning and usually travel time, neither of which I was managing

Giorgio said I was building up to a stroke or a heart attack. He stopped by the restaurant to visit and found me sitting in my office, head down on my desk, and that's when he came up with his plan.

“How much do you have in savings?”

“What?” I was half awake, having been up all night creating the next week's menu. Most restaurants had some new dishes but not the number we did. “Savings? Do you need to borrow some money?” I reached for my wallet, but he waved me to stop.

“No, I want you to look at this.” He held his phone out and I looked at what was on the screen. “It's a great opportunity.”

And before I knew it, I had agreed. He'd caught me off guard at the end of an awful week, and I'd have agreed to almost anything not to have to repeat it.

Everything that was wrong with that job was right with this one. The kitchen was mine. I had a little help back there, but I did almost all the cooking, and as to the menu? I had the option to try new things or not as I chose. At The Grizzly we were all about quality, and our diners would have been happy to eat our half-pound bison burgers all day long. I had a standing menu but whenever something sounded fun to me, I made it and wrote it on the whiteboard. It wasn't every day, sometimes not every week, but it worked for us.

I liked living out back, loved everything about my job, and I slept well for the first time in a decade. My bear? Blissed out because we just had to step outside to shift. He could ramble the forest for miles and miles.

So since everything was perfect, why wasn't I as happy as my bear?

What an ungrateful wretch I was.

Maybe Giorgio was right and I just needed to spend more time in the front of the house. I'd never be the host, of course, I was far too shy for that. And the place was usually crowded with people enjoying my food and having drinks, which made it hard for me, but maybe pushing myself a little would be a good thing.

I pushed the door open and peeked out at the busy bar, bursts of laughter and conversation rising above the general hum. Then I took a step back and sat down at my desk. Unlike in the city restaurant, my office here consisted of a small desk in the corner of the kitchen. One more thing I liked, being in full view of whatever was going on instead of locked away until someone needed me or it was time to make something fancy.

Those bison burgers? I made them, and they were great. Every bit as good as one of those fancy dishes I'd prepared before.

"Stefano, do you have a minute?" Giorgio's voice pulled me from my thoughts.

"What, oh yeah. I was just getting ready to shut down the kitchen for the night. Did you need me to cook something

first? Have a special order?" Here that usually meant double cooked fries or an over-easy egg on a burger.

"No, not at all. I just...I did something."

He looked so funny, I couldn't decipher his expression. "Giorgio? Want to sit down? Is something wrong?"

"Wrong? No. I hope." He pulled out the chair opposite mine and sank into it. "I've been noticing that you seem a little lonely, and I want to help with that."

"You do," I hurried to reassure him. "You're always there to hang out with me, run in the woods. You're great."

"That's not what I mean." He looked around as if expecting someone else to be in there, but I'd already sent my helper for the night home. I liked doing the end-of-night chores myself and often did. "I'm just going to say it. I signed you up for the Male-Order Mates app, and initiated contact with someone."

I reeled, trying to think how he could have done that. "So I have to talk to them what, online?"

"Not exactly. They are coming to meet you."

Flabbergasted, I stared at him, wordless.

He shrugged. "You deserve to be happy."

But was this the way?

Chapter Four

Pilan

It didn't take long to find Sidney. His work was in a gallery across the country and had gotten a great deal of press. He looked happy and had a baby in his arms for one of the pictures. And his baby was why it took me three days to first ping him on social media.

Hi. I don't know if you remember me, but I met you last year.

I hit send and went back and forth on whether or not I should dirty delete it when he messaged back: *How are you?*

Shouldn't he hate me? Our times with Julian overlapped. By all accounts, I was the side piece. Sure I didn't know it, but that didn't make it less true. My stomach lurched just thinking about it.

I didn't know.

Instead of messaging back, he sent a video chat request, and I accepted it immediately, worried that if I thought about it, I'd chicken out.

"Hello?" It came out like a question, his face filling the screen. "I'm Pilan."

"I know who you are." He didn't sound the least bit mad at me, and his next question took me aback. "Are you safe?"

Was I safe? Julian wasn't a violent man. He just used people and, in my case, I willingly let him, too foolish to see the situation fully at first.

“Yeah, I’m safe. He wouldn’t...he doesn’t...”

“I didn’t know if you were on the streets.” His voice dropped a bit quieter.

“Yeah. I’m still...I’m in the penthouse. You have to believe me that I didn’t know.” For some reason that mattered to me more than any of the rest of it. I wasn’t an asshole. Naive? Absolutely. But I’d never intentionally come between people. Never.

“I knew that the day we met,” he reassured me. “What has you reaching out?”

Zero judgment tinged his voice. If anything, there was a parental quality to it. I found myself trusting him completely and telling him absolutely everything from the time I met Julian to me gathering the courage to message him, leaving nothing I thought remotely close to relevant out. And he listened intently to each and every word.

“Well, good thing is that you are one step ahead of where I was.”

“How’s that?”

“Because I found out my world was falling apart and that I was homeless pretty much all at once. You have time to prepare and make a plan.” A small noise in the background distracted him. I couldn’t quite hear what it was, but, given that he’d already started walking, I knew it needed his attention. “Figure out where you are going to go and how you are going to pay for it. I’m not saying your local art career will freeze up when you are not with him anymore, but it might.”

Meaning that his had.

“How did you do it? You have a career and a family, and I can’t even figure out if I should stay in the city or go back to my small town and work at the diner.”

If they even had a job. Gramps would welcome me back with open arms, but no one who went back there ever got out again. It was like you had one shot, and that was that. Blow it, and you might as well accept they will bury you there. No. I couldn’t go back there. Not until I gave it my everything.

“I signed up to be a Male-Order mate,” he said then set down the phone, and for a second I thought I’d embarrassed him too much, but then I saw him picking up a baby. “I got you, Adeline.”

He placed the phone where I could see them both, and she nestled into his arms, still half asleep from the looks of it.

“I’m sorry.” I couldn’t imagine needing to sign up to be a mate. How hard that must’ve been for him.

“Don’t be. It’s the best thing that ever happened to me.” He swayed back and forth with her in his arms. “I found the love of my life, a place where I truly feel at home, and have the most wonderful daughter in the world.”

His sincerity shone through, and I felt guilty about being so judgy.

“Sorry. I didn’t mean...I’m glad you are happy.”

“Don’t be sorry. It sounds like only badness can come from it, but the group I signed up with does a great job, and Crios is my mate—my true mate.”

He went on and on about their courtship and, by the time he was done telling me all about it, I was wanting to at least

think about giving it a go. As he mentioned a few times, I didn't have to follow through and, if I got to wherever my mate was and he smelled like old cheese, I could just leave.

It took me three days from the time I spoke with Sidney until the time I looked up the site and another two before I filled out the information, saving but not submitting it quite yet. I wanted to wait until Julian came home to speak with him about us, not wanting to up and leave him. He may have done that to Sidney, but I had to live with myself and I needed to at least communicate with him.

That was until I got tagged in a photo on social media. Only when I checked it out, it wasn't a picture of me at all. From a distance, I could see how someone would think it was; he had the same hair and build as I did—he was also on the arm of the same man. Only thing was, they were in Paris, and I was in my bedroom.

That settled everything for me. There was no reason to stick around. And when I was suddenly blocked from the picture, I doubted Julian would even be surprised I was gone. I submitted my information to the app then packed my suitcase, being sure to not take anything that wasn't mine, especially the fancy watch Julian had given me for my birthday. I wanted it to be a clean break.

Unlike the jewelry and electronics, I did take my art supplies, though, attempting to weed out anything that was there before I arrived...at least until it clicked.

I took out my camera and snapped a picture of the supplies that had been there when I moved in, the ones I never felt quite right about using, and sent the image to Sidney,

asking him if they were his and not any too shocked to discover that they were.

Into a second suitcase they all went. Sidney deserved his things, too. He may have the life he always dreamed about now, but that didn't mean he didn't deserve to have them back.

I'd mail them to him when I got where I was going. That was, if someone picked me. If not, it was back to Gramps and a shitty job washing dishes at the diner.

Chapter Five

Stefano

I was outraged, angry, upset, and hopeful by turns. My brother had stepped over the line. Far over it. How could he make such a decision for me without even discussing it with me first? If this Male-Order Mates app was such a good idea, why didn't he set up a match for himself?

Of course, I knew the answer to that already. Giorgio wasn't lonely. He spent every day and evening in The Grizzly, mingling with customers who had become friends in many cases. But I didn't think that meant he didn't need a mate.

However, that was a conversation for later. I lay in bed on the day my Male-Order mate was expected to arrive, watching the sun brighten the sky outside my window. I rarely saw the dawn, with my work schedule going fairly late into the night, but today I couldn't sleep another minute. My mind had raced all night. What was my mate going to be like? My brother swore they had an incredible record at the app, and I actually did know that because most of the couples who were at the baby shower a while back had met through it.

But I didn't know if I was ready to mate. I'd shut down that part of me a long time ago when most of my friends had already found their other halves and moved on to live married lives and have babies. I was focused on work and my bear. With the decision made for me, at least for the two of us to meet, I would have to do it. No pressure, Giorgio said. If we didn't hit it off, it would be fine.

But it wouldn't be. He was coming all the way here, and although I didn't want to say it, the thought of having someone of my own, a mate to care about, was opening that part of me I'd shut down. Just a little, but it was enough to know that I still had the need, the yearning for a mate of my own.

I wished I knew him better, our few online conversations not nearly enough to do anything but make me wonder...

But the train would not be in for hours, and I had to do something to fill the time, so I did what I always did when stress settled in. I headed for the kitchens and proceeded to cook. Baking was especially good for this, allowing me to expend my creative juices in a productive way.

Banging the cabinets, I found the ingredients for a basic muffin recipe and mixed up a quadruple batch before dividing it between several bowls. It made it easy to create a whole variety this way. To one, I added cocoa powder, chocolate chips, and pecans. To another a peanut butter and jelly swirl. A third had a selection of dried fruits and nuts, so kind of a granola mix-up when I tossed in a handful of oatmeal as well.

And then, I found a bag of frozen blueberries and added that, along with some lemon zest for a classic blueberry muffin that I topped with a mix of oats, flour, sugar, and butter. Streusel. It would be so good. But this was just the beginning of my bake-a-thon. Pies soon joined the lines of goodies marching along the counter. Chocolate, pear, cranberry apple, and a dried peach variety.

Cake next, then bread, pastry, and while I was at it, I seasoned a huge prime rib and a turkey and put them in the

oven, too. There were advantages to having a commercial kitchen and this was one.

I made potato salad, macaroni salad, coleslaw, and a four-bean number with vinaigrette that Giorgio particularly loved. By the time my brother came yawning into the kitchen, he stumbled to a halt and his jaw stayed open.

“Good morning.” I looked over from where I was stirring a huge pot of marinara sauce. “I can’t decide whether to make spaghetti or lasagna next. What do you think?”

“I think you have snapped. Is there anything left in the walk-in?”

“Yeah, sure. But I had some time to kill and, you know, if I am going to be busy later, I thought you should have some things around to feed the customers. Of course, Antoine will be here to make burgers and fries, but I didn’t want to short the menu.” A bell dinged, and I grabbed a pot holder and opened the oven. “Oh good, the turkey’s ready.”

“You don’t need to worry. Antoine will do fine. You trained him after all. But I think you need to get showered because it’s going to be time for the train soon, and you don’t want to meet him all covered with cooking smells.” He sniffed appreciatively. “Or maybe you do. You smell pretty good.”

I sniffed my arm. “Cinnamon from those snickerdoodles over there.”

“What are we going to do with all of this? It’s enough for the whole town,” he muttered.

I looked around, too, and saw what he did. “I guess I did go a little overboard. Not sure what to do about all this food.”

I shrugged. "I just cook it, you sell it."

"Maybe we need to have an all-you-can-eat buffet tomorrow. We haven't done anything like that except at private events, but you've made enough to fill it." He picked up a cookie and bit into it. "So good. Anyway, go shower and I'll find help to put everything in the fridge that needs to be there."

"All right." I reluctantly untied my apron and headed for the back door. "I'm still not sure this is a good idea." Turning on a heel, I came back and picked up a basket. "Just going to take him a welcome basket."

"How romantic," he said, but I wasn't sure if he meant it or if he was being sarcastic. "Muffins are nice."

"Good idea." I decided to go with he was being helpful. "Everyone likes muffins, don't they?"

"Yes, I suppose they do. Be sure to leave me a blueberry."

Chapter Six

Pilan

I didn't get a match right away, and that was fine. Not ideal but fine. And I wasn't in a complete rush anyway. More that I was nervous I would chicken out and decide not to leave, keeping the badness I knew over potential badness I didn't.

And with Julian still in France with his new flavor of the week, I had some time before I needed to make a full-on move. My bags were packed, and I could leave with no real notice. And with the money I managed to save up, I could easily find a hotel for a bit if need be. But I had to face the reality that maybe this wasn't going to happen for me.

I was young, maybe too young. I was also honest on the information I gave, letting the potential mates know that I was used to being in the city and, while I grew up in a small town, I had never experienced rural life.

Still, I wanted to be matched and move on to the next season of my life.

What surprised me in all of this was how I became sort of friends with Sidney. After the first time we chatted, I figured that would be the end of it. Who wants to chat it up with someone who was literally fucking your man while you were still together? Sure, I had no idea Julian was taken, but logic and feels didn't go hand in hand. That wasn't how life worked.

Yet, he didn't seem to mind. He had such a kind soul. I couldn't be happier for him in his new life. He was where he belonged. There was no mistake about that.

And when I was finally matched with a mate, the first thing I did was text Sidney, even before I replied.

I was matched.

How exciting! Tell me everything.

And so I did. He was a bear who worked in the service industry, had a brother he thought the world of, and lived in the same state as Sidney now did. On paper, he looked amazing. A nagging part of my brain thought it was a good idea to tell me that if he was that amazing, he'd already be mated and wouldn't need a male-order service. But in reverse, the same could be said for me. So, who was I to judge?

I didn't have a name or actual city yet, but knowing I'd have a friend in the state meant a lot.

Tell me about where you live?

He regaled me with stories of the nature that surrounded him and how his raccoon adored exploring the open spaces. Sidney explained the changing of the seasons in such vivid descriptions, I almost felt like I was there. And then he started to talk about the differences in the way of life.

It sounded like a bit of heaven to me, but my squirrel was not so sure. He was an urban squirrel through and through. He loved the city noises and chilling in the parks. When we first moved here, all he wanted to do was shift and play. He was at home for the very first time.

And now I was looking to relocate us to the middle of nowhere. But, what choice did I have? My ales would all but dry up when I lost my connections to the art world. And not because my art wouldn't be less desired by buyers but more

because I'd be shut out of galleries. No one wanted to piss off Julian and, from what I found online, none of his past flings in the art world, aside from Sidney, were still working, and he was doing so, far outside the NYC scene.

I think I'll say yes. If I was being honest with myself, I'd decided that before I typed the first word to Sidney. Thank you for all of your help.

I didn't help. I listened and shared my experience. That's all. Keep me updated.

I will. Promise. Off to let my squirrel out. He's being a butt.

He sent back a laughing emoji, and I set my phone down. Normally I would let my squirrel out at the park, but I didn't want to go too far from the penthouse, just in case Julian came home early. I didn't think he'd do anything to my things. He wasn't evil, he just kept his brain in his balls. At least that was what I was beginning to see as I looked critically at both him as a person and us in whatever our relationship had been.

I took the back staircase up to the rooftop. In theory, it was to be used by staff when he was entertaining up there, but I preferred it. It made me feel less like a guest, even though I sort of was one.

The rooftop garden was my favorite part of the penthouse. It was small but gave the feeling of being in a courtyard and not thousands of feet in the air.

I shucked my clothing and set it on one of the many overpriced pieces of furniture and let my squirrel out. He could run around without having to deal with cars and drunks,

and I didn't have to worry about my belongings in the apartment. It was a win-win for us both.

We stayed up there, running around, digging holes that would most assuredly piss Julian off later, but my beast needed to get the energy out. And really, Julian could deal.

When my squirrel was good and worn out, I shifted back, threw my clothes on, and went downstairs to do what I knew needed to be done. I responded to the Male-Order Mates app match, letting them know that I was not only very interested but that I could leave immediately.

It might not be the place I wanted to move to or the way I wanted to find a mate, but that didn't mean it wasn't what was best for my squirrel and me. Look at how blissfully happy Sidney was? If I was only half as lucky in my match, I'd be doing okay.

Chapter Seven

Stefano

In the end, I spent so much time deciding what to put in the basket of muffins and other treats, I didn't even have time to change, much less shower before I had to leave for the train. I'd also upgraded the basket I was using. Twice. It barely fit in the front seat of the pickup truck I was taking to the station.

With The Grizzly logo emblazoned on the door, it would be hard for anyone not to know it was either me or Giorgio coming into town. I would have preferred to drive the SUV, but it was in the shop getting winterized—whatever that meant. I knew it involved changing the tires to the other set but beyond that, not a clue. My brother was in charge of car things. I knew as little about them as he knew about flambéing the new dessert I was designing in my mind.

This time of year, we didn't have the tourists coming in to the forest, or at least not as much, so we only had one train stopping a day—meaning, I didn't have to think I might have the wrong one, which I did anyway—and there wouldn't be many people disembarking. Also, there were only three other people waiting on the platform, and one had already asked me if my muffins were for sale.

I gave him one. There were so many sweet treats in the basket, it was in danger of spilling over anyway. Then the other two drifted over, looking hopeful, so, of course I had to be gracious. But not one more. At the rate I was going, I'd end

up giving them all away and have nothing to welcome the Male-Order Mates app responder with.

Oh, that sounded awful. Responder? But I couldn't say mate. I hadn't even met him yet and didn't know if we'd like one another. Or actually be mates. That was a very specific and wondrous thing, and how a company could find the right person for a shifter, I had no idea.

Watching late-night TV as I often did, I saw all the commercials for the human dating apps, with everyone madly in "love at first sight" and now three years in and welcoming their second child or something.

I also saw the talk shows where those who had far different experiences discussed all the things that went wrong, from people who just weren't attracted to one another all the way across the spectrum, to criminals who used them to find victims. I'd started watching those when Giorgio told me about the Male-Order app and what he'd done. Of course, there were no such shows where shifters talked about their dates and mates. We weren't entirely undercover, but not everyone knew about us, and a lot thought we were the stuff of fairy tales.

The fall weather was settling in, and a cool breeze blew fallen leaves across the platform. I shrugged my jacket closed and zipped it up. Would the Male-Order guy have warm clothes? If not, we could stop on the way out of town and pick up a few things. It wasn't too bad now, but tonight the temperature would drop and I didn't want him to get chilled. The very short conversations we'd had concerned details about

his trip, but for the life of me, I did not think I had mentioned the weather.

What kind of an alpha didn't make sure their omega was warm enough?

Before Giorgio started this whole thing, I truly had given up on the possibility of having a mate, of having a partner in life. Surely if I was one of those lucky enough to have a fated, he'd have found me by now, or I'd have found him.

I checked my phone for the time, at least the tenth time in the five minutes I'd been waiting here. The train was due in any minute, and my heart was pounding so hard, I swore you could see it through my shirt.

Squeezing my eyes closed, I listened hard, straining my ears for the sound of the approaching engine. With no airport anywhere close, we were one of those oddball locations that most people who didn't want to drive here did it by rail. In the summer, there were whole excursion cars set aside for tourists coming to explore the forests. Some travel agent had, in fact, put together a rail tour of several of them, kind of like cruise ship ports of call.

But now? Just locals coming back from visiting family or trips to the big city. The occasional lover of late fall when it was a bit chilly but not nearly so crowded, although there weren't a lot of accommodations available now, either.

I heard...yes, there it was. A distant rumble, clank that had my eyes flying open as I switched to staring down the tracks for a peek at the train bearing my future. And wasn't that dramatic! I hadn't met him yet. I had to keep reminding both myself and my overactive bear that we did not know if

this was our mate. I gave the basket one more look and rearranged the muffins and breads and cookies so you'd never know anything had been given away to someone besides its intended recipient.

Would he like these things?

Or would he have preferred apples, a fruit basket?

Or flowers! Every other alpha would have brought a big bouquet to welcome him, and I just grabbed up what I had in the kitchen. Plain-old baked goods.

What was I thinking?

I was thinking that I was still wearing my kitchen whites...no wonder the other people waiting thought I was selling these things or maybe, one said, waiting to load them on the train for the first-class dining car.

That was a pretty nice compliment, actually.

I could see the cars behind the engine now, and there was no time to change clothes for sure, or even run to the florist and see if I could buy a bunch of roses.

No. All I could do was stand tall and try to make it look like my outfit was intentional and not the result of a spate of baking and cooking insanity in anticipation of his arrival.

He'd come a long way just to meet me. And he deserved a warm and appropriate welcome. For a moment, I almost handed off my basket, thinking maybe nothing was better than this, but then I decided no.

If he was going to know me, it would be by my cooking. I didn't have any other skills, really, or things I was known for.

Just this. And I did it well. I hoped those jaded diners back in the city regretted their treatment of me and realized the part their constant demands played in my moving way out here in the sticks.

Where I was happy.

Really happy.

Or...

The train was squealing to a stop and the conductors opened the doors of three separate cars. I studied those who got out of each one. First, an older woman wearing a jacket more suitable to January in Alaska than fall in the forest. She was greeted by the first person I'd given a muffin to who kissed her cheek and handed her half of the muffin. I tried not to preen that he'd liked it so much, he'd saved half for his mom. The other two people met their friends or whoever, but they were not so lucky as to receive any goodies, nor was I going to be the one to give it to them. Good, bad, or indifferent, I would be handing this to my mate. I mean, Pilan, the man I was here to greet.

It was nice to be meeting someone, someone who had traveled across the country to see me. To maybe even make a life with me.

It all seemed too good to be true.

Chapter Eight

Pilan

I didn't hate the train like I thought I would. In my mind, it was going to be like riding the subway but for a far longer time. It was nothing like that. I had a comfy seat, there were meals, and I got to watch as the scenery changed with each passing hour. And the people were so nice.

For the first half of my journey, I sat with a man who was on his way to see his grandbabies. He regaled me with stories of the last time he visited, and the love in his voice made me want him to stay on the train for the entire time just so I could hear more. My gramps talked about me in a similar way, and there was comfort and reassurance in his tales, even if that wasn't the intent. I wished him well, and he tapped me on the nose as if I were one of those grandbabies, and it warmed me to my toes.

My second seatmate was a woman on her way to a new job. She was going to teach in a city school for her first job out of school, a mid-year replacement due to a paternity leave. We talked back and forth about what it was like living in the city and, while it wasn't NY, I had a feeling the important things were all the same.

And for the last leg of my journey, I shared my space with someone who bought seasonal train passes and was just randomly riding around the country to see what they could see. So far, their favorite place had been the desert, and good for them. I was happy to not be headed to said desert—scorpions

and I were not the best of friends. At least, I assumed we wouldn't be, given that I wanted to be nowhere near one.

He got off to catch a southbound train one stop from my destination, and I was left alone with my thoughts and my nerves. I was going to meet a complete stranger and then... become his mate. Why him out of all the shifters in this universe? Because an app told me to. I mean, not really, I did have a say, but there was no real courtship. A few short conversations about logistics, and that was it.

Of course, I left all of that out when I told Gramps I was moving. He'd only worry and I didn't need him doing that. Instead, I told him I needed a change and that I was moving across the country to check out the art scene there. And all of that was true, I was. I just omitted the Male-order Mate bit and was feeling quite guilty about it. I'd tell him soon enough about it. I just wanted to make sure I was really going through with this first.

The speaker turned on and between the crackling, all I could make out was that my stop was next, which I had already known. But the announcement told me it was coming sooner rather than later, and knots formed in my belly once again.

I gathered up my things and shoved them into my carry-on, finishing just as the train was pulling into the stop. I hated that I had to ship my suitcases ahead, but they were too heavy for me to lug around, and it felt safer just to ship them.

"I've got this," I told myself and stood up, looking around to note that I was the only one on this car getting off. I had known it was a small town, but that really exemplified how small.

As I climbed out of the car, bag in tow, I did notice a few people coming out of other cars, which gave me a bit of comfort. I grabbed my carry-on, which one of the conductors had taken off for us as I navigated the steps, and headed toward the small station. And by small, I meant tiny.

It didn't take long before I saw the grizzly I was there to meet. He was one of only three people waiting for travelers, but even if he had been in a crowd of a thousand, I'd have spotted him. There was nothing about the man that would blend. He was tall, built, and had a presence that just drew me to him. And even his white chef's hat didn't distract from his features, and there were very few people who could pull one of those off.

And in his hand? The man didn't carry a bouquet of flowers, not that I'd have turned them down. No, he carried a bread basket—an actual bread basket filled with all kinds of breads from what I could see of them. The grizzly knew how to woo a squirrel, that was for sure.

A few feet from him, the scent of the delicious carb-loaded gift tickled my nose, but it was out-powered by the scent of Stefano, my future mate. He was all nutmeg and clove, and I wanted nothing more than to lean in and scent him deeply. But I hadn't even spoken one word to him yet, and there were humans present, making that a piss-poor idea.

Mate.

Ours.

Eat.

My squirrel was on board with this, and that made me happy, especially with how jerky he'd been at the notion of moving.

"I'm Pilan," I said, unsure if I should shake his hand or hug him or just smile. The basket of bread made me choose the last option.

"It's great to meet you." He pushed the bread basket forward. "I brought carbs. City people eat carbs, right? It's back in fashion."

I had to chuckle because he was right. Carbs were love-hate in the city, everyone trying to keep up with not only eating trends but also fashion trends that included how much you could weigh and be acceptable. It was gross, and one thing I was glad to never fall prey to. Like me or don't. I was never giving up bread.

"Carbs are out in the circles I was in."

His face fell.

"But never for me." I dropped my carry-on to the platform and grabbed the basket. "Bread is my all-time favorite food—especially toasted with melty butter seeping into every nook."

"And cinnamon sugar?" He smiled so brightly, it nearly knocked me over.

"Oh my gods, yes!"

It was official. Everything was going to be okay.

Chapter Nine

Stefano

He loved carbs.

Which was amazing since I baked a lot of carbs, on a regular basis. Most of them were for the restaurant, but of course Pilan would have first dibs on any that he wanted. I made a mental note to prepare something with extra cinnamon sugar. Like...cinnamon buns? I hadn't done those today, and they were a big hit on the weekends in The Grizzly.

He held the basket and inhaled the scents, but I could no longer even smell the fragrances of blueberries and sugar and spices. Because this squirrel had the most enticing scent of vanilla with an undertone of oil paint. And my grizzly loved it.

He more than loved it.

Usually the bear was quiescent inside me unless we were going to shift and run. Then he was right there for it, but the rest of the time, like when I was cooking or hanging out with my brother, he rarely had a thing to say.

“My bear likes you,” I blurted, and he lifted his face so fast, I feared he'd wrenched his neck.

Eyes wide, he clutched the basket closer, and for a moment, I thought I'd spoken out of turn, but then a smile broke out, and his narrow face glowed with it. “Thank you. My squirrel is pretty excited, too.”

We stared at one another for another moment before he asked, “Do you have a car?”

“No, I had to bring the pickup truck. Are you ready to go? Did you have any other luggage?”

“I had some stuff shipped, but this is all I brought on the train.” He reached for the handle of his wheeled bag, but I beat him to it.

“Let me help you.”

He grinned, and I wanted to keep him smiling all the time. “I will let you because I’m not letting go of this basket. How did you ever think of doing this instead of something more ordinary like candy or flowers?”

I waved at my chef’s hat. “It seemed like the thing to do at the time.”

We walked to the car side by side. Even though he was several inches shorter than me, we seemed to be in perfect step. I liked how he came up just to my shoulder and walked with a lithe and light step. Somehow his lightness carried over to me, instead of making me feel thick and heavy next to him.

“Sorry about the truck. The SUV is in the shop.” I hefted his bag into the back and reached for the basket.

He clutched it to him. “I’ll hold on to it.”

I really hadn’t wanted to put it back there, although I did have a cloth to tuck around it and keep the road dust off, but, “It’s going to crowd you in the seat,” I protested.

“But what if they all blow away?”

“There’s more where those came from.” An image of the kitchen counters I’d left behind filled my mind. “So much more.”

“And you really baked it all yourself?”

“Yes. I do have kitchen help, but yes, this was all me. I might have been a little keyed up this morning, waiting to meet you.” I was never this open with anyone, especially about personal things, but somehow, it seemed right. He might be my mate, and if so, I wanted to start out on an honest foot. Or at least, be honest because an honest foot sounded weird to me.

“Do we have far to travel?” He settled back with his basket and selected a blueberry muffin. “Mmm. Is it all right if I eat these now?”

“Well, it’s fine with me but maybe not all of them, unless you want a belly ache.”

He bit into the muffin and moaned, and my cock went on full alert. My bear growled in pleasure that we were feeding our omega.

I leaned back and tried to chill out all the parts of me so I could drive us safely to The Grizzly. Looking at the lightweight hoodie he wore reminded me of something. “It isn’t far, but I was wondering if you have a warm jacket with you? It’s awfully chilly here at night.”

“This isn’t going to cut it, huh?” He shrugged. “I don’t have anything heavier with me. I suppose I could just stay inside at night until I can do something else.”

“I don’t think we can do that. There’s so much beauty here at night, but even going from the house to the restaurant late in the evening will chill your bones sometimes. Let’s make a quick stop before we head for home.”

My bear rumbled at the word “home.” He very much was into having this squirrel under our roof where he’d be safe and warm. But warm we could do something more about, and so I steered the car to a local shop that specialized in just what I thought would be perfect for him.

An hour later, he was gaping at the pile of clothing on the counter. “Stefano, I can’t...maybe I could just pick out one sweater.”

“There’s nothing here you don’t need.” Or that my bear and I didn’t want him to have. “Please allow me to give you this little gift.”

“There’s nothing little about it. I saw the price tags. It’s not right for you to spend so much.”

The shop assistant, who up until this point appeared very eager—no doubt there would be a generous commission involved—began to appear worried.

“Give us a minute,” I told the assistant and, taking Pilan’s hand, led him away from the counter to speak to him privately. Just that contact was intense and electrical, but I had things to do and could consider what that meant later.

“I can’t—”

Placing a finger on his lips, I shook my head. “You can. You gave up everything and moved here to be with me. All I did was bake a few muffins and drive to the station. Let me do this for you. It will make me feel better to know you have what you need.”

To my shock, the alert, chipper squirrel shifter’s eyes got glossy. “I didn’t give up anything worth keeping. But I will

accept your gift in the spirit it's given.”

Behind the counter, the assistant was adding up the items we'd picked out. It was a lot, but what was a better use of my money than this? I did use everything I had to start The Grizzly, but since we'd been turning a profit, I was mostly just banking my share. Watching Pilan return to the counter and pick up a soft gray sweater, rub it against his cheek, was everything. My bear and I were happy.

The drive home wasn't 100 percent comfortable. We did run out of conversation once or twice, but overall, I felt much better about today than I had ever imagined being. Maybe I didn't need to be mad at Giorgio after all.

Chapter Ten

Pilan

The plan was for us to go home, gods I loved the sound of that, but as was the way of things, the plan changed when Stefano's timer on his phone went off. At first he just ignored it, but he had the annoying kind that got louder and louder with each beep, and eventually, ignoring it no longer became an option. He pulled over and fished his phone out of his back pocket.

"Sorry about that. I forgot." He plopped the phone in the cup holder and buckled his seat belt back up. "I forgot about work."

"So we need to go there first?" I didn't mind. It was a place where I could eat my bounty and maybe get a feel for the culture here. And honestly, being at work with him sounded better than being in a new place all alone.

"No. It's fine. I'll just...I'll..."

I settled my hand on his shoulder, loving the way his body warmed me all the way through.

"I don't mind. It will be nice to see where you work. Sidney mentioned it a couple of times in passing...as a place, not...that sounded creepy." I let out a long breath. "I'd be happy to go. It would be better than being home alone."

I loved the way home fell off my tongue.

"If you don't mind and people are great there. I forgot you know Sidney. I don't know him well, but my brother does, I

think. I've seen his art though. It's amazing." He relaxed under my touch and I became increasingly aware of our physical connection and pulled it away.

"I really don't. It will be nice for me to see how things are here. Back in NYC things were very hurry, hurry. I imagine here isn't like that." And it was one of the things I was looking forward to. When I first moved to the city, I loved everything about it, but it wore on me, and quickly. I didn't even realize how much until the notion of moving hit me.

"Okay. But I'll make sure you know how to get home if you want to leave."

"I don't know how to drive," I confessed. "But it's fine. I'll be fine." I wasn't sure who I was trying to convince more, him or me.

"So you would be fine being trapped here?" He looked visibly uncomfortable. "I wouldn't like that—you being trapped."

"I could always squirrel out and hide in the trees; there are a lot of them."

Stefano pulled onto a dirt road.

"I don't want you to ever feel you need to squirrel out to be safe." He drove up to a cabin. "This is our home. We came in the back way. I'm driving us the rest of the way, but remember how we get there so you can walk back."

He was so serious and in a protective, not possessive way. It had my squirrel purring. He wasn't purring in the way wild squirrels do as a way of warning; no, he was purring with

pleasure. In some ways, my beast was so domesticated it was humorous.

“I’ll pay attention,” I promised.

Stefano backed out of the spot and drove a very short distance to The Grizzly. His cabin was basically in the car’s parking lot. I could see the convenience but also the potential dangers that brought with it. Who wants drunks randomly wandering to their home? No one. But he must’ve thought it safe or he wouldn’t have lived there. Or maybe it was a money thing and I was being a classist jerk like Julian, in which case I needed to cut it out.

“Why am I sensing fear all of a sudden?” He pulled to a stop and parked.

“You live on the same property as a bar.” I hated admitting that his home was an issue to me. “Drunk men are not a good thing.”

“Most all of our customers are shifters and no shifter could possibly afford enough booze to get drunk.” He was right. That would be a ton of liquor. “And we never serve humans to intoxication. It’s too much of a liability. I promise you on my life that it is safe here. And if you don’t feel that way after a bit, I’ll gladly get us a new place.”

“Thank you. And it’s fine. I was just surprised.” And if it turned out it wasn’t fine, I’d make it be fine. This was my mate and the home he adored. Taking that away from him over nerves was a dick move if I ever saw one.

“I stand by what I said.” He took the keys out of the ignition. “Do you mind sharing why you don’t drive?”

His question took me aback, not because it wasn't a question I'd been asked before, because it had—many times, but because I was waiting for more about the whole living-at-a-bar thing, Stefano wanting to make sure I was at ease with it. I might've only known him a short time, but there was no mistaking his protectiveness.

“Well, I never needed to drive in the city and back home, I walked everywhere. Don't worry though, I'm never trapped. My squirrel can get in and out of just about anywhere.” I chuckled, but also—it was true. My squirrel was a shifty little bugger.

“I can't wait to meet him.” Stefano's words surprised me in the best of ways. “And if you feel the need to leave, tell me and I will make it happen.”

It was a vow and had my squirrel prancing around like he was king of the universe.

We went inside, bread basket in hand. I wasn't letting those go. The bar was not yet open, the only person in the room, Stefano's brother. There was no mistake about it. Even if I hadn't known a brother existed from our chitchat in the car, I'd have recognized the family resemblance instantly.

“Giorgio, I have someone for you to meet.”

Giorgio set down the rack of glasses and came right over, hugging his brother and then standing awkwardly near me as if unsure if he should do the same to me or not. I gave the bear a quick half hug, not wanting to mush my bread while at the same time putting him out of his misery.

“Your brother says I'm here because of you.”

“He needed a kick in the ass.” He shrugged and given my reason for being there was my life crumbling was just as good a reason as any. “Why are you here, Brother?”

“Because this is my job.”

“Go the eff home and spend time with your mate. Like work would come before that.” The bear rolled his eyes, and I pictured the two of them growing up and giving each other buckets of trouble all in fun.

“You could’ve told me that earlier.” Stefano bantered back with humor tinging both his voice and his mannerisms.

“Then I wouldn’t have been the first one to meet your mate, now would I?”

They laughed, hugged again, and promised to see each other soon. And we would’ve left right then and there had we not been noticed by a few others from the back room. It looked like we were staying, at least long enough to meet some people.

And really, I was fine with that. It was obvious from the second they called out his name that everyone at The Grizzly cared about my mate and that mattered. That mattered a lot. Was I tired? Absolutely, but this...this was important. So important that all of the nerves that fled from me on our ride from the train station started to inch their way back in.

These people were an integral part of my mate’s life and I had to make a good first impression. Me...a far too young, male-ordered mate who sort of had an art career for a nanosecond and not much else going for him. On paper I looked like the worst match ever.

But then I looked over and saw Stefano watching me, a genuine smile on his face, one that reached his eyes. He didn't care what I looked like on paper. He saw me as more than that even though we'd barely known each other for an hour.

Chapter Eleven

Stefano

Properly dismissed by Giorgio, who had been watching me for clues as to how things were going, I led Pilan around The Grizzly pointing out some of my favorite features of the dining room and bar areas. Our tables and chairs had been carved by craftsmen in the area, and we'd incorporated art from local craftspeople as well. I wasn't surprised to see Pilan, an artist himself, studying a particular painting that was my personal favorite.

"I can't read the signature, but whoever he is, he's talented," he mused.

I was about to tell him the artist when Giorgio stopped to ask me something, and by the time he'd left, we'd moved on to another painting. I had planned to tell him it was created by another Male-Order Mates app omega, but maybe that would have been too personal anyway. Seemed like the kind of thing Sidney should tell him himself if he wanted to. Not that it was a secret.

"And now that I've shown you where Giorgio works, I want to show you my domain."

"Giorgio handles the front, while you are always in the back?"

Funny how he summed it up so quickly. "That's pretty much what it has been, although I've been thinking I should spend at least a bit more time out here with the customers."

“You should. If your other food is half as good as what was in that basket, they should be lined up outside all day and night.”

“Did he say was?” Giorgio had reappeared. “What happened to everything in the basket?”

“It’s not all gone,” Pilan said, gaze fixed on the floor. “Just part of it.”

In fact, he’d eaten a good third of the breads and treats, but I wasn’t going to fink on him if he was embarrassed by it. One of the things I hated most was to be made to feel that way myself. “Come on, Pilan, let’s go see the kitchen.”

We left Giorgio behind, along with the customers who had been filtering in since we got there. In the kitchen, my helper was frying some burgers, but his counter space was really limited, and I felt a little guilty. He tried so hard to do a good job and hoped to be promoted to sous-chef soon. “Hey, Jon. Meet Pilan. He’s my...” Oh hell, how did I introduce him right at the beginning without overstepping?

“Hi, Jon.” Pilan stepped forward with his hand extended. “Sure smells good in here.”

Jon shook his hand, smiling. “Does, doesn’t it? We have the best bison and beef here, bought from some of the local ranches.”

“And all the food!” Pilan turned in a circle, waving at the laden counters. “You must go through a lot in a day.”

Jon choked, and so did Giorgio, who for all his trying to get us to go away on our own just kept showing up. I flashed him a glare, but it didn’t do a thing to quell my brother’s

response. “Stefano cooked all of it while waiting to go to the station. He was a little nervous.”

“He told me he’d cooked a bunch, but wow. Me, too, on the nervousness though,” admitted Pilan. “ I don’t cook much. I can make ramen, toast, maybe a scrambled egg...”

“You have no worries there. As long as you are with Stefano, you’ll never go hungry.”

At this point, I decided I’d show my m-Pilan around outside. Giorgio had good intentions, but he was too vested in this going well, and we needed to spend time together and get to know one another. So, after the fastest kitchen tour in history, I guided the squirrel shifter outside and toward my home. I was in the older of the two mostly because I’d wanted to redesign my kitchen using a lot of the century-old “bones,” and as he mounted the steps to the porch, Pilan looked around admiringly.

“This is just what I imagined a house at the edge of the forest would look like. It’s very old, isn’t it?”

“Pretty much. We were sharing a house, Giorgio and I, until recently. Then we decided we were grown-ups who should have their own homes, so we built one for him. It’s not very big, but there is room to expand if I ever want to.”

“I was living in a penthouse with a roof garden, and it was nice, but this is so much better.” He sat on the edge of one of the pair of rockers. “Much.”

“I’m not sure how you can know that. You haven’t even been inside yet.”

“And I want to see the inside, but the main thing is that even from out here, it feels homey.”

I opened the door and waved him in. “Well, come on in and see if it feels the same in here.”

He stepped inside and walked over to the couch, resting his hand on the leather back. “Oh. Yes. Definitely.”

I followed with his bag that we’d picked up on the way from the truck. Also, the basket, which I set on the breakfast bar that divided the living room from the kitchen, and the shopping bags full of new clothes. “I know you had some muffins and things, but are you hungry for lunch?”

“I don’t want you to go to any trouble.” He looked into the kitchen as if expecting those counters to be laden as well. And who could blame him? “But a little.”

“You probably didn’t get much to eat on the train,” I commiserated. “What would you like? I can make a cobb salad, paninis...cinnamon-sugar pancakes?”

He smiled again! I was getting hooked on it. “The last one. Is that really a thing?”

“Sure.” Actually it was a recipe I was just making up in my head now. “And maybe some bacon? Or I have sausage patties from the local butcher that are pretty tasty. You should have some protein, too.”

“Aren’t there eggs in the pancakes?” He arched a brow then shook his head. “I’m joking. First, I have no idea how to make pancakes, so that was a guess. Second, I think the sausage sounds great.”

I headed into the kitchen to put together what I thought would make a tasty pancake with his favorite flavor. I put the sausages in a skillet with a little water and covered them with a lid before turning on the flame low so they could thaw out before frying.

And I assembled the batter. Pilan hopped up on a stool at the bar and kept me company while I worked. In about fifteen minutes, I'd set the browned-butter beauties on a plate for each of us, along with the sausage patties, and joined him at the counter. It was so comfortable, I wanted lunch to last all day, but by the time we were finished, his eyelids were heavy. Travel was tiring, and I'd been keeping him talking all this time.

“Pilan, I need to check on Jon and make sure everything is going well in the kitchen. Maybe you'd like to rest for a little bit until I get back?”

He covered a yawn with the back of his hand. “Maybe just for a few minutes.”

“Stretch out on the couch, then, and I'll go get a blanket and pillow for you.”

When I came out of the bedroom, he was already asleep.

Chapter Twelve

Pilan

I was glad we went to The Grizzly, but I was equally glad to be heading back to my new home. It was nice to see where my mate worked and how the people around him loved him so. They didn't say those words, of course, but they did. And it filled both my squirrel and me with happiness to see.

I instantly fell in love with our new home. Stefano and his brother used to share the cabin that Stefano and I would be living in. He didn't kick his brother out or anything; the two of them just built a second house. My guess was because their bears were ready to settle down. Our animals tend to know things before we do, for squirrels anyway, and I projected that right onto the bears.

The cabin that was ours sat in the back of the property, closest to the woods. My squirrel was all about that. There was so much for him to explore and right near our new home. I was less sure I'd like the wilderness being so close, but more because I'd never lived so far away from everything. It would be an adjustment, but all things would be. That was kind of how life worked.

The inside put the outside to shame. There was a comfortable feeling that settled into me from my first step inside. Even my squirrel was in agreement. He settled right down, no longer pushing at the forefront to take everything in.

Watching my mate cook—he was a chef. He called himself a cook, but it wasn't accurate. He wasn't someone

who simply flipped burgers or baked some chicken. Stefano understood the balance of flavors and textures that made things work. I'd only tasted a few of his items, but his talent shone through.

The pancakes might've been the best thing I ever put in my mouth. And the company? Everything. And then it was time for him to go. When he first told me he was leaving, I waited for my nerves to come back, for me to second-guess everything or be worried about a drunk-assed serial killer coming to the house when he was gone. But when he went into the bedroom to grab me a blanket and pillow, and I climbed onto the couch, my exhaustion overtook everything, and I fell sound asleep, not waking up until he was already gone, my body covered with the softest blanket I'd ever felt.

A quick glance at the clock told me it was just a power nap, and I'd only slept a half an hour, which meant I probably had a couple-three hours left before Stefano returned. If I had all my things and knew where to put them, it would've been an ideal time to unpack. But my carry-on was mostly filled with clothes that needed washing if I even knew where to put them.

Run.

Climb.

Play.

My squirrel knew what he wanted to do, had from the time we arrived. And now that he was rested, too, he was ready. And given that nothing else needed doing, so was I.

“Fine. We can climb, but we are staying close to the house so we don't miss Stefano coming home.”

Mate.

Ours.

Play.

“Yeah, I don’t know if he likes to play the way we do. He might just want to look for honey and sleep in leaves.” Which was completely from a kids’ book and not reality but was also about as much as I knew about bears.

I took off my clothes and shoved them into my carry-on and cracked open a window. It was cold out, and I hated the idea of leaving it open, but it wasn’t like I could go outside naked, not with being so close to a public place. In the city, I had places scoped out where I could shift and not be caught. Here, I hadn’t managed to do any of that yet. I’d need to but not yet. For now, I needed to just let my pesky beast out.

I took my fur and climbed out the back window, jumping down to the grass. I had barely touched the ground, and my squirrel took off toward the first tree he saw and climbed up about halfway before stopping to turn around and look down. These trees were nothing like the ones back in NYC; they were huge. Like ginormous huge, and my squirrel loved it.

He climbed up and checked out the different branches and leaves and then scurried to the ground, circling around it, scenting for others who might’ve been there. He didn’t mind wild squirrels, but the jerk wanted to be the only squirrel in our bear’s life.

And to be fair, I did, too. I never in my wildest dreams thought I would connect with anyone this quickly, much less someone I met on an app. Sidney said he knew instantly that

his mate was for him, and I thought maybe he was a one-off. But I was quickly starting to think that the app was made of magic or something.

A car came rumbling into the drive, and I raced back up the tree. It was two people from the sounds of it, and for all I knew it was a lost delivery guy or possibly that drunk-assed serial killer with his victim. Probably not that, but given the number of movies I'd seen, it did cross my mind.

I watched carefully from my perch as both Stefano and Giorgio came into view. I bolted down the tree and over to them, tapping on my mate's foot to follow me. I wanted to talk to him but didn't dare shift where we were. Thankfully, both he and his brother followed me into the woods and out of sight. I took my skin.

"I didn't want you to worry when I wasn't there," I explained, a chill running through me.

"Why did you have us come out here?" Giorgio asked.

"Because I didn't want anyone to see me shift." I wrapped my arms around myself. It was too cold to be naked out here.

"They can't," Stefano assured me. "Promise."

"I believe you." Or wanted to anyway. I believed he was being honest, just was a bit concerned about the being visible thing. I really needed to spend some time exploring this place. "Gotta fur-out. It's cold."

I shifted back and Giorgio started to laugh a full-on belly laugh. Was he laughing at me and my Peeping Tom concerns or the being cold thing? I didn't know. It didn't matter. Even I

knew both were ridiculous—the cold, less for being cold and more for the way I just peaced out and took my tail.

“See, Brother.” He slapped his brother’s shoulder. “You are needed here, not at work. We can handle the shift there, and it looks like you have a shift to do here.” He laughed again, this time at his punniness.

And off he went, leaving me to watch my mate getting naked for the first time. I was not sad about it. Not. At. All.

Chapter Thirteen

Stefano

My grizzly was deep in love and chanting *mate, mate, mate* in a rumbling undertone that would have driven me to distraction had I not been so focused on the squirrel who was rambling on beside me.

While I was also taller than him in human form, we were close enough that we'd been in perfect step from the first. Not like marching but just the matching stride, the ease of walking side by side I'd noted when I picked him up at the station.

But of course, the size difference was magnified by, I don't know, several hundred times, when in animal form, which I was sure would make it much more difficult for him to keep up with me.

Also, as soon as we left the property, I became hyperaware of my surroundings. Grizzlies had no natural predators, to speak of. At least grown-up, healthy grizzlies. A mountain lion would hunt a cub or a sickly, elderly bear, given the chance, of course, but overall, grizzlies weren't most predators' idea of a safe dinner to attempt.

A squirrel? He was safe from almost nothing in the woods. Determined to keep him safe and at my side, I slowed my pace until I was almost tripping over my paws. I was looking left and right and even up. The tree canopy was pretty thick in this section, but that might not be enough to prevent a hungry hawk or eagle from dipping down. At least, I didn't

think so. I'd never paid much attention to what they did, except to admire their beauty in flight.

Having a squirrel at my side would change everything. I began to make plans in my mind to ensure he'd be safe when we were outside. Even our yard was dangerous because of those birds of prey—and it wasn't as if we had a high wall or even a fence separating us from the rest of the great outdoors.

Maybe it wasn't safe to bring him out here at all. I glanced to my side to see how he was doing, make sure he was able to keep up. Poor little guy's legs must be...

Where is he?

I must have left him behind. I'd been trying to move slowly but apparently not slowly enough. Cursing myself for an inconsiderate oaf, I turned and went back the way I came, peering under every bush and on the tree branches around in case he'd stopped somewhere to rest. I'd known I needed to pace myself, but his legs were so short, his furry, gleaming body not anywhere near big enough to keep up with a grizzly. What a fool I was.

I swore to all that guarded woodland creatures that if I found him, I'd never bring him out here again. It was too dangerous. Maybe he'd been taken already, some bobcat carrying him off to her den or—no, I couldn't think that at all! I just had to find him.

I didn't deserve a mate if I couldn't keep track of him for even a few minutes. Knowing the dangers, I'd gotten lost in thought and—

Loud chittering came from behind me, and I lumbered around to see an agitated squirrel bouncing toward me at a speed fast enough to kick up dust and leaves in his wake. I didn't speak squirrel, and had no access to his thoughts at least at this point, but it didn't take a translator to understand, *Where are you going, you big jerk? I was moving right along, and then I looked and you were gone! I thought bears were supposed to be faster with those long legs and... WTF is wrong with you?*

Maybe he wasn't saying exactly that, but it was close enough, and he couldn't say enough to cover my mistake. The danger I put him in. I dropped my head to the forest floor, between my paws, wanting to show him how sorry I was. If he chose to leave, I wouldn't blame him. Anything could have happened to him while I was distracted and being a terrible alpha.

Squeezing my eyes closed, I prepared to listen to whatever he wanted to say in squirrel speak. I deserved it.

But then the chittering cut off, and something brushed my cheek. Opening one eye, I found myself staring into the dark, liquid eye of a squirrel staring back. He chirped, a whole different tone, soft and friendly, and I held my breath. He had every right to be angry. I had assumed he was going to be a slowpoke, when as I had witnessed, he was fast. Maybe not as fast as me at a dead lope—but I didn't lope often anyway.

I growled, low, wondering if I should shift so we could talk out what just happened, but then, he rubbed his nose against mine and crept onto my shoulder, rubbing against the side of my head and making the most extraordinary sound.

How had I not known that squirrels purred?

Captivated, I slowly rose to my feet—all four of them—and lumbered forward, moving slowly at first, concerned about whether he might not be able to hold on, but after a few yards, he gave me a chitter and nipped my ear.

Taking that to mean, “speed up,” I did. A little at first, then more, then, as I reached the meadow, at a full-out lope. It felt amazing. Freeing. Running with someone like him, someone I already felt so happy to be with, was something beyond my dreams and my bear’s joy vibrated through me.

Pilan clung to my shoulder and chirped encouragement, alternating with purrs that my bear answered with rumbles, and we had a whole animal thing going when we rounded the ancient pine at the far end of the meadow and turned for home.

I’d wondered how we’d have a run together, and how I could protect him when we were in the forest...but my brilliant squirrel had presented the perfect solution.

As we neared the tree line and emerged onto our property, I finally slowed and, at the back steps of the cabin, came to a stop. Pilan hopped up onto the porch rail and sat, his beautiful fluffy tail curled around him. I dropped to the ground, huffing from exertion, but exhilarated in a way I’d never been before.

Eventually, we shifted and dressed and went inside where I found a note from Giorgio telling me there were plates of some of my earlier cooking adventures keeping warm in the oven. *Since you’re off frolicking somewhere, we thought you might get back too late to cook. I know it’s your love language,*

but don't fuss. You did cook this after all. G. He'd also stuck a bottle of wine in the fridge and left a pie on the counter.

My brother the matchmaker. He'd done everything but light candles on the table. Oh, he'd brought candles, but he didn't light them. I hadn't decided if it was being pushy on my part to up the romance to that level, but when I came to the table with the plates, Pilan had made the decision for me. And I was glad.

We had a nice meal together, but we didn't talk much. He'd had a long day, between traveling and being in a new place, and, of course, I'd cooked enough for a thousand people then run all afternoon in the forest. It seemed like enough for one day.

Chapter Fourteen

Pilan

I had a blast running with my mate. Even with the miscommunication we had initially, it turned out to be everything I could've dreamed of and more. His bear was stunning. Beyond stunning. In my head, I had been picturing a black bear even though I knew full well he was a grizzly. It wasn't until I saw him that first time that I fully grasped the difference between the two types of bears and not just in the color of their coat.

Stefano was twice the size of the black bear I'd seen in the wild back east. At least twice the size. I hadn't stuck around to see if the bear I'd come face-to-face with was a cub or not, but still...Stefano was huge. That had been both the first and the last time Gramps and I went camping. We both decided we liked running around in beast form just fine, but that we much preferred a warm bed and hot shower as humans.

We came back in and ate, the food delicious. Giorgio cracked me up. He set us up with a meal—but not a meal he cooked. No. He went and brought something my mate had made earlier. It was scrumptious, and I was happy for it, but I very much saw the humor in it.

The two of us didn't really talk much over dinner. Not because we didn't have things to talk about. There were plenty of discussions we were going to need to have in the near future, everything from where to put my things to what I could do for work around here. But the quiet was what we both

needed, just to bask in each other's company and decompress from a very long day.

"I'm going to take a shower before bed unless you want to sneak in there first," Stefano said, and I appreciated the offer.

In the penthouse, there was no need to ask who went first; there were plenty of showers and enough hot water for the entire city. But even if that weren't the case, Julian wouldn't have asked me. He just didn't care that much.

"Go ahead. I want to call Gramps to let him know that I'm safe." I'd told my mate about my Gramps, and it was time to tell Gramps about him.

"Tell him he's invited here anytime." He gave me a smile, the one I'd already grown to love, and headed to the bathroom.

I believed him, too. He would gladly have Gramps here for a visit.

My grandfather picked up on the first ring, and I told him I arrived safely and how my squirrel felt about Stefano. I waited for him to respond the way he had with Julian, telling me I was moving too quickly, and I was too young. He didn't.

"Our squirrels know," was all he said on that.

When I heard the shower shut off, I let my grandfather know it was time for me to go and was sure to invite him to visit. I didn't expect him to reply in the affirmative. He'd avoided NYC like the plague. To my surprise, he told me that he would love that, and that we'd figure it out after I was fully settled.

My shower felt amazing, the hot water absolutely what I needed. I had a pair of joggers and a T-shirt left that were

clean and threw them on. They were hardly sexy and, while I was over-the-top attracted to the grizzly, rushing into that part of things felt like a foolish idea. So maybe being unsexy was for the best.

“I need to do a load of laundry in the morning.” I set my bag in the corner of the bedroom, Stefano already in bed.

“I can do it now.” He started to climb out of bed, but I shook my head.

“Tomorrow is soon enough. I’ve had a long day and based on all the food you prepared, I’d say you did as well. Let’s get some sleep.”

He agreed, and I climbed into bed and closed my eyes. “Good night.”

“Night, sweet squirrel.”

I was used to people calling me many things, but sweet wasn’t one of them. They always focused on what I could do or what they wanted to do to me: sexy, talented, ambitious, lazy. It all depended on who was saying it, but sweet? That was a new one for me, and I liked it.

“Thank you, I needed that.” I curled onto my side to snuggle into sleep.

“No. What you needed was an apology,” he said so softly that even with my great hearing, I wasn’t sure I heard him correctly.

I rolled over to face him. “For?”

“I underestimated your beast. And I shouldn’t have.”

“It’s fine. Most people don’t really understand how fast and crafty we are.” I half shrugged. “And to be fair, when I first saw your bear, I realized I’d underestimated you, too. In my head, I had you as a black bear, only brown. And besides, it wasn’t like I didn’t question you in my own way. Not intentionally, but the house location did kind of twitch me out for a bit, and it wasn’t until we talked about it in your house that I finally felt at ease.”

“I guess we both had a lot to learn about each other.” He brushed a hair from my brow. “Good thing we have time. How was the conversation with your grandfather?”

“Great. He wants to come when I’m settled.”

“So you’re staying?” His question took me off guard. I assumed he thought this was a done deal. I mean, I traveled across the country. Hearing him say that things were still my choice...it had my eyes tearing up and I shut them before he could see. Not that I didn’t want him to know that I was happy but because we had enough emotions for one day. It was time to sleep and allow the rest of everything to be dealt with another time.

“Yeah. I want to stay. ’Night.” I rolled back over. “This is the side I always sleep on.” I let him know, not wanting him to think it was him.

“I sleep facing the opposite way,” he said back. “I guess we are doomed for a lifetime of back cuddles.”

“I could be okay with that.” I scootched over and pressed my back against his.

I awoke the next morning in the same position. Yes, back cuddles would do nicely.

Chapter Fifteen

Stefano

Giorgio had really gotten the word out about the all-you-can-eat event at The Grizzly. I knew this because when Pilan and I dashed into town after breakfast to pick up some sundries he'd forgotten to bring, everyone I ran into asked me about it. And by the time we got back, the parking lot was filling up. I would have offered to let him take the SUV, since it was back from the shop, but the city squirrel had never gotten a driver's license. And I can't lie, I didn't mind going with him at all. Something as mundane as finding the soap he liked had been like a treasure hunt at the drugstore. And I wanted to tell the world he was staying. It was early times, but my bear and I were all in.

"Wow, is business always this good?" He had his face pressed to the window. "No wonder you cooked all that food."

I couldn't suppress my laughter at his comment. "Actually, although we're usually pretty busy, it's this crowded because I cooked all the food. Giorgio is an amazing marketer, and the event everyone was asking about"—as if they weren't also hoping for an introduction to Pilan—"is a good way to use everything I prepared."

"Oh." He leaned back in the seat. "Do you need any help with getting it all ready to serve or anything?"

I started to tell him no, he could just go home and relax until I got off work, but then my selfish side, backed up by a

certain grizzly with the biggest crush ever, said, “That would be great. I’d like that very much.”

We left the truck in the rear employee parking area and, after we dropped off our purchases, it was time to head in and make this party happen. Not that I’d be partying, of course, but I had a lot of work to do to get everything ready for the crowd we’d have arriving this evening.

I had been making a list of how I wanted to present all the food, and as soon as we arrived in the kitchen, I wrapped Pilan in an apron and gave him a quick hug. “You sure you want to do this? You’re an artist, not a kitchen helper.”

“I’m sure I want to hang out with you. I don’t even have my painting things yet, and I like to keep busy. Put me to work, boss.”

I fixed the squirrel shifter with a firm boss-like frown. “Pretty sassy there, squirrel.”

If Jon hadn’t slapped a hand over his mouth, cutting off a chuckle, my words might have had a better effect on Pilan. Instead, the two of them laughed so hard, they ended up holding each other upright and wiping away tears.

“It’s lucky you’re only here temporarily because I think the two of you would be getting into a lot of trouble together.” I wasn’t laughing, much.

“We’re sorry, boss,” Jon echoed the name. “But we will behave, right, sassy squirrel?”

“Right.” Pilan stood straight up and gave an attempt to look serious, but then his lip quirked and a giggle slipped out. “That’s the last one, I swear.”

I wasn't angry. I'd fallen for his smile when I met him, and his laughter was musical and even more enticing. But we did have work to do, so I sent the two of them out into the dining room to set up the steam tables and other serving things while I started cooking—reheating—arranging...whatever.

Things got busy fast, after that. With the people pouring into the bar, Giorgio asked me if we could serve earlier than planned, so my helpers and I were rushing back and forth. Pilan took over placing cold meats and cheeses and vegetables and breads on platters with an artistic flair I could not hope to match. Jon carried things out, joined by some of the waitstaff from out front.

When he had a moment to breathe, Pilan peeked out into the dining room. "They are a loud bunch considering they are eating. And so many of them."

I came up behind him and peered over the top of his head. "That's because there are at least twice as many guests as we are allowed by the fire code." I sank back to lean against a counter. "What is Giorgio thinking? Would you go out and see if you can find him, tell him I need to talk to him?"

He cast a look over his shoulder but then smiled. "Sure, but it's lucky he looks so much like you, or I'd never find him in that mob." The door swung closed after him while I pondered the fact that I'd never thought we looked a bit alike, my brother and I.

But I was too busy to waste time contemplating the genetic pool that made the squirrel think we looked alike. Instead, in the hope that we could move some of the people through and out the door if I gave them dessert, I turned my

attention to the pies, cakes, cookies, and other sweet treats I'd prepared. At the time, I knew it was quite a bit, but this evening, I'd begun to wonder how I'd done this much.

Luckily, it seemed my brother had managed to make use of my nervous cooking to create the event of the season. Jon came back in for refills of some of the pans and told me people were wondering if we could do this every month. Or every week. I wasn't sure I could pull it off on my own when not under the pressure I had been.

But maybe we could figure out something.

The next time Jon came in, I asked him where Pilan was, because he'd been gone at least ten minutes, and I was starting to worry.

He waved me over to the swinging door where I found myself once again peeking into the dining room. "I don't see him."

"That's because he's surrounded by admirers. Over in the corner there."

"Oh. I see."

"Don't be mad at him, he really did get waylaid. They all wanted to meet your mate. You're very well liked, you know."

I rolled my eyes. "For my food, maybe." But I shook off any irritation. I was truly glad that the gang at The Grizzly was making my mate welcome. He was fun and animated and would probably be the life of any party. And the least I could do was what I did next. I stripped off my apron, dropped my chef's hat on the counter—not like at the train station where I looked like the hot-cross-buns salesman in a children's picture

book—and took a deep breath before plunging into the wall-to-wall mob scene that made up The Grizzly’s dining room and bar.

The corner Jon had pointed out lay at the far point from where I started out, and even without my hat, of course everyone knew who I was and wanted to tell me what they liked best and what they wished we’d serve next time.

It was strangely reminiscent of my old job with its demands, or would have been, except that these people were not jaded and were the same ones who would eat bison burgers every night and be complimentary. They recognized this as a special meal and loved it.

And I loved them all for it. Except by the time I made it to the corner booth where Pilan sat, the sheer number of people had overwhelmed me some. But then he looked up at me, and smiled, and everyone else faded away. He scooted over and patted the seat. “Come sit with us. Do you know Sidney?”

“Huh?” I looked up to see he sat next to the artist whose work he had admired and whose baby shower we had hosted. “Oh yes, hello.”

“I know him, too.” If not for the fact that Sidney was happily mated, I’d have been jealous about how happy he was to be sitting with the raccoon shifter. “In fact, we were online friends before I got here. Isn’t that great? He’s going to introduce me to his connections in the local art scene. Isn’t it a small world?”

I agreed it was, and when he slipped his hand into mine under the table, I was happier than I’d been since he left the kitchen a while earlier. And far more comfortable than usual

because I had my mate by my side and friends all around us.
Now, I was happy.

Chapter Sixteen

Pilan

The party was nothing like the ones in the art world. People ate, were themselves, and had a good time. It was fun, especially when I got to help. There was something about working side by side with my mate that was so rewarding. And it was also like he was sharing a special side of himself with me. I didn't quite get it, but I didn't need to. I just needed to enjoy it.

One of the nicest parts about the party, aside from my time with Stefano, was getting to spend some time with Sidney. He was so nice, when most people in his situation would despise me. And really, the red flags had been there. I should've noticed what Julian was up to, but I didn't. And if Sidney forgave me, it was about time I forgave myself. Both of us were in a better place than we'd have been had it not been for the jerk face, so there was that.

He didn't even pretend to care when I let him know I was moving out. I mean, yeah, I knew he was about to get rid of me, but the facade of caring would've been nice. Instead, he told me to leave my key on the counter. Made it easy not to look back and wonder what could've been and all that jazz. I doubted that I would've anyway. Not with Stefano being so... well, Stefano.

We walked back home, both of us pretty beat from the event but also pretty wound up. We weren't going to be going

to sleep anytime soon, which worked for me because as much as I wanted to go to bed, sleep wasn't what I had in mind.

My attraction to Stefano increased by the minute. Each little subtle touch as we brushed by each other, each whiff of his scent, each kind word had me wanting to jump his bones. Which probably wasn't the way to do things. We were trying to build something here, and that meant that we should take it slow—ish. Probably. Maybe. I wanted no part of slow.

“I'm going to teach you how to drive soon,” he noted as we passed the now fixed SUV. “It's better for you to not feel trapped.”

“Squirrel here. Never trapped.” But that wasn't exactly true. I had been before I came here...I just was too naive to see it at the time.

“Still, unless you have a reason not to learn, it would make me feel better.”

“I didn't need to drive, and insurance and cars cost money. That's the only reason. I'd be happy to have you teach me.” And a bit scared but not by him being my teacher. No, I'd be scared of the stupid ton of metal I was directing.

“Perfect. Let's go in and grab something to drink. I'm parched.”

I was, too, now that he mentioned it.

“Sounds great and I can use a shower.” I was covered in things I managed to spill on myself as I maybe got distracted by the eye candy that was my mate.

“I'll heat up some milk for cocoa, and we can swap places with the shower when you're done. I'm wearing garlic.” He

did have the scent about him. But I liked garlic and didn't mind as much as I minded the vinegar on my pants.

I took a quick shower, and the milk was still heating up when I came out to switch places. I promised to make him the best hot chocolate ever and sent him on his way, proud of myself for not following him in there. One day, we would reach that level in our relationship, it just wasn't now. Instead, I put all of my effort into making the best cocoa ever, as promised.

My grandfather had a secret recipe, and I managed to find all the ingredients in the pantry to make it and was proud as punch when Stefano came out, saw it, and smiled brightly.

"This is real cocoa." He brought the mug up to his lips, blew on the hot liquid then took a small sip. Between watching his lips and seeing his hair still damp and tousled, I had my cock doing a little number in my pants. It wanted out, and that wasn't going to happen. Not just yet anyway. We had to be on the same page first. At least I knew we were in the same books.

"It's a family recipe."

He put down the mug, a bit of cocoa on his upper lip.

"You have some cocoa on you." I pointed on me where it was on him.

"Maybe you could get it off of me?" He opened the door for me, letting me know that if I wanted to lean in and kiss him I could but also giving me a built-in way out, where I could just pick up a napkin and take care of it. It was sweet and considerate and only made me want to jump him more.

But for now, I was going to settle for a kiss. I closed the distance between us. “I’d be happy to help you.” I stood up on my toes and let my tongue dart out to taste the sweet remnants of his beverage. “Delicious.”

“I was thinking the same.” He reached up and cupped my cheek. “Oh no. I think you have some on your lip,” he teased.

“Would you possibly be able to help me with that?”

“I’d love to.”

I leaned into his touch as he brought his lips to mine for the sweetest kiss I’d ever had in my life. I wanted more and, when our lips broke apart, I decided I was having none of that and initiated another kiss—this one just a tad deeper.

Chapter Seventeen

Stefano

Cocoa and kisses were the sweetest way to end a long but wonderful day.

Or maybe not end it, but segue into another part of our night. We'd had a couple of days to get to know one another, and the best part was that we'd have so many more days and nights to do that now. It felt as if everything had changed since I got up a couple of days ago and cooked us out of bar and grill. One of the things I'd done today was place some big grocery orders online between getting food out for the clients.

And he'd come to help, my squirrel omega, when he didn't need to. He could have just stayed home and rested or watched TV or streamed something maybe, but instead he came in and helped in the family business.

He was an artist, and once he got all his supplies and things, he'd be busy with that, but I so appreciated him participating on the busiest day in our history. And then, who could have predicted that our all-you-can-eat night would turn into a welcome party for Pilan? I would probably never be a social butterfly, but I was sure more comfortable with him at my side. I wanted to protect him from all danger, but I also wanted to make him happy, and to do that, I knew I'd have to step out of the kitchen and join the world. For him, with him, I thought I might be able to do that.

But tonight? It was just us, and it was bedtime.

In a way, having slept together back-to-back the night before made it feel more natural. Yes, this was our bedroom, and this was our bed, and when we both slipped under the sheets in nothing but boxer shorts, it felt natural. Which did not do anything to take the edge off the desire that had me wanting him more than I'd ever imagined possible.

We lay side by side for a moment or two in the dim room, before I reached for his hand. "Are you sure?" I asked. "If you'd rather take more time..."

"No, I don't want any more time," he whispered, breathy and sexy. "Unless you do."

I brought our joined hands to the bulge in my shorts and brushed them across it. "What do you think? Omega, I've waited a long time for you, even though I didn't know it. While everyone I knew was pairing up, I never met anyone I was very interested in. And I had resigned myself to the fact that not every shifter finds their fated, and that I was going to be one of those who didn't." I lifted our hands to my lips and kissed his palm. "And then there you were at the station, and I knew then that I wanted you to stay."

"I'd come here to do that," he said, sidling closer until our legs touched. "To stay, I mean, but when I saw you, with that giant basket of bread and the chef's hat looking like I don't even know what, and my squirrel did a backflip, and my heart sped up, and for the first time in my life, I knew I was with the right person."

"I looked like a clown."

"You looked like a prince. Like an alpha. My alpha. And if the carbapalooza wasn't enough, you took me to that store

and bought me all those warm, cozy clothes.”

I slipped my free arm under his shoulders, cuddling him. “I couldn’t let you be cold.”

“I don’t like to talk about past relationships, but I want to clear the air of just one thing here. Sidney and I were with the same man. In fact, unknowingly, our time with him overlapped. And when we talked tonight, we agreed that neither of us had known what a true alpha was like. He’s so happy here with his Crios and their daughter Adeline. He showed me pictures of their family, so many pictures.”

“They’re a nice couple,” I agreed. “And I’m so glad you already have a friend.”

“A true alpha cares that their omega has everything they need like food and a comfortable home and warm clothes. You showed me what you are right away, and I can’t—” his voice broke, and I couldn’t stand hearing the pain from his life before me blending into the happiness I hoped we’d share. That I would make sure he enjoyed.

“I promise to make your comfort and happiness my priority every day,” I told him, blinking back tears. “It’s my job and my pleasure, and if you’re ready, I’d like to make love to you, and there’s a grizzly bear inside me insisting that I mark you as soon as possible.”

He rolled into my arms, and I gathered him close for a kiss, his scent surrounding me, enveloping me. Somehow our shorts were gone, maybe melted away, although we’d probably taken them off at some point, but I wanted every bit of our skin touching. I couldn’t get enough of him and somewhere in my mind was figuring out how to stay in bed

with him forever. Lightly furred skin like rough satin under my fingertips and lips.

I wanted to plunge inside him and feel his body close around me, but I also wanted to taste him. Kissing my way down, I decided to do both. His cock was as hard as mine but less broad, a little longer, and it curved gently. Gliding my hand over it, I reached the base and closed my fist, pointing the rounded head right at my mouth.

Pilan groaned and rocked his hips restlessly. I opened my mouth wide and closed it over the tip of my mate's cock, sucking gently and savoring his flavor. I lapped off the drop of precum and moaned. Hands closed on my head, fingers digging into my hair, and I took it as a hint to speed up. Bobbing my head up and down, I took in more and more of his cock, relaxing my throat so I could take him all.

He was tense and almost vibrating, tugging at my hair. "You have to stop. I'm going to... Ohhh." Warm cum poured down my throat, and I gulped it, every drop, not wasting any before rising up and looking at him.

I lifted his knees and brought them to his chest, baring his slick hole. I could see it shine in the dim light from the hallway. He was so ready for me, and I was so ready for him. I circled his dark hole with one finger and tested to be extra sure he was slick and could take me without pain. "You're so sexy, omega." I fitted my cock to the rim and pushed. He was tight but gave way, and I closed my eyes and plunged deep into his body, all that heat and scent and slick coming together to drive me higher and higher, closer and closer to an orgasm that remained out of reach.

With each retreat, I thought I'd come on the next thrust because I'd never felt this way before, never been so close or felt so good without tumbling over the edge, but it went on and on. He cried out under me, digging his fingers into my shoulders and holding on.

“Stefano!” he cried out and came again, spurting cum onto my chest to fall on his abdomen. And finally, his orgasm triggered mine, and I filled him up, my knot swelling to keep what I'd deposited inside and to join us. I dipped my head to his shoulder and sank my teeth into his skin, drawing blood and making a mark that would tell anyone who saw it that he had an alpha of his own.

“I want...I want to...” He didn't say the words, but he didn't have to. I knew and turned my head to the side. The burn of his teeth in my flesh should have hurt but it felt good, and as he pulled back, my knot shrank and I pulled out.

Dropping to lie beside him, I took his hand and kissed his knuckles. “That was...”

He nuzzled our hands next. “And more.”

The very best.

Chapter Eighteen

Pilan

Waking up in my mate's arms was great, but doing so after making love the night before—it was everything. I wanted to stay there nestled in his embrace all day long. My bladder? It wanted otherwise.

I attempted to slide myself off the bed without waking him but failed miserably. He tightened his arm around me, not fully awake but disturbed enough that while still mostly sleeping, he noticed me moving.

“I need to pee.” I gently picked up his arm and slid out. “Go back to sleep. I’ll be back in a minute.” I kissed his cheek as I settled the covers back over him and padded to the bathroom.

When I came back, Stefano was out of bed looking through our discarded clothing.

“What’s wrong?” Surely laundry could wait, but it didn’t look like a sorting-dirty-things sort of situation.

“My phone keeps going off, but I can’t find it to shut it down.” He dropped his pants and reached for a shirt.

“I’ll help.” And before I could, the notification I assumed he had been hearing went off again. “I think that’s my phone.” I found my joggers and pulled it out. Sure enough, it was all me. Fifteen notifications all in a row, and all from the shipping company.

“This is odd.” I unlocked my phone to figure out what was up, and a couple more notifications appeared in that short time. “They must be drunk. All of the notifications say a different location for my suitcases and things.” I shut down my phone. “Guess we’ll wait until they stop drinking to check them. According to the person when I dropped them off, they should be here tomorrow or the next day.” Which was good. I didn’t want to have to do laundry every other day. There was zero fun in that.

“Never mind. Let’s eat.” I grabbed my joggers and threw them back on. “I’m cooking.”

“You? Isn’t that my thing?” He had a fair point. I didn’t exactly have the culinary chops to out chef him, but I had one breakfast dish that no one could turn down—at least not anyone I cooked it for, who at present time was Gramps. Not the best sample size, but it would do.

“It might be your thing, but that doesn’t mean you need to always be the one doing it. Then it becomes a chore, and what is the fun in that?” I grabbed my shirt, not wanting to chance splattering my skin with hot butter as I cooked. “Besides, it is delicious.”

“I’m sure it will be. I’m sneaking in there.” He pointed to the bathroom.

He went off, and I watched because I’d seen that ass and planned to see it again anytime I got the chance. I didn’t even pretend not to be ogling him when he turned his head in my direction, instead shrugging. He laughed. I loved the sound of it and wanted to make it happen as often as possible.

Once in the kitchen, I found a gorgeous loaf of bread that was almost too pretty to cut and carved off a few slices. As pretty as it was, the taste of it was going to be a thousand times better. I reached for the cupboard where the glasses lived to find one the right size for an egg hole and realized that in this house, there would be actual cookie cutters. It didn't take long to find one, and I cut out a hole in each one.

My next mission was to find a griddle and get it heating up. My goal was to have everything cooking when he came out, the buttery scent tickling his nose when he emerged. I failed at that but had everything almost ready when he came over to me and kissed my cheek, and I called that good enough.

“What are you making? Need help?” It was a true offer. He wasn't pushing to take over like I assumed many chefs would.

“I got it. Just keep me company.”

“I can do that.” He kissed me again, this time on the lips, then stepped to the side, giving me room to cook.

“This was something Gramps taught me. He called it toad in a hole, but I've seen it called bird in a nest, too, although that one is a bit creepy if you ask me.” Seeing the “bird” was being cooked and all.

I explained to him how it was made and how my very first one ended up more shell than egg. He listened intently and watched as I did each step. Had I not known he could out-culinary me in a nanosecond, I wouldn't have known he was the expert the way he hung on my every word. It was a little

thing, but having him respond to me that way had me feeling cherished.

“Here you go.” I handed him his plate. “I like to dip the circle into the yolk,” I explained, not wanting him to think he needed to eat it all proper-like. Cooking the cutouts in butter on the grill made them far superior to regular toast and a thousand times worse for you. Worth it though. They were melt-in-your-mouth goodness.

“I love dippy eggs.” He grabbed the round and dunked it right in there. I hadn’t heard that term to describe over-easy eggs before, but it was very fitting and would now be my new go-to.

“Me, too.” We ate, Stefano making sure I knew just how much he appreciated the meal. “Do we need to sign for your packages?”

“I think so.” I had signed up for it to be the securest delivery possible, not wanting to lose the few paintings I was able to bring with me.

“Why don’t you see where they are, then? If they won’t be here until tomorrow, I can show you the gallery in town.”

“I’d love that.” I took out my phone and turned it back on, the thing exploding with notifications, my packages being scanned in every single city in this country by the look of it. But that wasn’t the worst of it. The worst was the final notification:

Lost in transit.

Fuck!

Chapter Nineteen

Stefano

Pilan was so distraught, I knew I had to fix this. He'd been so happy when I fed him and gave him a few sweaters and other winter garments, but an alpha's job was to see to his mate's needs. All of them. And from what I could see, he needed his paintings and personal items far more than he needed a blueberry muffin.

So, I opened my laptop and picked up my phone and Pilan's and sat down to do what I could. If they had gotten as far as the local town, I felt confident I'd be able to make things work because not only did the local postmistress stop by three times a week for a pulled pork sandwich and fries, and the manager of the local shipping store had a thing for spaghetti night, but every delivery driver who came down the highway tried to time it to have a meal with us. They might not know me well, but they knew who cooked their food. And while I didn't come out of the kitchen much, most of them had encountered me at least once. And if they ever wanted a bite of anything I cooked, they'd better help if they could.

I could call my food my super power, but I needed to consider what skills I had that could be used to accomplish this task. As a chef, especially back in the city, when I had a large staff, I'd learned to be very organized, and to this day was a list maker.

So I took Pilan's phone and made a list of all the places the delivery service claimed that his things had been, and it

was a long list. Then I pulled up a map of the US on my laptop and proceeded to mark every one of the locations to try and see if there was anything that made sense.

There was not.

The cases had traveled west then south then north then east. Basically in a complicated tapestry of motion that if I'd strung a string along the route, it would have looked like a spider web. But I was fairly certain of the last place at least one of them had been spotted.

Pilan was sitting on the couch and staring at the TV. I'd have bet he had no idea what was on, but it was better than staring into space, I supposed. I hated seeing him like this. He hadn't even complained since the *Lost in transit* notice.

"I think they show one of your bags in town at the shipping center."

I didn't want him to get his hopes up, so I warned, "Don't get too excited but we can try. And we can go into the gallery if you like while we're there. I don't have to be at work until later this afternoon. You up for a trip?"

"I guess."

I wished I could be more sure, but I'd called and gotten no answer at the center, so going in was our only chance of finding out if there was something there. They had limited hours and sometimes closed for random reasons. I got my keys and we went out to the SUV. Giorgio and I had shared our vehicles since we moved here, but now that I had a mate, I'd need to look into a car that just belonged to us. Probably, once

Pilan got his license, two cars. But for today, I'd settle for a suitcase, a few of his paintings, anything he needed.

Pilan was quiet on the way to town, but I didn't push him to talk. I had all my things everywhere around us in the cabin and all he had were the few things he'd brought on the train and the results of our shopping trip after he arrived. Overall, not a lot to make the poor guy feel like our home was his, too.

The shipping place was closed, of course, but I promised we'd go by again after we stopped at the post office. The postmistress was delighted to see me and even more delighted to meet my mate. She told him for a good ten minutes how much she loved her pulled pork sandwich and fries because, "You have to treat yourselves sometimes." When she finally wound down, I hurried to ask her if she had any packages for our address.

She was a very nice lady who had worked there for a very long time, but she wasn't the most organized person in the postal service. Meaning she had to do some searching to be sure before she told us she had nothing, but she did promise to keep an eye out in case anything came in.

We drove past the shipping place again, but the lights were out and the door was locked. With each stop, Pilan's shoulders drooped lower until I almost couldn't stand it.

The gallery was not closed. The door was not locked, and Franz, the owner was seated at a table at the back looking over a painting. He stood up when we entered and came forward. "Stefano, welcome. Is this your new mate?"

I shook his hand and introduced Pilan who came forward and shook as well.

“It’s very nice to meet you,” the gallery owner said. “We have a mutual friend who told me you might be interested in having us take a look at some of your work? We like having local artists featured here.”

“I’m honored that you would call me a local since I haven’t been here very long, but it seems that all my completed works are lost somewhere, hopefully, in the United States. If and when they get here, is the offer to consider hanging them still open?”

I was so impressed at the calm way he discussed this. Franz’s business might be located in a small town, but he had a reputation many in the cities envied. Local artists, like Sidney, were one of his focuses, but he had a wider reach than that might imply.

Franz nodded. “That’s terrible. I hope your work turns up, but if it doesn’t, maybe you can get started again. Just let me know when you have something for me to see.”

“I will, sir.” He strolled out of the gallery and was halfway down the block when I caught up with him. “I don’t even know what to do.”

My grizzly was desperate to help. He hated our mate being so upset. I reached for his arms and stopped him, turning him to face me. “Omega mine, you need to do what the man said. I believe your art will show up, along with all the rest of your belongings. But if it doesn’t, you start again. We’ll get you supplies, set up a spot for you to paint, and you will go to it.”

He blinked up at me. “I kind of like when you get all bossy.”

“Are you going to do it?”

He shrugged. “I might try.”

We drove past the delivery place one last time before heading for home, but I was so frustrated at not being able to help that I could barely focus on my job that evening. My job as alpha was to help, but I sure hadn't done very well on that.

But I wasn't going to quit until I succeeded.

Chapter Twenty

Pilan

There was no greater sound in the world than the delivery truck pulling up to the house and dropping off my packages. They were dirty but looked no worse for wear, which was good. I half expected them to come like the torn letters with no insides that say, *Sorry, there was an incident with your letter* or something similar to that.

“They look great.” I pushed the one onto its side and tore at the tape. My mate showed up at my side with a pair of scissors only a few seconds later.

“Thanks.” I took them and sliced through the tape and then pulled out the case. It was the one with my clothing and the paintings.

“I made this.” I handed the first one to Stefano, feeling like a little kid on their first day of kindergarten showing their parents their school papers.

“Wow. Your—the colors. What is it about the colors?”

I loved that the first thing he noticed was that part of my art I was most proud of. For some reason, I understood color on a level that most people never did. The techniques for painting and drawing...those took me lots of education and practice to get good enough, but my ability to make colors work together in order to tell a story? That was natural to me.

“Thank you.” I pulled out my favorite painting of all time. “This is the one that means the most to me.” I handed it to him

and felt a rawness I hadn't experienced since being here. We shared our bodies and fears, but for some reason, this felt deeper than that.

Stefano stared at it in wonder, a couple of times reached out with one hand as if he might want to trace what was there. I didn't push him for a comment. I didn't need one. His expression and actions said it all.

I set the other suitcase on its side and cut it open as well, my nerves building over how things survived inside. To my surprise everything was perfect.

"I need to call Sidney and let him know they are here." I pushed myself to stand, Stefano still mesmerized by the painting. I crossed to him and placed my hand on his cheek. "Mate, I'm going to call Sidney and let him know his things are here and safe."

"Say again?"

"I said I'm going to—"

He cut me off with a shake of his head. "Not that part. The first part where you called me mate."

"Mate, I was going to call Sidney." I rubbed my thumb against his cheekbone. "Does that sound good, Mate?"

"It does, but do you know what sounded better? Why don't we invite him and his mate, Crios, over for dinner?" He still had his hands firmly holding my painting.

Ours.

Mate.

Cherish.

Ours.

Yes. He is all those things.

“That sounds like a fabulous idea.” I grabbed my phone and called him, excited he immediately agreed to come and that they already had a sitter because they were planning a date night anyway. I felt bad taking them from their date night, but he assured me this was simply a double date—basically being double the fun.

I wasn't so sure on double the fun depending on what the two of them had in mind, but it was dinner out; they were going to be the winners. Nothing tasted as good as my mate's cooking. Nothing food related, that was. My mate tasted twice as good, but I wasn't willing to share him—not in that way. I was a greedy squirrel like that.

They showed up a couple of hours later. I had already separated his things into a box and was thrilled to see his face light up at the things I'd managed to save.

“Let me pay you for the shipping,” he insisted.

“Are you going to let me pay you for my mate?” I countered, and he looked at me sideways. “So, even Steven?”

“Sure.” He rolled his eyes. “But, just so you know, Fate has a way. It wasn't that I actually played a part in all of this.”

I wasn't so sure he was right on that one. I hadn't even known the app existed. But also—Fate doesn't put people on earth to ever find each other, do they? That just didn't make sense, either. So I went with it.

“My mate made us a delicious dinner,” I promised them. “Something with shrimp.”

I'd been busy sorting things as he cooked, so I wasn't exactly sure what he did with them, but the aroma in the room told me it was something magnificent.

"Lead the way." Crios rubbed his belly. "I adore seafood."

It ended up being a brown-butter-honey-garlic shrimp that was made of heaven. I had to giggle that my initial bear stereotypes of honey panned out, at least in this dish. But there was no denying that the food was worthy of a fancy magazine spread or cooking show. Not a morsel was left by the time we were done.

The conversation was just as wonderful as the food. Sidney and I talked about art, both the local scene and what we were doing, or in my case, I was wanting to do. I still hadn't set up a place to work yet, but I also just got my supplies back.

Crios, like the proud mate he was, whipped out his phone and showed us piece after piece, most all of, highlighting which had sold. And every time he mentioned a piece being purchased, I swore he puffed out a bit more in pride.

Not to be outdone, Stefano brought over my favorite painting and began to brag on it like it was his job. What amazed me was how quickly Sidney jumped in to add his two cents, citing my color skills. He also mentioned that my paint stroke skills had much improved.

"That might be because I was able to afford brushes for this one." Having painted numerous pieces with my tail was funny in retrospect, but at the time, it was out of desperation.

"You painted with your tail?" Stefano's eyes went wide.

“Yeah. But now I have brushes.” Good ones, too. “So I won’t need to do that again.”

And not for the first time even in that hour, Stefano said something that had me seeing just how much I meant to him. “But is it something you enjoyed?”

He wasn’t caring about the final product or my need for better supplies; he wanted to know what I liked and wanted. I couldn’t have asked for a better mate if I’d been given a checklist-style order form to pick out one by the Fates themselves.

“You know what...I did.” Taking out the necessity and the feelings that brought with it, I had liked it—a lot.

“Then you should do it again.”

He was right, and I probably would.

Chapter Twenty-One

Stefano

I was waiting by the front door for our drive to visit the gallery. After the bags came, Pilan had called Franz who told him to come right on in. Sidney had been in to talk to the gallery owner and show him the work my mate had managed to get to him, and apparently they were flying off the walls.

Now he wanted Pilan to bring in anything and everything he had so he could select the ones he thought would be complimentary to his current displays. “Pilan, we need to get going.” He had been so excited to go, but now we were going to be late.

“I’m coming.” He appeared in the bedroom doorway looking anything but well. “But I think I ate too many of those sausage patties at breakfast.” His hand was pressed to his belly.

I tried not to bristle. The sausage was something I took a lot of pride in, made entirely by me, but maybe it was a compliment that he liked it so much, he hate more than he should. “How many did you eat?”

“I’m not sure...three?” He ticked them off on his fingers. “Four, maybe.”

“They were big, but I think you’ve eaten more than that before.” Plus, he had managed to do it with a few eggs, some toast and, if he could talk me into making them, country potatoes. “Do you want me to make you some peppermint tea?”

“Maybe, yes, no.”

“Which is it?” I suppressed a chuckle. He was looking better already.

“No, we don’t have time. I need to get to the gallery early. I’ll be fine.”

I went over and laid the palm of my hand on his forehead. “You don’t feel warm. Would you like to postpone your meeting? Take it easy today?”

“Oh no.” He moved past me toward the door. “I need to go in, but I’ll keep it brief. I’m already a little better.”

“All right.” He was already studying for his license, and as soon as he got it, he was looking forward to being able to go wherever he wanted without having to wait for me to be available. But with the way he looked today, I was very glad to be driving him where he needed to go.

All the way to town, I kept peeking over at him. He didn’t seem too bad, but I didn’t like his color. “You sure you’re feeling better? Well enough for this?”

“Yes, I am.” But he focused on the passing landscape with none of his usual energy. A few moments later, he swallowed hard. “Can you pull over?”

He was not fine.

“I think we need to stop by the doctor’s after your meeting,” I said firmly. “Something is wrong, and I’d feel better if we got you checked out.”

His sigh came from deep down. “No, I don’t need to go to the doctor.”

“Pilan, I think you—”

“Drugstore.”

“What?” I buckled him back into his seat, wanting to do anything to take care of him then went around the car and climbed in. My bear was worried, too. “What about the drugstore? Did you want some Tums or something? Maybe let the doctor see you first.”

“I don’t need Tums, I need a pregnancy test.”

Luckily I hadn’t pulled out in traffic yet. It was light, but if I’d slammed on the brakes, it could have caused an accident. “Do you think you’re...but how?”

“Well, we’ve been doing things every night that...”

“All right, smarty squirrel. I know how it works and how much fun we’ve been having doing this, but I just never considered the possibility. I guess when I decided I’d never have a mate, I wrote off having children, too.”

“But now you have a mate,” he said softly. “Are you okay with this? I know we haven’t even talked about it, but I’m fairly sure it’s going to be positive.”

“Okay?” Stunned but more than okay, I signaled and pulled out. “We’re going to stop at the pharmacy first.”

“But my appointment at the gallery?”

“Can wait until we do this because I can’t possibly wait a moment longer than necessary to know if we are going to be dads.”

I parked in front of the drugstore and together we went inside. We came out with the bag of three different tests and a

six pack of ginger ale. To be 100 percent sure. And I was going to have to wait anyway because Pilan wanted to do it at home. Which made perfect sense, even if I was overeager.

The gallery meeting went great, but we were both so antsy we probably should have postponed. And then we were driving for home, which took a hundred times longer than usual. We had to make one more stop along the road, but sipping the soda slowly helped his stomach settle after that.

At least, long enough to get home and wait the required three minutes to see what the stick would tell us.

I only thought I was happy before. This was bliss.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Pilan

I had a love-hate relationship with being pregnant. Now that the morning sickness was gone, it sided more with the love, but there were days when I just wanted enough energy to both dry and fold the wash. Today was not that day.

“I hope you are getting all the nutrients you need, little one.” I held my hands on my belly. “Because you sure are zapping Daddy’s.”

I wouldn’t change it for all of the money in the world, but Daddy was tired. Almost too tired to make it all the way into the bedroom. And once I did manage to accomplish that, getting on the bed was another feat altogether.

I slid under the covers and snuggled in, using my mate’s pillow...loving the scent of him on me. Stefano was expecting me for dinner at The Grizzly in a couple of hours, and I set my phone alarm to not be late and then closed my eyes, sleep taking over quickly.

My dreams came at me a mile a minute. That was the unexpected part of pregnancy, the bit no one seemed to talk about: the dreams. Not only were they bizarre, but they came in rapid succession, and I remembered each and every one of them. If they had all been sunshine and roses or art inspiration, that would’ve been one thing. But some of them were just disturbing, like the one where I was feeding our baby nuts and getting upset he wouldn’t crack them with his mouth full of squirrel teeth.

I awoke to a hand on my forehead, and not my mate's hand, either. I flung it from me and tried to shift so I could get away. Only shifting wasn't happening, and I ended up just lying there and screaming like my life depended on it. And in that moment, I thought it did. And then I saw the owner of the hand in question.

It was our midwife. I was screaming like I was about to be thrown into a pit of broken glass from four stories up, and it was Gayle. I'd only met her once before, and I had to go and attempt to throw her across the room the second time. It was a feeble attempt but an attempt all the same.

"Sorry," I mumbled, still trying to assess the situation.

Shifters didn't really deal with their midwives much. It wasn't like humans and their doctors who they saw every few weeks while pregnant. They were a kind of as-needed provider. Once to establish care and then again, maybe never, or maybe at the birth. I was sure there were some shifters, especially those mated to humans, who would insist on seeing them more, but that wasn't Stefano and me, which made the entire scene before me a bit more perplexing.

"No need to be sorry. You were defending your child. It's what you are supposed to do."

"Why are you here?" It came out far ruder than I intended.

"You gave your mate a scare."

She sat on the bed beside me. "You slept through your alarm and, when I tried to wake you, you didn't stir."

I looked at the clock on the wall. I'd been asleep for hours.

“I guess I was really tired.” Which wasn’t okay, but it was better than whatever he’d been worried about.

“It’s not just tired. Your iron is very low, based on your scent.” Gayle pushed her palm against her left eye. “I think we need to give you some IV help and then get you on supplements.”

Supplement I could do, easy peasy, but the IV thing sounded scarier than any dream I’d had lately, and there were some doozies in the mix. Humans used IVs, and they seemed like a pretty last-ditch effort to me.

“Is our baby okay?” I was terrified to ask but more terrified not to know.

Gayle took her time before answering, and each ticking second felt like an hour. “Baby is fine but needs this iron as badly as you do, which is why they are basically stealing it from you.” That didn’t make sense to me, but I wasn’t a midwife, either. “I think the issue stems from you being a squirrel and your mate being a grizzly.”

“So my baby is stealing iron from me because I mated a bear?” I pushed myself to sit, hoping it would clear my head a bit so I could further understand what was happening.

“Your baby isn’t really stealing it.” Gayle let out a sigh.

Apparently I was supposed to be able to decipher her talk-around-things language after being ripped away from and nearly assaulting her—fine, there was no nearly unto it.

She went on, “They just are a little needier than your normal shifter baby. Let me do the IV and get you what you need and all will be well.”

“I’ll do anything.” And I would.

Stefano’s hand wrapped around mine and, when I turned to face him, I saw the fear in his eyes, mimicking my own.

“But our baby is going to be okay, right?” That was the most important thing.

“They will. I’m more worried about you, Dad.” She went and grabbed her medical bag. “Anything other than exhaustion hitting you lately?”

“Nothing new really. Exhaustion, smaller appetite quantity-wise, but hungry more often, a bit out of breath if I walk too fast...the normal.” At least, normal for pregnant me. “Oh wait...there is something. When I pushed your hand away, I tried to shift and flee.” I wasn’t proud of the wanting to flee part, but I needed to let her know everything just in case it could help.

“That’s nothing to worry about. It just means the baby is almost here. It’s shifter protection. If you shift when you go into labor, it’s animal babies for you because you’ll be stuck.” She spoke so calmly as if she was discussing the weather and not that I could conceivably have tiny squirrel babies. “Now, let’s get you hooked up and get those minerals flowing.”

I was too busy processing the potential squirrel-baby thing to even notice when she put in the IV, which wasn’t the worst thing, I supposed.

Chapter Twenty-Three

Stefano

“I can’t even fit in these pants.” Pilan’s assertion was not unexpected. It wasn’t even the first time today he’d said it. “I’m starting to think I’m growing a whole grizzly in here.”

“Oh, you are,” I teased. “Bears are born full-sized.”

His cheeks paled. “Don’t even joke about that. And seriously, look at me!” He turned in a circle in front of me. “I need stretchier pants.”

“We’ll get them for you,” I told him, reaching to pull him into my lap.

“Oh, don’t, I’ll squash you.” He wriggled to get free but only succeeded in making me hard. As usual.

“You couldn’t possibly squash me. I outweigh you by a lot.”

“Let me go. I’m repulsive.”

“Now you’re only fishing for compliments. You know how sexy you look all swollen with my child.”

He stopped struggling and leaned down to rest his cheek on my chest. “You really mean it, don’t you?”

“Of course.” I stroked his hair. “The only reason I don’t jump your bones every night is because I want to make sure you get some rest. You’re the hottest squirrel in town.”

“I’m the only squirrel shifter here, I think.”

“So you agree that you’re the hottest one.” I took his chin between my thumb and forefinger and moved his face to a kissable position. Then I kissed him. Gently at first then deeper until we both ran out of air. “Want to go to bed?”

“Are you hitting on me, sir? I know I warned you I am repulsive.” But he let me kiss him again and again, and finally we did stand up and stroll toward the bedrooms. Partway there, we paused for more kissing and more compliments. I didn’t think he was at all repulsive, and he knew that. But he also knew how much I liked to convince him otherwise.

In our room, I undressed him slowly, kissing the skin revealed and giving extra kisses to his belly before drawing the covers down and lying down behind him. We still slept back-to-back, but of course that was not great for what I had in mind. He tucked a pillow under his belly, something he’d been doing lately, and I massaged his back, shoulders, hips, everything to ease tight muscles from carrying my baby. Nuzzling his neck, I pressed against his hole, slick and so ready for me to penetrate. Every time was like the first time with my mate, so tight and hot, milking me slowly. I reached around and gripped his cock, rubbing and stroking to bring him along with me.

Coming together was a revelation for me, the kind of thing you read about but never expect to really experience. But with my mate, it happened more often than not. I continued to stroke him, whispering in his ear about how hot I found him, how his having my baby turned me on.

He moaned, bumping his ass back against my groin.

“Shh, you’re doing so well.” He was, to my great relief, no more blips on the radar since the iron concerns. He was thriving. And so was our child. My bear let me know how well everything was going. I didn’t know how he knew, only that he did.

Sometimes we were wilder, but as he grew close to his time, we loved these long, slow lovemaking sessions. And I was so grateful. “I love you, omega mine.”

“And I love you, my alpha. You make me feel handsome, no matter how big my bump is.”

“Because you are, my love. Because you are.”

My balls tightened against my groin, and I sped up my strokes on my omega’s elegant cock. He groaned and shuddered, and came, just as I did, and then we sank to the bed while my knot bound us together.

Soon there would be a baby who would wake us at odd hours, and that would be fine, but for tonight, we could take our time and enjoy one another. Enjoy the time it was just us. Before life took us to the next level.

Chapter Twenty-Four

Pilan

It took all the energy I had to get out of the chair. I was officially the size of five houses. How I even fit into the door of The Grizzly was a freaking miracle. Heck, getting here in the first place was something pretty amazing. And then I stayed here an entire fifteen minutes before the scent of the beer had me feeling like I wanted to puke. I didn't love the scent on a good day, but now that I was near the end of my pregnancy, it was far worse.

I waddled my way to the kitchen. "I'm heading home." I gave him a half wave, not wanting to knock anything he'd been working on over with my gigundo belly. "I really want peanut butter and mustard."

It wasn't a lie, but as I said it, I began to second-guess myself. How could I possibly think that was a good idea? How?

"I can make you one here," he offered. I hadn't thought of them having peanut butter, but even knowing they did, staying here wasn't ideal.

"Love you, but the stale beer...that's a hard pass." I held my belly, our baby moving about in there like they were taking a tap class and my ribs were the dance floor. "I'm just going to go home where it smells like my favorite thing ever—you."

He walked around the table he was working on and kissed my belly and then my lips. "I'll see you both later. Be safe."

Had it been last week, he'd have insisted he walk me home or at least have someone do it in his stead. I put a stop to that right quick. I was a grown-ass man with two feet and a cell phone. If the need arose for people to help me, I could easily call. And really, the walk was shorter than short. Having an escort was over the top on so many levels.

"We will be." I leaned in to kiss him, and my belly got in the way. "Pretend kisses," I teased and walked out the back door.

I called Sidney only a few steps out. I wanted to ask his opinion on a gallery showing I'd been offered. It was a tiny place and, if I sold one or two, it would be a lot, but it felt like a great opportunity. But I thought that about when I was "discovered" in NYC, too, and didn't quite trust my judgment on the matter.

"Is it baby time?" Sidney sounded more excited than a kid on Christmas, and it wasn't even his baby.

"No. I had a question for you about River's End." I went into details about the offer, getting more and more out of breath as I walked, having to stop twice because of muscle spasms. It was worse than round ligament pain, and that had sucked. Big-time.

"Don't take this the wrong way, but you sound not good."

"It's just the walk is getting to me. I might be too prego for this walking thing." I reached the bottom of the steps at my cabin and held on as another spasm ran through me. Maybe not a spasm though...maybe it was...shit.

“Sidney, how did you know you were in labor?” I asked, pretty sure that was what was happening.

He told me all of the symptoms and, one by one, I ticked them all off mentally with the exception of my water breaking...and then my pants felt warm and wet, and I ticked it off, too.

“So, good news is, I’m in labor.” I took one step up. “Bad news is, my mate just started his shift.”

“Pretty sure he doesn’t give a hoot about that. Hang up and call him,” Sidney insisted.

“I’m fine, and labor lasts forever.” Or longer than his shift anyway.

“I hate the idea of you not calling him. At least stay on the phone with me?”

That I could do. Sidney sure earned his friend stripes that afternoon. He was listening as I peeled off my wet paternity jeans and as I took a warm shower and when I screamed because the pain was getting too strong. He offered to call both my midwife and my mate but also respected me when I declined.

Sidney was officially a rock-star friend. Finally, it became too much for me to try and hold out for my mate, the need to push increasing with each contraction. As much as I wanted to wait until my mate came home from work to birth our child, they weren’t having it. Our little bundle of joy wanted out and stat.

“Call my mate and tell him I need to push.” There was a click on the phone and then silence, the timer still marking off

the seconds. He had put me on hold to call my mate. Double friendship stripes for him.

When the phone clicked over again, Sidney assured me my mate was on his way and that he'd stay on until Stefano arrived. Or at least that's what I thought he said after piecing together the words I heard while I was screaming and trying not to push.

Stefano came crashing through the place like a bull in a candy shop only a few seconds later, all out of breath.

Thank gods he did, because the next contraction wouldn't have allowed for me to do anything other than push. I pushed and I pushed, Stefano there to help me deliver our perfect baby girl. She came into the world both kicking and screaming only ten minutes later, and we named her Sadie, a name that just felt right. It sounded close enough to Sidney, the man who had inadvertently made this all possible by running into me back in NYC all that time ago.

"She's perfect." I looked down at my sweet girl, enjoying her first meal.

"She's you, my love. She's you."

Epilogue

Stefano

Plans for expansion of the cabin were off now that Gramps had come to stay. He arrived right after Sadie did, and announced that 1. He was not going to miss her growing up and 2. She was not going to be growing up behind a bar.

So six months later, Gramps lived in the cabin where I'd spent most of a year with Pilan. And our little family had moved half a mile down the road to a beautiful cottage with three bedrooms and two baths, and the previous owner had already done the remodeling. Miss Sadie was an angel, but one who took up most of our time, and we decided we'd rather play with her than plaster walls.

The cottage was charming and was also near the woods, of course, handy for shifting when we had a sitter. Gramps and Giorgio, Sidney and Crios, we had so many sitters, we could have gone out every night of the week if we wanted to, which of course we did not. Our favorite place was home with our little lady. I still worked evenings, but a shifting of schedules meant that if you wanted a real meal at The Grizzly, one of the specials, you had to get there a little early. After nine, it was burgers and other grill items and pizza from our brand-new stone pizza oven only. Sadie never wanted to go to sleep for the night before about ten, so I was there to tuck her in. And that was what mattered.

Sadie was not the only baby at the bar and grill, when she and I hopped in our new minivan and headed over, if Gramps

caught wind of her being there, he'd be in to grab her and take her to his house, lickety-split. After an hour or two, I'd take her home again, loving the freedom a driver's license gave me.

And every night after we tucked our little girl in her crib, we would eat a late dinner together and settle on the couch to share our day. Between River's End and Franz's gallery, Pilan had enough work to keep him busy, too, doing just the work he loved.

And after we'd shared our days, I'd stand up, tug my mate with me, and lead him off to bed where we made love into the wee hours or, quickly if we expected to have to take care of Sadie soon. But quickie or longie, I wouldn't trade one moment in my mate's arms for anything.

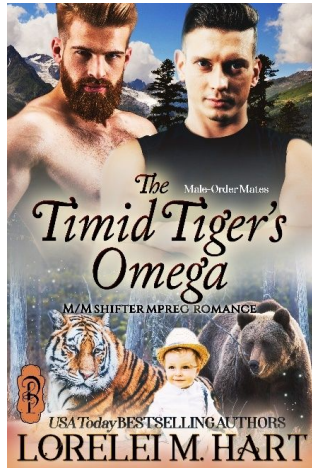
My brother's sneaky gift to me had been better than either of us could ever have dreamed.

I'd begun to wonder if maybe I ought to return the favor.

Thanks for stopping by to read The Bear Bar Owner's Omega. Next in the Male-Order Mates series is [*The Timid Tiger*](#).

The Timid Tiger: Male-Order Mates

Book 8



Giorgio

I was the first person to suggest people needed to settle down and find a mate. And by suggested, I mean I signed my brother up for the Male-Order app behind his back. It worked well for him—better than I could’ve possibly imagined, but when it comes to me finding a mate? I want to do it the old-fashioned way. I owned half a bar and peopling was what I did. Surely I could find my own mate. Only as time ticked by, I started to wonder if I could. Maybe I was destined to be lonely after all.

It isn’t until I discover my brother and his mate decided to “suggest” I use the app in the same way I had done to them that I started to think that maybe, just maybe, there might be someone out there for me. That was after I got over the shock

of learning that my Male-Order App mate was due to arrive in a few days. Surprise. Shock. Excitement. Confusion. But what could I do? I did it to him first.

Hernan

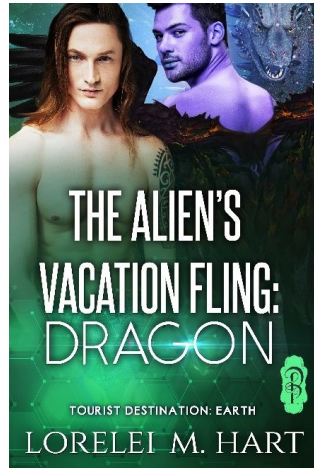
I love being an accountant. Working with numbers was fun for me and I'd carved out a nice niche helping shifter owned online businesses. My streak is not super-supportive of my career, though. They believe that tigers are fierce and therefore should hold jobs that embrace this. That just isn't me. I enjoy a night at the movies far more than skydiving or any of the other over-the-top adrenalin filled adventures they try to get me to take part in.

My family was sure that if I didn't "tiger up" soon, then I'd never find a mate and, to help me, they started sending alphas my way—alphas I had nothing in common with. So, what did I do? I did the only thing that made sense to me at the time. I signed up for the Male-Order Mates app. At least the app asks me what I'm looking for in a mate. That's something.

The Timid Tiger is the eighth book in the best-selling super sweet with knotty heat MM mpreg Male-Order Mates series. The Timid Tiger features a stubborn alpha, a timid tiger who would rather have a quiet night home than an adventure any day of the week, two pushy families, new beginnings, an arranged mail-order mating, true love, fated mates, and a

beautiful baby. If you like your shifters unusual, your omegas hawt, your mpreg with heart, and your HEAs complete with true mates and a bundle of joy, one-click today.

The Alien's Vacation Fling: Dragon, Tourist Destination: Earth Book 3



Recent college graduate and omega dragon shifter Igneus thinks it is a grand idea to travel and see all the country has to offer before settling in one place. Until his car breaks down in the middle of nowhere. The mechanic promises to get it up and running just as soon as he can get the part...no longer than a week. At least there's an old resort with cabins available at a good price. There were worse things than hanging out in the woods.

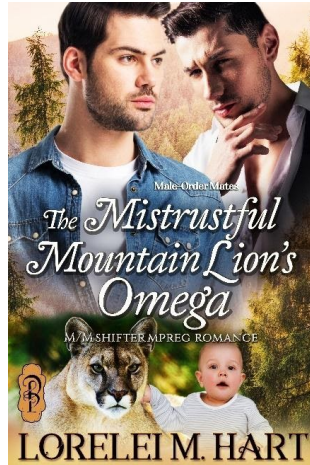
Ehlon needed to get away from his life of work, work, work. When he sees a discount fare to Earth, he immediately books his dream vacation. Work can wait. He's always wanted to see the blue planet galaxies away, and this could be exactly what he needs. If the resort is like the pictures, he might even be able to stretch his wings without detection.

When a midair near collision has Ehlon and Igneus coming face-to-face, they instantly recognize that they are mates. If only it were that easy.

The Alien's Vacation Fling: Dragon is the third book in the MM mpreg romance series Tourist Destination: Earth. It features an alpha who traveled across the galaxy looking for a holiday only to find his home, a dragon shifter whose car broke down at the perfect time, a mountainside resort like no other, some interesting, ummm...appendages, fated mates, true love, an adorable baby, and, of course, a happily ever after. If you like your alphas hawt, your omegas strong, and your mpreg with heart, download The Alien's Vacation Fling: Dragon today.

And check out the whole [Tourist Destination: Earth](#) series.

The Mistrustful Lion's Omega: Male-Order Mates Book 4



Available [Here](#)

Sometimes being the friendly local bar owner isn't enough... Months after Sheppard's pack members wreaked havoc on my roadhouse, and the alpha paid to have my best pool table recovered, he and I sat down and talked. I'd never seen him happier, and he gave all the credit to his new omega. When he left, I looked around my bar, a place I'd put all my energy for over a decade then I grabbed my tablet and downloaded the app that not only he but so many of them were chattering about. The app that apparently brought an omega right to the alpha's doorstep. I'd had about enough of the cold bed and the colder meals at my house and had known for a while something was missing. So, I filled out the questionnaire that took over an hour to complete.

Two days later, they claimed they'd found someone for me, but I thought it was too good to be true. Second-guessing myself—and them—I deleted the app.

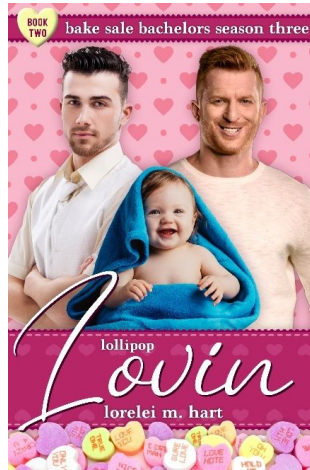
Ready to make a fresh start, I signed up with the Male-Order Mates app.

The app pinged me, saying it found a match, almost 100 percent, but the guy never answered any of my messages. He was gorgeous and had his own business. And since I'm pretty damned good with a computer, I tracked him down. And now that I'm here, I don't know what in the heck I was thinking. This Jagger guy is not my type. He's rugged and bearded and all the things I'd always claimed I didn't want.

So why is it my body and my animal practically demand I hop over that bar and formally introduce myself?

The Mistrustful Lion's Omega is a super sweet with knotty heat MM mpreg featuring a mountain lion bar owner whose app match travels far to meet him despite his mistrust of the app and a building heat that leads to the birth of twins. It is the fourth book in the Male-Order Mates series but can be read as a standalone.

Bake Sale Bachelors Season 3: Lollipop Lovin'



Sometimes a lollipop isn't the only thing you want to lick.

Omega Phil has lived in Clearvale most all of his life. He loves his job as the local veterinarian, his old farmhouse, and his cat Rainbow. The only thing missing is someone to share it all with. He thought he had that once, but careers sent him and his love to opposite sides of the globe.

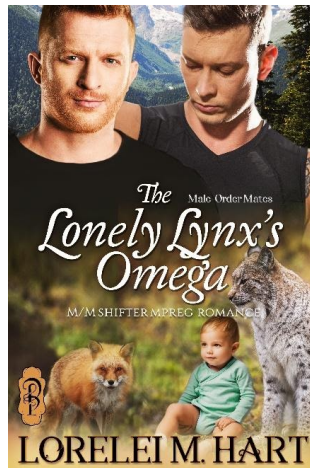
Alpha Hugh trained with the best, creating award-winning sugar art. He has trophies, accolades aplenty, and can work for the finest of establishments. And, for a long time, that was what he wanted. Everything changes when he sees his childhood home for sale on an old-home social media page.

He doesn't think twice, submitting an offer and crossing his fingers. He feels it's the sign he's been waiting for, the sign that it was time to go home.

When Hugh's offer is accepted, he wastes no time flying back, and his old neighbor William wastes even less time convincing him to donate to the Valentine's Day auction for the new children's wing at the local hospital. If his candy can help even a little bit, how could he say no? He doesn't realize there's a date attached to it and that the winner of said date might be what he was really coming home to.

Lollipop Lovin' is a second chance super sweet with knotty heat mm non-shifter mpreg romance featuring an omega veterinarian, the alpha who got away, a puppy who decided it was time to pick a family, snuggles—so many snuggles, an adorable baby, and a guaranteed happily ever after. If you like your mpreg sweeter than candy, your happily ever afters complete with a bundle of joy, and your mpreg with heart, this installment of Bake Sale Bachelors is for you. While each book in the Bake Sale Bachelors series is set in the same world, they can each be read as standalones.

An Excerpt from **The Lonely Lynx's Omega, Male-Order Mates Book 2**



Available [Here](#)

Chapter One

Roman

My phone chimed with some message, but I ignored it. I kind of had to since I was in the middle of changing little Sam's diaper and didn't want him urine-baptizing me—again. He could smile and coo all he wanted. That little shrimp aimed right at my face at three months old and had been trying to repeat the act ever since.

Uncle Roman was smarter.

“They're just going to have to wait, aren't they? Because I have important diapers to change and songs to sing to my boy,” I cooed at the babe who kicked his legs so much it was like trying to diaper a rabid hyena. He was so energetic and wild. Then again, he was part grizzly and part sun bear, so what did any of us expect but a boisterous babe?

It came to him naturally.

My time with Sam had become my one solace in a hollow life. I hung on to my times with the little munchkin like a buoy. Hawke and Aquila didn't know, but I'd stopped going to the bars and the nightclubs months ago, right after Aquila got his first ultrasound.

I'd gone that night to pick up someone, someone to make me feel less empty, but that only lasted temporarily, and then the next morning, my heart was again a cave, and my bed was cold.

I wanted more.

A whole hell of a lot more.

“Let’s go into the living room and sing about bees,” I said to him, and his brilliant eyes sparkled in the sunlight coming in through the windows. Hawke and Aquila had gone on a lunch date and were due back any minute.

And I’d be left alone again.

I picked up my phone to put on the YouTube video that sang the bee song and saw that the notification I’d received earlier wasn’t a text or a random Snapchat from a hot guy.

It was a notification from Male-Order Mates, the app that made mate matches possible. The app I’d signed up for after seeing how fucking happy Hawke and Aquila were. The app that gave me hope of getting rid of this hollow heart.

Nope, not even the Male-Order Mates app could take my attention away from little Sam, well, any more than it already had.

“Buzzy, buzzy, buzzy,” I sang to him, and he clapped his chubby hands, not with the beat at all but trying. He was a baby after all.

“I’m telling everyone at the Ranger station you’re singing that song.” Hawke’s bass voice wove through my lyrics and stopped me cold in my makeshift dance.

“Your papa thinks he can tell us what to do and threaten us. It’s so cute when he tries.”

Sam shrieked and laughed but kicked his legs and held his hands out for his daddy.

“That’s because Daddy is one bad mother—”

“Hawke,” Aquila admonished, interrupting the language Hawke was still working on curbing from his daily talk because of Sam.

“Sorry, omega. I’m still trying here.”

Sam went easily to Hawke but soon wanted the papa who held his food supply. The kid was smart. He knew where his bread was buttered.

“Did you two have a good lunch?” I asked, already packing Sam’s stuff into his larger-than-life diaper bag.

“We did,” Aquila said, but I knew by his blush it was probably less of a lunch and more of alone time without the tyke.

“Mmm, that blush does me in, omega,” Hawke said, running his thumb over Aquila’s cheek. “Um, Roman, are you rushing us out?” He lifted a brow as I got the bottles from the fridge with no grace whatsoever.

Yes. “Oh, no, of course not. I figured it was time for Sam’s nap, and I know the last thing you want is for him to fall asleep on the way home and then you have to try to get him to his bed without waking him.” Goodness gods above, the sentence came out like a big thought train with no chance of a stop.

Hawke and Aquila shared a look, but then both shrugged.

I had to get my shit together. And they needed to leave. I had a match notification, and it was all I could do not to run their asses out and check it before I lost my mind. After some purposeful dawdling, while trying to be nosey, they finally left.

I watched out the window until they drove away and then rushed to my phone and sat on the couch to open the app.

While the damned thing loaded, I made myself close my eyes and breathe. This could be the one.

Or it could be a dud.

Trust the process.

Trust the app.

Easier said than done.

You have a match. 99%. The message flashed on the screen as the app loaded.

The guy was beyond cute. Gorgeous, in fact. But there was something.

Oh gods above. You've got to be kidding me.

I knew this man. Though his profile said his name was Salem, in college, I'd always known him as Victor.

He'd been my best friend at one time. He went to Norway to study, and we somehow lost touch.

Stupid me.

He looked slimmer, not that he had been fat in college, but we all ate our weight in pizza, and he had been a little chubbier than the rest of us. He studied hard and had always made time for anything I needed. He was the kind of friend everyone would want in their life.

Again, stupid me for letting us lose touch.

But here he was again, a faint smile playing at his lips in the picture, behind him a vast landscape of snow-capped

mountains and white-tipped trees. Was he still in Norway? Did he never leave? Would he even remember me?

I breathed again and took a chance, typing the message before I could chicken out.

Long time no see.

About the Authors

Lorelei M. Hart is the cowriting team of USA Today Bestselling Authors Kate Richards and Ever Coming as well as Ophelia Heart, another bestselling author. Friends for years, the trio decided to come together and write one of their favorite guilty pleasures: Mpreg. There is something that just does it for them about smexy men who love each other enough to start a family together in a world where they can do it the old-fashioned way.

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