



SWEET ALPS MATES BOOK FIVE

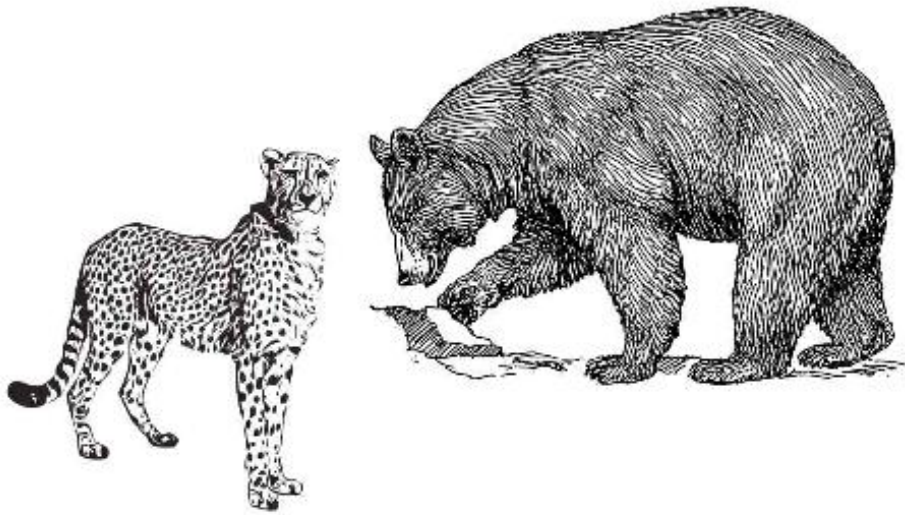
HIS DADDY

Omega



RAIVEN MATTHEWS

His Daddy Omega



Raiven Matthews

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For Beckie. Never forget road trips in the Z-28, '80's hair bands blasting, and breaking curfew. Rock concerts, touching Paul Stanley, and being obsessed with Warrant and Skid Row.

I hope you've found your peace, Becks. RIP 1972-2022.

And For Collin. Thank you for making me fall in love with Oklahoma, Sooners football, and with love again. I know you're going to be watching your boys grow from above. RIP

1976-2022.

This book contains Daddy/little kink and depicts scenes of this nature, but does not contain ABDL. If that isn't your jam, no worries, but this book might not be for you.

TW &CW:

Discussions of loss of a parent, survivor parent alienation, bad parenting, and bullying. All actual events take place off-page, but are discussed. Please be aware if any of these might trigger you.

Asher Pierce

Being an omega Daddy was frustrating, to say the least. But I had never met a challenge I couldn't conquer, and Gabe Carmichael would be no different. From the first moment I had laid eyes on him sporting the cutest pair of little pajamas, I knew I wanted him. He called to both sides of me; to protect him as his Daddy, and to claim me as my alpha. I had to have both, even as my little bear ignored my flirtatious advances. When an injury makes it clear to us that Fate is on my side, I hope it's the opportunity I need to convince my stubborn alpha little that he's everything I've ever wanted and more.

Gabe Carmichael

As an alpha and a little, my dating life was a joke. Finding a Daddy? Impossible. No one wanted an alpha bear as a little! The thought of giving up my little side for a mate nearly

brought me to tears. After a bad experience, hookups with strangers and playtime with my bestie were what I had left to fill the gap. Enter Asher Pierce. He turns my world upside down. Too pretty, too confident, and way too bossy for my liking. Better to avoid temptation than be hurt again. When I'm hurt saving a wolf cub, Fate steps in. Now Asher is everywhere I turn. Smelling like the sweetest omega, and spouting orders like the Daddy Dom he is. I don't know what to do about any of it.

Could he be the Daddy I needed, while still allowing me to be the Alpha I was?

“His Daddy Omega” is book five in the Sweet Alps Mates series and can be read as a standalone, but your reading pleasure may be enhanced by having read book four. While it is not necessary to have read the previous books, some readers find it more enjoyable since a few favorite characters make appearances. This book contains fated mates, opposites attract, Daddy/little (no ABDL), size difference, shifters, knotting, Mpreg, a shy bear with an alpha heart, and an overly assertive cheetah who likes to top from the bottom. TW: Discussions of loss of a parent, survivor parent alienation, and bullying. All actual events take place off page, but please be aware if these may trigger you.

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Chapter One



Gabe

I missed my friends.

Admitting I was lonely sucked balls. But I was. It wasn't like my friends were far away, but they weren't right next door to me like they had been.

We were all just in different phases of our lives.

Wade had lived next door to me the longest, and we'd quickly bonded. He was a petite fireball of an omega, who seemed larger than life. He'd taken one look at me in my shifter form, and unlike most other shifters, he hadn't run the other way. Nope, the little arctic wolf had run right up to my Kodiak bear and nipped playfully at me with his sharp teeth.

We'd been friends from that day forward. He was outgoing and loud, and I was quiet and shy, but we had clicked. Well, Wade had decided we were going to be friends, and when Wade Monroe decided something, not much was going to change his mind.

We had shared movie nights, dinners, and gossip, and it had been great. And then he'd met his mate. Not just his mate, his fated mate. Well, I guess they'd met years before, and it had been dislike at first sight. Until one night when dislike had turned into fiery passion, and that was the end of that.

Wade had moved in with his mate, and was now the proud daddy of two of the cutest wolf pups I'd ever seen. I was

happy for him and his mate, Finn Sinclair. And I adored their two little ones, Logan and Remy, like they were my own blood. I was Uncle Gabe and I loved it and them.

Wade's house had stood empty for months, until he'd rented it to a sweet omega named Ryan Foster. Ryan and I had instantly bonded, and I could honestly say he was now my very best friend. We were both on the shy side and shared a secret together. We were littles, and I'd been ecstatic to find someone who shared my kink, who understood it, and who I could play with. Without being judged or made fun of.

Shortly after moving in, Ryan had met *his* fated mate, Brendan Sinclair, who was also his Daddy. It had still been great, because we'd had playdates with his Daddy Brendan watching over us both since I didn't have a Daddy of my own. But Ryan and Brendan now had had a pup of their own, and we hadn't had a playdate in months.

They had a new baby. I got it. And baby Charlotte – Charlie – was the most beautiful little girl there was. She'd stolen my heart the minute she'd blinked her big blue eyes up at me. Ryan was busy with a new baby, a new mate, going to college and working part-time at the daycare in town. With his Daddy there twenty-four seven, he could be little whenever he needed, despite the new baby. He didn't have to wait for us to have a playdate.

Really, I didn't need to have a playdate to be little, but it did help me get into my headspace. And I liked having a Daddy there, even if he wasn't my Daddy. Ryan and I on our own in

little space, tended to get into trouble. We ate too much candy, and had a habit of getting toys and crayons everywhere, without cleaning up. Having a Daddy gave us, or at least me, the structure I found I needed in my little space. Having rules made my head feel better, and allowed me to fully embrace my little side. The easy way Ryan could slip in and out of little headspace was something I was envious of. It took me longer to be comfortable with my surroundings, and people, to become little Gabey.

Sighing, I lumbered slowly into the woods that ran behind my backyard. My large, brown paws crunched the crispy grass just starting to peek out from the just melting snow. It was the middle of January, and despite a milder than normal winter, and a couple of overly warm, sunny days that had melted most of it, there were still patches of snow on the frozen ground. The weather wasn't fooling me. We were bound to be hit with more snow, or icy rain, sooner rather than later. But I was determined to enjoy the mild day, in spite of my dreary mood.

Truth be told, I was feeling a bit sorry for myself. Lonely and a little jealous of what my friends had found. *Be honest, Gabe, you're a lot jealous.* I wanted a Daddy of my own. I wanted a mate. I wanted to see my mate grow round with our cub. I was pretty positive I'd never find all the things I wanted, and I'd resigned myself to settling for one or the other.

I just didn't know which one I would rather settle for. Did I start searching for a mate? Someone to make a life with, have cubs, and live a happy enough life? Or did I search for a Daddy? A Daddy who would probably be another alpha like

me, who would fulfill my kink side, my little side, but give me very little else in my personal life that I needed?

Choosing sucked donkey balls.

Deep down, I knew what my choice was going to end up being. The choice I would make. My heart twinged, knowing that one day I'd have to pack away my binky, crayons, and toys, and push my little side down forever. Just the thought of it made me ache with sadness. Sighing again, I wished the bad thoughts would go away. Those were tomorrow problems. Or next week problems. Maybe next month problems.

Sitting just off the well-worn path most of the shifters in town used, I glanced around me, but no one seemed to be around to play with. There was a strong bite of chill in the air, but sniffing, I didn't sense any snow coming. My fur kept me warm enough, so I wasn't cold even with the chill. At odds with myself and my maudlin thoughts, I tried to decide what I wanted to do tonight. Did I feel like playing? Even if I did, I had no one to play with.

Restless when I'd gotten home from work, I'd needed to get out of the house. We'd finished up a remodel on a kitchen early, so I'd let my crew take the rest of the day off. But once home, I'd needed to get out into the fresh air, not sure what to do with myself. Nothing was holding my attention or interest.

My little side was calling to me, so maybe I'd try to indulge it after my shift. Playing alone wasn't that much fun anymore. It had been fine before I'd met Ryan. But after months of having little playdates, where I was free to be myself one

hundred percent, playing alone didn't hold the same appeal it once had.

Ryan was constantly trying to get me to join the local kink club, Sinful Playgrounds. They had a large nursery for littles, and often held special events. Ryan had met his Daddy there. I always made up excuses as to why I didn't want to join. It was too expensive. I didn't have the time. I was too shy.

Lies. All lies.

I knew exactly what kind of nursery Sinful Playgrounds had. I had built the damn thing. My construction company had done most of the work on the building when Jamie Sinclair had bought it. Jamie had even given me a couple of passes shortly after the grand opening. And I had used one of them one night.

I'd never been back. It had been horrible. Sometimes I could still hear the mean things the Daddies had said to me. Well, one Daddy, but I knew they were all thinking the things he had said.

To this day, I had never told anyone about that humiliating night. And I never planned to. Nope. Kink clubs weren't for me. I knew I wasn't the average little, but I had held out hope that my perfect Daddy was out there. He'd come and make everything better, he wouldn't care that I was bulky and towered over most people. He wouldn't care that I was an alpha. He would just be my Daddy. As long as he was nice, I didn't care what he looked like or even if he was another alpha. It was all fantasy and nonsense.

That night had convinced me of one thing.

No Daddy would ever want a little like me. No Daddy wanted a big, brawny, alpha little. I didn't belong there, in that club. I didn't really belong anywhere.

Clunk.

Flinching when something hard landed on my head and bounced off, I glanced down to see a hard acorn still bouncing along the ground near my feet. *What the actual fuck?*

Clunk.

Jerking as another one pelted my head, I glanced upward. It took my eyes a minute to see him up in the tall oak tree, but once I did, I wasn't sure how I had possibly missed him.

The cheetah.

Long and sleek, he was stretched out across a branch above my head, high up in the tree. His black tipped tail swished almost silently, as he stared down at me with slanted, glistening dark brown eyes. I'd swear there was almost a smirk on his face, as his tail flicked another acorn my direction.

Before I could think to dodge, the acorn bounced off my nose, while the cat blinked its wide eyes at me innocently.

Little shit.

I'd seen him a few times before, as he ran past me in a blur. He was beautiful, all long muscles, lean but powerful. And fast. So fast! Cream colored fur and dazzling spots had whizzed past me, glancing back once, before he had continued on his way. He had taken my breath away.

This was the closest I had ever been to him, though, and if I didn't know better, I'd think he was trying to play with me. Or trying to get my attention. But that couldn't be. Maybe he was just being mean. People could be so mean sometimes. It seemed more likely that was the case. Most shifters either went the other direction when they saw me, or they literally tried poking the bear.

People were mean, and mean people translated to mean shifters. Not all people were mean, of course, but I had run across my fair share of bullies. Even though I was bigger than most people, in shifted form or human, I had a soft heart and my feelings got hurt easily. To make up for my extra-large size, I spoke quietly, when I would speak at all. As a kid, my shyness had made words trip over my tongue, so I would just stay quiet. And every time I had tried talking to my dad he had turned away and ignored me. As an adult, I still tended to not engage easily with many people.

When that long cat tail made a swishing sound, I moved to the side, standing up to my full height on my hind legs. As high up as he was, I couldn't reach him, but I could at least make my displeasure known. I might not be a tough, scary alpha, but I was a damn big bear that usually could intimidate people if I wanted to.

Those cat eyes blinked at me slowly. Then he yawned widely, his pink tongue poking out of his jaws.

Did he just stick his tongue out at me? It sure looked like he had. Could Cheetahs stick their tongues out?

I would google that when I got home.

The gall! Ugh, I'd had enough of people for one day. I was taking myself home. I wanted a bath in my oversized tub, preferably with lots of bubbles and my duckies. Maybe my sea creatures could join in. Then I'd climb into my little pajamas, maybe the ones with the feet. I only had a couple pairs to choose from. The footie ones slid across my hardwood floor fast. They were super fun and perfect for chilly nights. Maybe I would get out one of my coloring books and the chunky crayons Ryan had gotten for me. They were so much better for my big hands than the regular size ones, and I could stay in the lines better. I could color a new picture to hang on my refrigerator. Ryan's Daddy always hung his pictures up on the refrigerator. Sometimes he hung mine up too when we had a playdate. Being Daddyless didn't mean I couldn't admire my own artwork.

Little time was what I needed to get me out of my funk, even if I was by myself. It wasn't like I hadn't played alone before meeting Ryan. It was just so much *better* with a friend.

Huffing at the cheetah, I let out a ferociously loud growl upwards in his direction. Landing back on all fours, I shook my almost two tons of shifted weight and ambled slowly back down the well-used path that led to my backyard.

Shifting back to my human form, I scooped up my clothes from the pile I'd left them in, and entered my house through the backdoor of my garage. Tossing my dirty clothes into the washer in my mudroom, I made a beeline for my kitchen.

Pouring cold apple juice into my Pooh Bear sippy cup, I went to start my bath and get the dirt of the day off me. The cup had been a gift from Ryan when he had seen my collection of Pooh Bear stuffies, and it was my favorite to use.

Sniffing at my pits, I crinkled my nose at the smell. Owning my own construction company, one of only two in the town of Sweet Alps, was lucrative and I loved my work. But more days than not, I came home dirty and sweaty, since I liked to get into the heart of things and work side by side with my crew.

Squirting in a generous dollop of tropical fruit smelling bubbles into my bath water, I scowled when my phone started ringing.

Ignoring it was my first instinct, until I saw that it was my friend Wade calling. I really wasn't up for peopling tonight, even for one of my favorite people. But it was Wade, and there was something inside me that just wouldn't let me ignore calls from the friends I considered family. Since we all usually chatted by text or messenger, I was concerned that he was calling. Thinking there might be something wrong with one of his pups, I accepted the call.

"Teddy Bear, are you busy?" Wade's voice sounded as cheerful as always and my heart did some kind of weird little squeazy thing hearing his voice. Had I said I missed my friends? Because I really, really missed my friends. It felt like we hadn't seen each other face to face in forever.

Glancing at the water filling my tub, and then down at my naked body, I grimaced. Torn between helping my friend and dumping all my duckies in the fast forming mountain of fruit smelling bubbles. “What’s up?”

“We’re across the street at the Victorian,” Wade explained, “can you come over for a few minutes?”

The Victorian was just that. A huge, rambling Victorian house that stood on a double corner lot across the street from my house, and what used to be Wade’s house. Was still Wade’s house technically, since he still owned the cute bungalow next to me and was using it as rental income.

Wade’s fiancé, Finn Sinclair, had bought the Victorian for an absolute steal and was slowly remodeling it. It was a pet project of his, and he’d had me working on it in my spare time, since he wasn’t in any rush to have it finished. He was a busy OB/GYN, and my business was booming, so our free time had been limited lately and we hadn’t made much progress the last few months. Usually, winter months were slower for me, but I’d had a rash of customers wanting interior remodels done the last couple of months that had kept me and my crew busy.

“Something wrong at the house?” My mind was whirling, wondering if a pipe had burst or the older-than-me shingles had finally sprung a leak. Honestly, I hadn’t been inside the house in weeks, and anything could have gone wrong. Especially with the cold front that had moved in a week ago. It had only lasted a few days, but the temperature had dipped rapidly into the single digits.

The house itself was well over a hundred years old, and nothing – not one thing – had been updated by the previous owner. It had stood empty for almost two years after they had passed, until the bank finally took possession of it.

When Finn had gotten the keys and we'd done a walk through, I had pointed out all the things that needed done. New plumbing, electrical, and a new furnace and A/C unit if he didn't want the place burning down the first time it was turned on. I'd been surprised when Finn hadn't chucked the whole project and cut his losses.

The roof was going to need replacing this summer, and the hardwood floors needed hours of sanding, buffing, and staining to make them beautiful again. If he even wanted to keep them. He was still deciding if he was going to just replace them. Secretly, I was hoping he kept them, even though it was going to take some elbow grease and long hours to make them shine again. Good thing I knew a guy who could handle it, because while I loved the idea of keeping the original floors, I didn't want to have to deal with them.

The house could be beautiful, but it was going to take deep pockets to get it that way. Not that Finn didn't have just that. The man invested in real estate left and right, and had a good head for business. He had a lucrative, thriving obstetrics practice, and he was a Sinclair. One of *those* Sinclairs. As in one of the founding families of Sweet Alps. Still, I had expected him to chuck the whole project in the bin. Instead, Finn had asked me if I would be willing to work on the house in my spare time, as he wasn't in a rush and money wasn't an

issue. I just invoiced him for my time and supplies when I was able to work on it.

Since the house was beautiful and I had been dying to get inside it since I had moved into the neighborhood, and there wasn't a crazy deadline or unrealistic budget for it, I had said yes. Admittedly, I'd seen it as a peace offering from Finn. He and I hadn't exactly gotten off on the best foot when he and Wade had first gotten together.

Wade and Finn had been enemies for as long as I had known Wade, so when he had shown up one night at Wade's door, I had been a little bit overprotective of my much smaller omega friend. Finn had seen an unknown alpha in his mate's house, and well...neither of us had been overly impressed with the other. We had since worked out our differences and even become friends.

"Yeah, let me throw some clothes on." Shutting off the water, I pulled the plug on the drain. Watching all my wonderful bubbles go to waste. My bath would have to wait.

Tossing on a clean t-shirt and jeans, I slid my feet into my well-worn sneakers and headed across the quiet street. We were at the end of a cul-de-sac in a subdivision, so there was seldom any traffic to worry about. Glancing across the driveway, I saw Wade's SUV parked next to a black BMW convertible sitting next to it.

"Finn got a new car," I mumbled, taking in the fact that the car was a two-seater and not at all kid friendly. But Finn collected fancy, expensive cars like he collected houses, so I

wasn't that surprised. Opening the front door, I was met with three sets of eyes instead of two.

The three men turned to face me, the tall blond omega immediately capturing all my attention. He was beautiful. So breathtaking to look at it almost hurt. The quintessential all American pretty boy.

Thick, shiny blond hair was artfully styled to perfectly frame his flawless face. Pools of dark chocolate brown eyes pulled me in, a startling contrast against his sun-kissed hair. He was tall for an omega, almost six foot, if I had to guess. He was all long legs and sleek, lean muscles.

He smiled wide, his teeth straight and white. His smile was warm and blinding, and made my stomach swoop, like I was on a roller coaster going downhill way too fast. Looking down, I averted my eyes from him. I never knew how to act around a handsome omega. Especially when I was covered in dirt, sweat, and grime from my day and my shift in the woods. Shuffling my feet, I wasn't sure what to do with my hands so I shoved them in the pockets of my jeans.

Pretty. Want. My bear decided to put his two cents in. He was a bear of few words sometimes, just like me.

We don't have anything he wants, I told him.

“Gabey!” Wade and Finn's two-year-old, Logan, yelled from where he'd been standing behind Finn and ran towards me. Without a thought, I scooped the boy up into my arms, nuzzling his soft chubby cheeks. Logan giggled as my close-cropped beard tickled his baby soft skin. Patting my cheeks,

something he'd done since he was a baby, we grinned at each other. Logan was one of my most favorite people on earth.

The omega's dark, dark eyes perused me slowly, from the top of my darkish brown hair down to my toes, then back up. Fighting the urge to squirm, my senses tingled as he slowly eye fucked me. Goddess, no one had ever looked at me like he was looking at me. Like he was about to lick his lips over a three-course meal.

Ignoring the gorgeous omega, I silently questioned Wade with my eyes. Giving him my what-in-the-actual-fuck-is-happening-right-now look. He knew it well, and the little shit just grinned at me. Clearly, he hadn't missed the eye fucking and found it amusing.

While Ryan might be my best friend, Wade was my oldest. He grinned at me, bouncing his almost one-year-old pup, Remy, on his hip. Today Wade's dark, spiked hair was dyed a bright lime green, and his nails were a bright pink. You never knew what color the top of Wade's hair was going to be on any given day. The man had to spend a fortune at the salon.

"Hey, Teddy Bear, hope we didn't interrupt your night." He drawled, using his nickname for me.

Shrugging wide shoulders, I answered softly, "Wasn't doing anything important."

My eyes traveled over the parts of the house I could see, doing a quick assessment. We were all crowded into the foyer area, but I was a head taller than everyone except Finn, so I could see past them. To the right of us was what had probably

once been a parlor, and down the hall to the left I knew was the dining room and the kitchen.

Chancing a look under my lashes at the omega, I saw he was giving me a sly grin. His eyes filled with heat and something I couldn't even begin to try to identify. His eyes raking over me had my internal temperature soaring, and I was thankful I hadn't donned a jacket on my trek over. The last thing I wanted to do was add more sweat to my sweat. As it was, I didn't want to stand too close to the handsome man and have him get a whiff of me.

Logan was babbling in my ear. Two-year-old nonsense that only made sense to another two-year-old. The only thing I could focus on was the sexy omega standing in front of me. Feeling my cheeks heat under his gaze, I ducked my head and stared at the floor.

“Gabe,” Finn’s deep voice had me glancing up at him, “this is my friend, Asher Pierce. I don’t know if you two know each other?” It was phrased as a question, and before I could respond, the blond answered for me.

“I’ve never had the pleasure.” His voice was smooth, silky, and flowed over all my nerve endings like cool silk. The exposed skin of my muscled arms broke out with goosebumps that had nothing to do with the chill of the night air. “Though I’ve seen him around.”

What? Where? When?

And how had I never seen him before?

As if sensing my confusion, he raised a dark brow at me, which contrasted starkly with his golden hair. “Brendan is a good friend of mine. Probably my best friend, I would say. And I’ve seen you at The Sweet Spot a few times in the mornings.”

The Sweet Spot was a popular bakery/coffee shop owned by our friend, Quinn Rafferty-Sinclair. Quinn was married to Lachlan, one of Finn’s four identical quadruplet brothers, and was also Wade’s boss.

How I had missed seeing this gorgeous man before was beyond me. But honestly, I seldom paid attention to people around me. Preferring to keep my eyes focused in front of me, and just place my order and go. I didn’t like drawing any kind of attention to myself, and my size usually drew enough unwanted attention. Not only did I stand four inches over six feet, I was broad. My chest was wide, my biceps bulged, and both constantly stretched the material of my shirts to within an inch of their life.

Construction, manual labor, did that to a person. Well, and being a Kodiak bear shifter probably factored into it somewhat.

Remy reached out his chubby arms toward Asher. Asher smoothly scooped him from Wade’s arms and propped him against his own lean hip. He looked like a natural, holding a baby on his hip, and a pang of longing slammed into my body, nearly taking my breath away.

Dammit, I had no business thinking about what this omega looks like holding a baby. What he would look like holding *my* baby. Gah, I didn't even know him.

But the man was hot. Like super, smoking hot, and his long, lean body was doing it for me. I'd probably crush him with my bulk, but a bear could dream.

As if he could absolutely read my mind, Asher shot me a sly, sexy smile, raising his brow over sparkling dark eyes. My face flushed with heat, and I had to look away. Before I completely and totally embarrassed myself and did or said something stupid.

Or sported a raging boner. My skin felt tight and tingly, flushed with unnatural heat. Yet goosebumps ran down the length of my arms. Goddess, I was either super turned on or coming down with the flu.

"I need to apologize to you," Asher's voice had me shooting him a look of confusion. "For the acorns," he clarified.

Realization dawned on me like a lightning bolt. How I hadn't figured it out before now was beyond me.

The golden hair. Those dark, mysterious eyes and that sly smile. The long, leanly muscled body. Sniffing subtly, I let my bear senses take over. It was generally rude to use my super sniffer on people, so I tried to avoid it in social situations.

Musk and something deliciously sweet filled my nostrils, instantly shooting blood into my groin.

Fucking honey.

He smelled like honey.

Of course, he fucking did. It might be the oldest cliché in the book, but I freaking loved the smell of honey.

“You,” I mumbled, ignoring the half chub I was now sporting and hoping the fuck everyone else kept their eyes off my crotch. “That was you.”

The cheetah.

He shrugged, not even trying to look remotely sorry. “I couldn’t resist. And I wanted to get your attention.”

Blinking in confusion, I couldn’t help wondering, “Why?”

Asher laughed, and the sound was like music tinkling in the foyer. His laughter caused both Logan and Remy to start giggling, even if they had no clue what they were laughing over.

Wade’s gray eyes were wide, as they flicked between Asher and I, like he was watching some late-night TV drama. Finn appeared to be staying neutral on whatever might be happening between us. Not that I had one clue what was *actually* happening between us.

Other than that he liked tossing acorns and hitting me with them because he wanted to get my attention.

Who the fuck does that?

Instead of answering, Asher just continued staring at me with that mischievous smile of his. Like he had some kind of

secret that only he knew. Finally, he winked at me. Fucking winked.

“You’re freaking adorable.”

Say what now?

He thinks we’re adorable, my bear chuffed, quite pleased on both our behalves.

No one had ever, in my entire life, described me as *adorable*. Fighting the strong urge to look behind me, to see if there was someone standing there he had to be talking about, I chose to ignore his comment completely.

Mostly because I had no idea how to even respond to it.

“What did you need me to look at?” Better to get my mind back on the business at hand, whatever it might be. I knew what it wasn’t. It wasn’t some Greek God come to life calling me ‘adorable’, who smelled like fucking honey.

Instead of Wade or Finn answering, Asher matter-of-factly informed me, “I’m buying this place from Finn. We thought you could walk me through what your professional opinion is on what urgently needs to be fixed first. And also, I have some ideas on some upgrades and some remodeling in the master bedroom that Finn thought you could help with. We can talk about the second-floor rooms, and then down here. The kitchen has to go.”

“You’re buying this place?” I repeated slowly.

Asher grinned, “Seems we’re going to be neighbors.”

Chapter Two



Asher

The sinfully sexy bear, standing in the foyer of what was about to be my new home, couldn't keep the astonishment off his face. Then it was gone, vanished like a puff of smoke and he once again was looking anywhere but at me. I didn't even try to hide my grin at the way his whiskey colored eyes would sneak a look at me from under his thick lashes, when he thought I wouldn't catch him. Since my eyes had pretty much been glued to his large body the minute he had walked in the door, I had caught each and every look. He would shyly duck his head when I would catch him, his cheeks flushed with bright pink color.

He was even more adorable than the one picture I had seen of him last year. My best friend, Brendan Sinclair – Finn's brother – was a Daddy like me. His little, Ryan, and Gabe were besties and often had playdates and sleepovers. They'd had their very first one when Brendan and Ryan were first dating. The two littles had fallen asleep on the floor together and Bren had snapped a quick picture and sent it to me.

With one glance at my phone screen, I had instantly felt *something* for the handsome man now shuffling his oversized feet on the scuffed hardwood floors in front of me. Desire for sure, as my cock had stood straight up and taken notice. But it had been more than lust at first sight.

That picture had captured a sweetness in him, as he had lain sleeping on the floor in his cute little pj's. An innocence and a vulnerability that had called to my very soul.

After that I tried to casually find out things about the man from Brendan, without making it obvious.

I knew his name was Gabriel Carmichael. His age, thirty-five or six, which made him a few years older than my almost thirty-two. He owned his own construction company. And I had found out where he liked to spend his free time in his gorgeous shifter form.

I might have run past him a few times, showing off in my cheetah form, whenever I would see him in the woods. On more than one occasion I had been hanging out in a limb high up in a tree and would observe him on the ground. Usually, those times he was with Ryan and Brendan, so I stayed up on my limb and just watched him.

Creepy, my cheetah yawned, *there's laws against that you know?*

Zip it. Take a nap or something.

Tonight, when I had seen him, he had been alone and there had been an air of loneliness surrounding him. Sitting below me in his big bear form, he had just been looking around, and he had looked so lost. Sad. Lonely.

Flicking the acorns down on him with my tail had been nothing more than me wanting to get his attention. The

equivalent of a schoolboy pulling a cute girl's pigtails. In this case, a cute, cuddly Kodiak bear's pigtails.

Childish? A bit. But one of us needed to make the first move and it certainly didn't seem like it was going to be him. I knew he watched me when I would run past him. But not once had he made any contact with me. He would just watch, his warm eyes trailing after me until I ran out of sight.

Brendan had told me Gabe was super shy, and the way he seemed to not be able to meet my eyes for more than a second tonight, confirmed that. He spoke quietly, which was something I hadn't expected. His voice was a deep, smooth baritone, but he certainly seemed to keep his volume muted. Like he was trying to tuck himself into a little ball standing there. His wide shoulders were pulled in the tiniest bit, his head down. As if he didn't want to be seen or heard.

His arms were tucked behind himself. Was he trying to hide those massive guns of biceps he had? My mouth salivated, staring at the huge muscles. He made Jason Statham look like he had stick arms, and that man did it for me. With a capital D. I had fantasies about Statham's biceps. He had hold-onto-me-tight-and-enjoy-the-ride-biceps, but Gabe's upper arms were twice as large. Maybe three times the size, even.

At nearly six foot tall, I was well aware I wasn't the average omega size. Gabe still had at least four or five inches on me, and he was twice as wide as my lean frame. His thick thighs were making his tight jeans earn their keep, and his t-shirt was stretched across his chest to the point I was sure I could just

see the outline of his nipples through the material. My tongue traced my bottom lip just taking in the visual art that was Gabriel Carmichael.

His gaze scanned the woodwork around him, before slowly straying back to me for the fifth or sixth time. Before he could look away, I winked at him, a sly smile curving my lips.

His whiskey eyes grew wide, his cheeks turning an even brighter shade of pink, and he quickly looked down at the floor. His hands flexed on his thighs, his chest was moving rapidly. He was flustered, no doubt about it.

That picture I had seen hadn't done him justice.

My Goddess he was the sexiest man I had seen in a long time, and the cutest little I had ever encountered. And that was saying a lot because I met a lot of littles. At the club, in my personal life, and my professional one.

“We were hoping you had time to do a quick walk through with Asher,” Finn told him, and Gabe's head shot back up, his eyes like saucers. “Point out what still needs done, what is a must, and then Asher has some ideas for changes he would like to make.”

“Only if you have the time this evening,” I told him, smiling. “And I wouldn't expect the quote for a few days. Since we interrupted your evening.” Was I hedging to see if we had interrupted his evening with someone? Yes, yes, I was. And I wasn't sorry about it.

“I wasn’t doing anything important,” he said quietly. Though there was a flicker in his eyes that told me we had indeed interrupted some plans of his. Narrowing my eyes at the stab of jealousy I felt for absolutely no reason, I shut that shit down. I had absolutely no right to be jealous of anything he did with anyone. Not yet anyway. “I’ll just run out to my truck and get an estimate form and something to take notes with.”

The Daddy in me had already noticed he wasn’t wearing a coat against the chilly night air. “Grab a coat while you’re over there. It’s chilly and I don’t want you catching cold.”

My teasing tone had vanished, and out came the Daddy Dom voice that no one argued with. Whoops. Oh well, some things I just couldn’t turn off, they were just a part of who I was. And I kind of wanted to see how he was going to react.

Three sets of eyebrows shot up at my firm command, but I didn’t blink as I focused on Gabe. Surprisingly, he scowled at me. Looking for all the world like he wanted to tell me to go to hell, yet he kept quiet. No snappy comeback, just a hard-glared silence. But there was something besides annoyance in those beautiful brown eyes of his. A flicker of something the Daddy inside me recognized. He wanted to obey. He wanted to be a good boy.

“I run pretty hot. I’m fine,” he rumbled.

“You certainly are,” the words practically purred from my throat. Gabe swallowed nervously, then hurried out the door, a flustered look on his face. From the corner of my eye, I caught Finn and Wade staring at me with *what the fuck* looks.

Turning, I flapped my arms at them. “Stop looking at me like that. We all play at the same kink club. This is not a surprise to you. You know I’m a Daddy.”

“Yes,” Finn said, his eyes travelling to the etched glass of the front door. We all watched as Gabe leaned against the side of the white work truck sitting in his driveway, head down and one foot scuffing at the concrete. Seeming to gather himself together, he began rummaging in the back seat. “But Gabe –”

Wade interrupted with a knowing smirk, “Teddy Bear is just fine, trust me. Daddy Asher knows exactly what he’s about.”

“Teddy Bear?”

Wade shrugged, “It’s our nickname for him. He’s a bear and cuddly.”

He certainly looked nice and cuddly. Though I was pretty sure I would prefer to call him something else. Baby bear instantly came to mind.

Because if I had my way, he was going to be my baby bear in every way possible.

Chapter Three



Gabe

“Boss, we’ve got a slight problem,” Stu, my crew foreman told me, hands planted on his hips. As if I couldn’t see that for myself.

Glancing to where one of my guys was measuring the clearly too small cabinets for the kitchen reno we were in the middle of – about the one hundredth one this winter – I snarled at him. “I can see that.”

Goddess, I had been rumbling and growling at everyone the past week. Like a bear with the proverbial sore paw.

Stu side-eyed me, smacking his lips together. “You sick or something?”

Wincing at my tone, I started to apologize when my cell phone rang. Shaking my head to answer Stu’s question, I glanced down at the unknown number. Stu’s question had been fair; I was an absolute crank ass when I was sick, but that wasn’t why I was all kinds of out of sorts. No, that blame belonged to one long, lithe, gorgeous cheetah.

Pulling in a fortifying breath, I tried to put on my I’m-a-grown-up-business-owner voice.

“Carmichael Construction.”

“Gabriel.”

The smooth, silky purr in my ear instantly had every molecule of blood in my body racing straight for my dick.

Turning quickly away from my crew before they could notice the already impressive chub in my jeans, I growled, “It’s Gabe.”

The chuckle that filled my ears was dark and rich, and made me instantly think of decadent chocolate. That perfect mixture on your tongue of sweet and bitter. The exact color of his eyes. *Fuck me.*

“How can I help you Mr. Pierce?” Running a hand through my thick brown hair, I stepped out into the homeowner’s backyard, tossing my sunglasses onto my face against the bright morning glare.

“It’s Dr. Pierce, actually,” a teasing lilt filled his tone.

“Dr. Pierce,” I corrected.

Gah, why did just this man’s voice have the effect on me it did? It had been just three days since I had met him at the Victorian and done a walk through with him. Jotting down notes for the changes he wanted to make. Telling him no, we really couldn’t move a load bearing wall. Watching his little pout as he realized I wouldn’t be budged on that one tiny detail and then emailing him my quote for all the renovations and upgrades he wanted. He had invaded my thoughts to the point of irritation and distraction. Still, I was surprised to hear from him so soon.

“Call me Asher, please.” *Was his voice always so damn... throaty?* “For now.”

For now? What the fuck did that mean?

You know what it means, my bear laughed, you know what he is. Da-

Shut it!

I needed to shut that shit down and quick. I knew Asher Pierce was a Daddy. But he wasn't my Daddy and he never would be. Nope, a Daddy like Asher wasn't for me. The man was ridiculously self-confident and bossy. Big top energy practically seeped from his pores.

And while I might be shy, and as my friends told me, super sweet and nice, I was one hundred percent a top. The bedroom was one place where I lost all my shyness and inhibitions, and I was in complete control.

I didn't fight for the top spot when I was fucking an omega. All his toppy energy wasn't going to work for me.

Nope, I was much better giving Asher Pierce a wide path away from me. Keeping him at an impersonal, client only, arm's length. If I wanted to use the man as jerk off material in my shower that was my business. No harm, no foul. And in those fantasies, I could make him bend to my rules.

“Gabe?” Asher's question broke into my mind's ramblings.

“Sorry, what can I do for you?”

The backdoor opened, and Stu popped his red head out. “You want me to deal with the cabinets?”

Holding the phone away from my ear, I growled, “Call the vendor and see who fucked it up. If it was them, they'd better hope they have them in stock, and send someone to get them.

If it was me,” *fuck, please don’t let it have been me*, “see if they’ll do an exchange, and send someone to get it done. This morning.”

Stu nodded and disappeared back through the open door, not even commenting on my uncharacteristic display of surly emotion. I was pretty sure my guys were used to it this week, and were keeping their distance. Probably why it had been Stu who had come to question how I wanted to handle the way too small cabinets we had unboxed. Despite his bright red hair, Stu was super chill and rarely lost his temper.

“Is this a bad time?” Asher’s voice turned my attention back to him. Multi-tasking was a problem for me today.

“No, I’m sorry.” Exhaling, I ran a hand through my hair for the twentieth time that morning. I needed to get it cut. It kept falling over my eyes, and I was sure my hands tugging at it all morning had it going every which way. “It’s just been a morning.”

“I wanted to see about going over the quote you sent, if it’s a good time?” He phrased it at the end like a question, but I felt like it wasn’t. There was that part of me inside myself that instantly turned it into a command.

Since I didn’t figure it was going to take him long to tell me he was going with a different contractor, I told him now was fine. “I realize it was probably more than you were expecting, but the house is pretty old and wasn’t well maintained before Finn bought it. And your list of upgrades and changes was long.” The list wasn’t that long really. But his main focus was

on opening up the downstairs rooms – fairly easy – along with complete gut jobs on the kitchen, bathrooms, and the third floor that he wanted some type of spa resort bed and bathroom suite. Kitchens and bathrooms weren't cheap.

Why did I feel the need to defend my pricing? Especially when I knew taking on this job would throw me right into the eye of the storm that was Asher Pierce. And whatever spell he had cast over my emotions. Not to mention over my dick, which was still insistently pushing against the zipper of my jeans. My dick was such a fucking traitor.

“The pricing is fine, lower than I expected to be honest,” he told me, and I was thankful he couldn't see my jaw hit somewhere around my knees in shock. “I just had a couple of questions.”

Swallowing hard, I nodded. “Shoot.”

“The items you noted as needing priority, would you be able to clarify and prioritize what should be done first? The roof, for instance, could it wait until summer?”

Chewing on my bottom lip, I nodded again, then realized he couldn't see me. “It can, but honestly, I don't think those shingles will last much past summer. It's kind of a mess up there. I'm amazed there hasn't been a bigger leak yet, besides what I noted in the attic. But it's on borrowed time. Summer is doable, but I strongly urge you not to wait much past that.”

“I just don't want you up on the roof if there's a chance we might still get a last minute snowfall. Or a thunderstorm in spring. It's dangerous.”

Blinking, I didn't know what to say. It wasn't like I had never been on top of a roof in shitty weather before. While summertime was ideal for doing a roof job – even if it was hot as hades – roof repairs didn't always like to wait for good weather. Instead of answering, I just made a humming noise in the back of my throat. I knew better than to argue with a customer.

Yeah, okay, my bear harrumphed, more like you know better than to argue with a Daddy. Especially this Daddy.

“And the items you have marked as using outside contractors, like restoring the floors, you trust them to do the job as well as you?” Asher seemed to be ignoring my silence, and the weird non-verbal sounds I was making. What were those sounds even? I had surely never heard myself make them before.

“I've worked with them all and trust them to do good work. Their prices are fair, and I don't overcharge for their services in the quote. I also guarantee them. If they don't do the job, I'll make sure it gets done correctly, and I won't push any extra costs onto you.”

It was Asher that made a sort of humming sound now. Or was that a purr? Why did the man always sound like he was rumbling from the back of his throat? I mean, cheetah shifter, yeah, but I didn't go around roaring like the bear I was. He shouldn't go around purring all the time. “I trust that you didn't pad the costs. And this extra twenty thousand for contingencies. What does that cover?”

It was the most frequently asked question I got from clients, so I wasn't surprised by him asking. "Have you ever watched any of those home improvement shows on TV?"

"A few, here and there," he admitted, though he sounded like he was embarrassed by doing so.

"I'd like to say all the extra stuff they find when they start a reno project is exaggerated and for dramatic effect. But the truth is, we never know what we are going to run into when we start tearing into stuff, but I can almost guarantee we will run into something. Your house is old, and old man Bramble, the previous owner before Finn, couldn't keep up with the maintenance and repairs."

Or he just couldn't be bothered. The grizzled old wolf shifter had been as cranky as they came. When I first moved into my ranch house across the street from the sprawling Victorian, I had noticed the overgrown yard. After two months of summer, and never once seeing a lawnmower tackle his lawn, I had pushed mine across the street and mowed his grass for him. On the third week of me doing this, the man had come out to observe my progress from his porch. When I had stopped to take a swig of water from the bottle I had with me, he had snarled, pointing out a spot I had missed, and gone back inside with a slam of his door.

His crankiness didn't deter me, and I kept mowing his grass even after he had passed. Not once did I ever see him have any visitors, and I had felt a kinship in his aloneness. My dad lived in Washington state, but we weren't close. We saw each other

once a year for a few days at Christmas, and we were both good with that. Bears weren't pack animals, but I had always felt the need to have people around me. Maybe because I had mostly been alone my entire life. Dad had been busy building his law practice. Being a widower with an infant hadn't been easy on him, and parenting hadn't come naturally. I was grateful for the found family I now had.

"So," Asher chuckled, "you're telling me to be prepared for the worst, and hopefully this amount is enough. I may have watched more than one or two home reno shows. Enough to know I will gladly pay someone to deal with all the nonsense."

Despite my complicated feelings for the man, I laughed, "Pretty much."

"All right, I'm signing the contract now and will email it back, along with payment. If the timeline you wrote to begin in two weeks is still open, that will work great. My lease is up at the beginning of March, so I'm going to be moving stuff in around you guys while you're still working. I was hoping my apartment complex would agree to a month-to-month until renovations were complete, but they are being stubborn. Either I'm out by the first, or I sign another year's lease. That's not happening."

"It's still available," I told him gruffly. Biting my lip, my mind screamed at me not to ask, while the words slipped right out, "So when are you planning to officially move in, then?"

Because the man was going to be living across the street from me. *Across the street!* While I could ignore him, I would

still know he was there. Just over there. I could look out my huge front window and see lights on in his house. Probably catch glimpses of him moving around. Would be able to imagine him up in his bedroom.

Stop it! Get a grip, Gabe!

Oh, I bet he's got a grip all right, my bear chortled, with just the right amount of pressure and wrist action.

Asher shuffled some papers in the background, and I imagined his hand smoothly signing the quote and contract I had written up. Why the fuck did I even find that sexy? “Since it’s a private sale, I can move in pretty much anytime. I’m going to start moving little stuff over the next week after work, a bit at a time. Stuff I don’t need right away and can toss up in the attic. Then I’ll get the furniture in about the time you guys are starting. My schedule is pretty full, so I’m hoping this way things won’t be rushed, and all crammed into one weekend. Hopefully, you’ll have a good start on some of the reno, and I’ll just work around you all.”

“Well,” my mind struggled with something to say that wouldn’t betray all my wayward thoughts. My dick gave a solid twitch in my jeans at the thought of him being so *close* to me. Looking down at the prominent bulge, I glanced over my shoulder at the closed door leading from the client’s kitchen to their backyard. Making sure none of my guys were around before I palmed a hand over my crotch. Giving it a quick squeeze, I ordered it to go the fuck down. “Welcome to the neighborhood.”

“Thank you.”

There was that throaty rumble of his, that purr. My dick jumped, and I felt precum drip into the soft cloth of my boxer briefs. Closing my eyes against the pure wave of desire that ripped through my stomach at those two simple words from him, I inhaled sharply.

I had never gone into a client’s bathroom and rubbed one out, but I just might need to if my dick didn’t deflate soon.

“Feel free to knock on my door anytime, Gabe. Day *or* night.”

The way his voice dropped an octave when he said that last sentence had my heart pounding wildly, my breath hitching in my chest, and the fingers tightly gripping my phone trembled.

Daddy, Daddy, Daddy, my bear chanted happily.

I was so fucking fucked. This was all going to end badly, I just knew it.

Chapter Four



Asher

Sighing in frustration, I moved another box around in my attic, looking for where the fuck I had put my dish towels. At this point, I was about ready to jump in my car, head to Sinclair's department store, and just buy new ones. How the actual fuck had I ended up with so many boxes marked "kitchen", yet none of them had produced a single dish towel? I mean, I loved to cook, but this was fucking ridiculous.

Where the fuck are my towels?

My phone vibrated in the back pocket of my jeans, and I was almost grateful for the reprieve. Seeing a text from my best friend, Brendan, I smiled and swiped my thumb over my screen.

Bren: *Want to meet me for a beer at Ballzeys? Ryan and his little gang are having a late lunch/early dinner and I'm his DD. Keep me company while I sip my one beer I'm having?*

Me: *Are we allowed at the omega table?*

Bren: *Fuck no! I've been told I'm sitting at a different table, preferably across the restaurant LOL He's such a bossy little sometimes. Mom is*

watching Charlie, so I thought I'd just sit here and enjoy some baby free time.

Me: *And you're afraid you're going to be bored?*

Bren: *And I would like some adult friend time myself. Why should my mate get all the fun?*

Me: *On my way.*

Giving up on my search for my dish towels, I wiped my hands down my jeans, then headed down the steep stairs into the construction zone that was currently my bedroom. The way it was looking, I might need to spend a night or two on the couch downstairs, but it would be worth the backache. Just like it had been worth seeing the look on the gorgeous bear's face when I had told him I wanted to knock out the other rooms on this floor to make one big suite. Complete with a nursery across the hall.

Looking down at his size fifteen feet, he had quietly asked, "So, you're planning on having cubs then?"

Hiding my grin, I nodded. "Eventually. In two or three years. But I think they'll be on the floor below us when they are old enough for a crib. We'll see." I had been deliberate in my use of *us* and *we*. "No, this is a different kind of nursery."

When he peeked shyly at me through his long lashes, I winked, "With much bigger furniture."

The blush that had covered his cheeks above his trimmed beard, which he kept at a length barely longer than a five-o'clock shadow, had been truly spectacular to behold. He blushed so easily and so prettily, that I just couldn't keep myself from teasing him. And I had been feeling him out to see his reaction. He was so fucking adorably delicious. More so when he got all flustered and pink.

Finding my wallet and keys, I hurried down the second set of stairs that led into my newly renovated kitchen. The kitchen was finished yesterday, and I couldn't have been happier with the result. Everywhere else was still a bit like a bomb had gone off.

My friends – Bren, Finn, and a couple others – had all pitched in and we'd gotten all my furniture moved, and I had officially moved in last week.

The mess and chaos were enough to set me on edge. Not to mention the construction crew that had started banging around at the ass crack of barely morning last Wednesday, my day off. It was the one day I let myself sleep in, even skipping my usual early morning run.

But the banging had meant my kitchen would be finished, so I had just groaned loudly, and tossed my pillow over my head. The other mornings I had made a point of being dressed, caffeinated, and on my way out the door just as Gabe's crew would start showing up. The bear himself was usually just ambling across the street about that time, and I would toss him a wave as I headed off to work.

Noticing the drizzle hitting the windows, I grabbed my leather jacket and ran for my car. I was really hoping to have a garage built next to the house before the end of summer. It had rained enough throughout the day that the grass was soaked, and the early March air had a cold bite to it.

Halfway to Ballzeys, the adults-only arcade and bar in town, the drizzle turned into another downpour. Flipping my wipers to the highest setting, I squinted at the white truck pulled to the shoulder of the road. A large figure was bent down, working a tire iron over lug nuts.

Recognizing Gabe through the rain, I pulled up behind his truck. Grabbing the umbrella I kept in my backseat, I hurried over to him.

He squinted through the rain, scowling when he recognized me.

“Need help?” I called, as a big boom of thunder echoed around us, shaking the earth.

“I got it,” he grumbled, tossing the tire iron down next to him, and pulling the flat tire off the truck. “You’re going to get soaked.”

“I have the umbrella.” It was keeping most of the water off of me.

He was already drenched, his brown hair plastered to his head, making it appear darker. Water streamed down his face. The gray t-shirt that was stretched across the wide expanse of his chest was nearly see-through. His nipples poked at the

material in a way that had my mouth salivating. By the way he tossed the flat tire into the bed of his truck and swiftly rolled the donut over, it was clear he was not in the best of moods. Not that I blamed him. Getting a flat tire in this weather would make me salty too.

“Where’s your jacket?” Irritated Daddy littered my tone as I asked the question. It was just who I was, and sometimes it seeped into my everyday life. Especially with a delectable little standing in front of me, looking for all the world like he was on the verge of throwing one hell of a temper tantrum.

Gabe shot me a put out look, silently working the spare tire into place. “You can be on your way, Dr. Pierce, I have this handled. No need for both of us to be out in this monsoon.”

Arching my brow at him at his annoyed tone and the formal way he addressed me, my lips pursed together in a tight line. He was damn lucky he wasn’t my little right now, or he’d be finding my hand on that delectable peach of an ass of his.

“You’re soaked. You’re going to catch a cold.”

He snorted loud enough I could hear him over the rain. “Even I know that’s not how you catch a cold, Doctor.”

Tightening the last of the lug nuts with an impressive bulge of muscles, he rose to his feet with the grace I wouldn’t expect from someone his size. Tossing the tire iron in the truck bed, he wiped his hands on a rag he pulled from his back pocket. It managed to get most of the grime off, but it was as wet as the rest of him.

“I’m a pediatrician, so I’m well versed on colds and flus. I’ll leave you to it.” Turning on my heel, I stalked back to my car. Yanking open my car door, I yelled over the rain, “And put your damn coat on, Gabriel!”

“It’s Gabe!” He slammed his truck door, and was back on the road before my rare flare of temper had cooled. That boy needed a good spanking. And a Daddy to take him in hand. And fuck, I wanted to be that Daddy, and oh how I wanted to take him in hand. My slender fingers flexed on my steering wheel, itching to feel them smack that ass of his. Imagining how the plump mounds would jiggle. How they would pink and warm under my hands.

Fuck. If I didn’t get myself under control, I was going to end up meeting Brendan with a hard on I really didn’t want to have to explain. But Gabe did it for me on every single level. I wanted him. My cat wanted him. The Daddy in me wanted him, and my omega hormones sure as fuck wanted him.

If there was one thing I excelled at, it was getting what I wanted.

Want to go to medical school when there was no college fund set aside? Get a track scholarship and model on the side for extra cash.

Want a house by the time I was thirty? Okay I was almost two years past that deadline, but I was still happy with my progress. Save the inheritance from my dad’s passing, invest it wisely, and save, save, save from my income. Not only did I have the house, but I was able to afford all the renovations and

then some. I might even see about putting a pool in. I had the room for it.

I had never met a challenge I couldn't conquer. And Gabe Carmichael was one delicious challenge I planned to win.

I was going to get my bear.

Chapter Five



Gabe

Sliding my heavy bulk onto the hightop stool, I grimaced as a wet strand of hair fell over my forehead and dripped down my face. My three besties, Ryan, Wade, and Quinn, stared at me with raised brows and questioning eyes. I knew I probably looked like a drowned rat, but I wasn't going back home to change into dry clothes.

Once I had placed my order for a much needed beer, I grumbled, "Flat tire. And of course, it had to start pouring in the middle of me changing it."

"Where's your coat?" Ryan asked, grabbing a menu and looking it over. Even though we had been here a million times, and he always ordered the same thing. He still insisted on looking over the menu.

"In the truck." Grabbing the remaining menu from the middle of the table, I perused it like it was the first time I was seeing it. It wasn't like I didn't know what I wanted. Like Ryan I tended to be a creature of habit, but it gave me something to do besides answer unwanted questions. "Why the fuck do they have the A/C on?" I tried to hide the slight shiver as the air conditioned air hit my skin. Goosebumps raised over the exposed skin of my arm as cool air blasted down on me from a vent in the ceiling.

Wade shrugged his narrow shoulders, running a hand through his bright aqua colored spikes. "Probably because it

gets hot in here with all these people, ovens, and all that. Why you grumpy, Teddy Bear?”

“Yeah, who pissed in your cheerios?” Quinn took a sip of his own beer, smacking his lips. “Oh, that’s good. This week has been hell. I think every single kid in Sweet Alps has a birthday this week, I swear to the Goddess. I truly hope one of my children wants to be a cake decorator because it’s not my favorite thing to do, and I will gladly pass that baton to them.”

Our server stopped by and took our orders, and I waffled between getting a burger or indulging my little side. Because I was desperate for any type of littleness I could grab onto right now, I ordered the chicken strip basket with fries and a side of mac and cheese. Dino nuggies would have been better, but beggars couldn’t be choosers, and I’d take what I could get. This would be close enough.

Ryan ordered the same, shooting me a conspiratorial smile. Noticing his mate, Brendan sitting alone a few tables from us, I nudged him. “Why’s Bren over there by himself?”

Brendan was scrolling absently through his phone, but I saw his eyes keeping track of his boy every few seconds.

“Charlie is with Grandma Mary and Bren wanted some adult time out too. Plus, he’s my DD. But I told him he could absolutely not sit at the Musketeer table. I mean, I can’t talk about him if he’s sitting here. And Wade and Quinn can’t talk about their mates either.”

He had a point. All three of them were mated to three of the four Sinclair quads. And the group did tend to like to gripe

about their mates, or talk about their sex lives, or any number of things. Well, Quinn never went into explicit detail about his and Lachlan's sex life, thank the Goddess for that. Wade went into enough detail about his and Finn's to make me shudder. It was hard as fuck to look Finn in the eyes sometimes, knowing the things I knew.

I just didn't need to know certain things about certain people. Call me old fashioned, but I kept what I did behind closed doors just that. Private.

Ryan's attention caught on something over my shoulder, and I turned to see what it was. My breath froze in my chest at the sight of Asher Pierce, striding confidently past our table with a smirk on his too perfect face. He gave us all a little wave, his dark chocolate eyes giving me a thorough once over, like he hadn't just seen me minutes before.

Goddess, the man was sheer perfection on two long, slender legs. Every time I was near him, I wanted to just stop and stare.

No one, not one single omega on this earth, had ever affected me the way he did. It was damned annoying.

He was so freaking sure and confident in every single thing he did. It made me feel enormous and clumsy, and...just a mess, honestly.

Because I wanted him. Badly.

And no matter how much I told myself not to look, my eyes always – always – strayed to wherever he was.

Just like they were doing now.

His head was thrown back in laughter at something Brendan had said, showing off the sleek column of his throat. When he finished laughing, he was grinning broadly, flashing straight white teeth. The lights reflected off his blond hair, making him look like he was surrounded by sunlight. He was all graceful, elegant limbs covered in sinewy muscle, and I wanted to touch him all over. Run my tongue over all the lines and hills and valleys he was made of.

And fuuucckkkk, he caught me staring!

Before I could look away, his full perfect lips that were just made for kissing, pressed together with a wicked smile, and he winked at me. Winked! That was the second time he had winked at me. Who even went around winking at people? If I went around winking at people all willy-nilly like he did, I'd probably look like I had an eye twitch.

Cheeks burning, I quickly looked away, trying to concentrate on my friends' conversation as random words floated by me. Picking up my beer I took a deep pull, savoring the hoppy taste, and swallowing roughly.

Peeking at Asher through my lashes, I saw he was still staring at me. The smile was gone though, his eyes full of heat and fire. A small shiver raced through me that had nothing to do with my wet clothes, or the air conditioning running in fucking early March.

“Gabe, are you even listening to me?” Wade demanded, rapping the table with his fist to get my attention.

Blinking, I stared at him, having not one fucking clue what he had said.

“Of course, I’m listening.”

Quinn rolled his green eyes, “If you call eye fucking my kid’s doctor listening, then you absolutely were.”

“I wasn’t eye fucking him!” I hissed through clenched teeth, picking at the label on my bottle.

“He has a crush on you,” Ryan stated matter-of-factly, and I stared at him incredulously.

“What? He does not.” The words came out in a croak.

Ryan nodded his reddish blond head emphatically. “He does. Brendan told me he’s always asking him questions about you. Like. All. The. Time.”

“That’s ridiculous,” I scoffed. “We just met each other. He’s a client. And a neighbor now, I guess.”

“Nope, he saw you way before, like last year. He saw a picture of you and me, and started asking Bren all about you.” Glancing at the other occupants of the table, Ryan said, “It was when I first moved to Sweet Alps, a week or two after we met.”

I had a feeling Ryan was talking about one of our very first playdates. While I knew Brendan’s family were aware he was a Daddy, I didn’t know if that extended to knowing that Ryan was also a little. Regardless, I didn’t advertise my kink. But I had a feeling Wade knew, or at least, had guessed.

“Ugh!” Wade sighed dramatically, “I need to pee.” It was funny watching him slide his barely five-foot-six body down the very high stool. “I fucking hate high tops. Why do we always sit at them?”

“Because Gabe and I are fucking tall and don’t want to eat with our knees in our chest.” Quinn slid his six-foot-two, overly tall omega self out of his stool smoothly and without any fuss. “I’ll come with you.”

When they were out of earshot, Ryan looked over to where Brendan and Asher were chatting. Lowering his voice, he whispered, “He’s a Daddy, you know?”

“What? Who?”

Okay, it wasn’t like the thought hadn’t crossed my mind that Asher might possibly be a Daddy. Especially when he looked at me with his secret smirky smiles like he knew all my secrets. Because it had absolutely crossed my mind and invaded my fantasies. My wrist had put in some overtime action thinking about what it would be like to have Asher as a Daddy.

With his cock-sure confidence and the way he issued orders, just expecting to be obeyed, there was no way I could not entertain the idea. Not to mention that nursery he wanted next to his master suite. The one with the *much bigger furniture*. What that even meant had definitely been niggling at my brain.

All. The. Damn. Time.

I undeniably was not going to start something with Asher, knowing exactly how it was going to end. Badly, that was a fact. I wasn't going to do that to myself.

I was too old to be playing games, and there was a deep part of me that was ready to be settled with a mate. That craved it. I was ready to make a commitment to someone. I wanted what all my friends had. I wanted cubs of my own. It was great being a surrogate uncle to all my friends' pups, but I wanted to hold my own cub in my arms. There were times I was a bit jealous of what they all had found. Jealous and lonely. And I hated feeling that way, especially when it was directed at friends who I considered family.

Asher was beautiful, and sexy, and if he was a Daddy, he would want the same perfection in a little. I was none of those things. I would never be anyone's idea of a perfect little. That fact had been made painfully clear to me.

Besides, Asher oozed top all over the place, and that would categorically be an issue between us. Nope, it was better to nip all this now, and not have to be bothered with anyone's hurt feelings. Mainly, my hurt feelings, but I was all about protecting my tender heart.

Ryan rolled his eyes. "Asher. He's a Daddy."

"Oh." That might have been the most pathetic sounding word I had ever uttered.

"You guys would be perfect together," Ryan declared, shushing as two servers brought the food for the table. Once

they were out of earshot, he continued, “And he totally has the hots for you. And he’s massively hot. Like model hot.”

“That’s a lot of hots.” Shaking the ketchup bottle, I squeezed a good-sized portion onto my plate before passing the bottle to Ryan. “And, why are you looking at other guys anyway? Didn’t think you were into omegas, and does Bren know?”

Ryan dipped a fry in his ketchup, before biting the tip off. “It’s hard not to notice how gorgeous Asher is. He seriously really could be a freaking model. Even Charlie bats her eyes at him, and she’s only four months old.”

Digging into my mac and cheese, I resisted the urge to do a little butt wiggle in my seat as all the cheesy goodness tickled my tongue. “Charlie bats her eyes at everyone. Her judgment can’t be trusted,” I joked. “Doesn’t matter, it would never work between us. I’m not even going to open that can of worms.”

“Why wouldn’t it work?” Ryan demanded. It was hard to believe when we’d met barely a year ago, he had been super shy. Even shyer than me. Now, he could be super nosy and bossy when it was just the two of us. And very loud when we were playing.

“Because it wouldn’t.” What the fuck was taking Wade and Quinn so long in the bathroom? I really, really wanted to talk about anything else but Asher, his looks, or his Daddy vibes.

“That’s a bullshit answer if I’ve ever heard one.”

Thankfully, our conversation was interrupted by Quinn and Wade *finally* returning and all of us eating our food. We caught up on each other's past weeks since we hadn't all been together in about two months. Talk turned to their kids, and Wade asked how I was liking all my new neighbors. He had rented out the house next door to me that he still owned a few weeks ago to a single dad and his young son.

"They're quiet," I told him, wiping my mouth with a napkin. "I never really see them. I've waved a few times, when we were both leaving in the mornings at about the same time. I think he drops the boy off at school and picks him up, but that's about all I can tell you."

Wade finished the last of his drink, "He's British and his accent is hella hawt. He sounds like James Bond and sorta looks like Q. From the new movies, not the old guy in the older ones. He's a children's author and he works from home. We've just started reading his series to Logan and he loves the books. His name's Sebastian Hollingsworth. That's a fucking mouthful. Seems nice enough. I'm not sure what his son's name is. Matthew, maybe?" He shrugged, "I can't remember. He wasn't with him when we showed him the house." Wade was full of all kinds of useless tidbits of information. "He passed his background check and paid a year's rent up front."

We all whistled impressively at that morsel of gossip.

Deciding to indulge, we all ordered dessert, and Wade turned the conversation to asking how the renovations were coming

on Asher's house. "Finn said you guys were making fast progress when he helped move his furniture in last week."

"Surprisingly, we haven't run into any issues. Yet. It will happen though." In fact, law of averages said I had probably just cursed myself.

The conversation stilled once more when wait staff delivered our desserts. Drooling over mine, I dug into the extra-large banana split I had ordered. My clothes had sort of dried, and the natural heat of my body had finally kicked back in, and I had wanted ice cream. Full disclosure, there was never a time I didn't want ice cream.

And this sundae looked delicious and was the perfect size for a hungry bear. I had swapped out the pineapple topping because I found it icky, even though I loved fresh pineapple. They had substituted with extra chocolate, swirls of whipped cream, and three cherries on top of each mound of vanilla soft serve.

"That thing is as big as your head," Wade grumbled, taking a bite of his slice of devil's food cake.

Grinning around the cold spoon in my mouth, I mumbled, "It's bear size."

My phone vibrated in my pocket, and with an annoyed sigh I reluctantly put my spoon down and fished it out of my jeans. Really, really hoping it wasn't a client with some kind of house or roof emergency I would need to leave and deal with.

Asher: *Don't give yourself a tummy ache with all that ice cream and sugar, baby bear.*

Staring at my phone for what felt like forever, but was probably less than thirty seconds, I read the words once. Twice. Three times.

They were still there, taunting me in black and white.

Baby bear?

Why did reading those words, thinking of him calling me that, make me feel all fluttery in my stomach? Maybe it was all the sugar. No one had ever called me a pet name, unless you counted Wade's nickname of Teddy Bear for me, and I wasn't.

Why was Asher even worrying about what I was eating?

Ryan's words sparked in my mind, and my bear chuffed.

He's a Daddy, you know?

My mind and body seemed at war with one another, as I tried to come up with some kind of response. My phone insistently buzzed a second time. I was torn between being annoyed by him, and telling him to mind his own business. That I was a grown ass man – fuck, I was probably older than he was – and I could eat whatever the fuck I wanted. While the little side of me wanted to say, “*Yes, Daddy.*”

Ugh, what the actual fuck was wrong with me?

Asher: *But if you do get a tummy ache, you can always call me. I am a little doctor. I'm sure I could fix you right up and make you feel better in no time. I know all kinds of tricks for achy tummies. And I'm just across the street.*

Daring to look his way, he seemed to not be paying attention to what was happening at our table in the least. Instead, he appeared to be engrossed in listening to something Brendan was saying.

Then he grinned, looking straight at me, his eyes dancing with amusement.

And my heart did a little flip-flop in my chest.

Was he toying with me?

Teasing me, like he had with those acorns?

Or, could he be serious, and was just being a Daddy because he couldn't help himself?

Honestly, I had not one fucking clue.

But that smile of his, that look in his eyes, told me he knew exactly the effect he was having on me.

I had never been in this situation before, and I didn't know how to act. Most people didn't flirt with me. Or, if they did, I was usually oblivious to it. And I was self-aware enough to know I had zero flirt game.

Random hookups didn't usually require flirting, or even much conversation, thank the Goddess. It was why I found

them easy. Swipe on an app, and a few messages to iron out details. Meet. Fuck. One and done, and back home again. Easy. Simple. No fuss.

And the only actual experience I had with any Daddies – besides Brendan, who wasn't even my Daddy – had been less than stellar. So horrible I never wanted to repeat it. Ever.

Asher Pierce had me spinning in a thousand different directions until I didn't know which way was up, and I had no clue what to do about any of it.

Instead of trying to make my brain hurt figuring him out, I glanced away from his hypnotic stare. Picked up my spoon, and ate another bite of my ice cream. If I did end up with a tummy ache, I sure as shit wouldn't be calling him to make it better.

Though I would be sorely tempted.

My phone buzzed, and my spoon hovered in the air, halfway to my mouth.

Asher: *We'll deal with you not wearing your coat later.*

My spoon clattered in the bowl loudly when it slipped from my fingers. My thumb and fingers flew angrily over the keyboard on my cellphone as I furiously replied. This guy had some fucking obsession with me and my coat.

Me: *I'm a grown ass man, in case you failed to notice. I don't need instructions on when to put my coat on. I have parents, thanks, and they know I can make my own decision about if I think I need to wear a coat or not.*

Defiantly, I glared at him across the restaurant when I hit the send button a little too hard. Pointedly, I ignored all three of my friends gawking at me, silent questions filling their eyes.

Asher didn't need to know that technically I had a dad and stepmom, who Dad had married after I had moved out to go to college. My Dad could honestly give two shits if I was wearing my coat in the middle of a snowstorm.

Whatever. It wasn't Asher's business, one way or the other. I had gotten my point across, loud and clear.

Talking over text was ten times easier than saying words out loud to someone. Texting made me much braver than I really was.

Asher read my text, a tight smile forming on his lips. He typed quickly, then kept eye contact with me as he hit send, one golden brow arched perfectly. Go ahead, that brow said, keep pushing me. I dare you.

It felt like the entire table was watching as I looked down at the phone buzzing in my hand. Reading the words, I nearly had to grab onto the table to keep myself upright. My breath hitched painfully in my throat, and then I just forgot to breathe altogether. My heart pounded ferociously in my chest. My

stomach dipped and soared like it did when I rode a roller coaster, and we swooped down a sky-high hill at breakneck speed.

Asher: *You may have parents, baby bear, but we both know what you need is a Daddy.*

Chapter Six



Asher

Gabe Carmichael was, without a doubt, avoiding me. Had been for a couple of weeks now. After our teasing and heated text exchange at Ballzeys, the following morning he had been conspicuously absent when his work crew had shown up at my house. When I had casually inquired about his absence with the crew foreman, Stu, he had told me Gabe was working on another project across town.

Seemed they had been overrun over the winter with kitchen renos, and now with Spring trying to appear, the rains had brought an abundance of leaking roofs to contend with. I might have bought that story if I hadn't seen Gabe heading across the street to my house when I had looked in my rearview mirror, after heading down our street on my way to work.

He was deliberately waiting for me to leave, and then he would slink across the street, travel sized coffee mug in hand, never wearing his damn coat. Yes, I knew he was a bear shifter, and yes, I knew he probably did run hot as he had claimed. But the Daddy inside of me was screaming to get a coat on my boy. If I found out he was deliberately not wearing one just to disobey me, he was going to find my hand on his ass.

Whoa, whoa, whoa, my cat huffed, your what now? Your boy? When did that happen? As usual, you're getting a bit

ahead of yourself.

Like most days when my cheetah questioned anything I did or even thought, that he didn't agree with, I ignored him.

But I was done playing this cat and mouse game with Gabe. Peeking out the window in what was shaping up to be my living room, I watched him move around his house. The sun had set a little while ago, and his living room was lit with warm, yellow light. He still had the curtains open over the big bay window that looked out onto his front lawn, as was his habit.

I wondered if he knew I could see him while he went about his nightly routine when he didn't shut those heavy drapes. Did he do it on purpose? Or was he so used to the house across from him being empty, it didn't even cross his mind?

Not that I was complaining. If the man wanted to walk around in nothing but his tight boxer briefs, I wasn't about to rat myself out by telling him to close his curtains. Even from across the street at night, with my cat eyes I could see him well enough to know his large body was covered in delicious looking fur. That broad chest of his had a wide pelt that tapered down to his stomach and disappeared into the waistband of those tight boxer briefs he preferred. His thick thighs and well-muscled calves were covered in luscious dark curls.

I wondered if his delectable, round ass would have a nice covering of fur too. I was good either way, but I didn't mind a

hairy butt. I actually liked a fine layer of peach fuzz to stroke my hands over.

Since I had watched him walk through his living room towards what I knew led to his garage, and he hadn't reappeared, I assumed he had gone out for a shift. He seemed to shift most nights. I would give him his time and not bother him, even though my cheetah was aching for a good run. No, I would be too tempted to tease and play with him if I came upon him, and he didn't seem to take my teasing all that well. I did want to have a conversation about exploring a Daddy/little relationship with him, but I'd prefer him not to be annoyed with me when we had it. Though I wasn't going to let him avoid me forever. When I wanted something, I went after it.

And I wanted Gabe Carmichael. I wanted him so, so much. Not just as a Daddy either. The omega part of me practically melted inside whenever I saw him.

Telling my cat we would shift tomorrow and he could run, I changed out of my office business dress into a comfy pair of worn sweats and a baseball tee. Grabbing a cold beer from my fridge, I took it out into my back yard. Removing the temptation of me staring at Gabe's empty living room, like some obsessed stalker. He didn't need to know that I couldn't seem to settle into sleep until I had made sure he was back safely, and watched him lock up and turn all his lights off.

The need inside me to make sure he was safe was stronger than anything I had ever experienced. Logically I knew he was bigger than me, in both human and shifter form, and could

take care of himself, but logic flew out the window when I was near him. My Daddy senses took over and I couldn't stop them.

Taking another sip of my beer, I leaned on the railing of my massive back deck. It had been added on at some point in the last few years, and was in decent shape. There were a few boards that needed replacing, but all in all, nothing major needed fixing right away. There was room for a grill and some nice patio furniture. I was already planning on cookouts with friends in the summer. A privacy fence was on my list of needed things, as I wanted to put in a large play area. A swing, possibly. Some fun plastic play toys, like a play grill. Maybe a sandbox. Part of me was still contemplating putting in an in-ground pool. I certainly had the room, but I wasn't sure if the expense would be worth it.

A crack split the night air, startling me out of my backyard daydreams, and I nearly dropped my beer. Ears cocked, head tilted, I turned towards where the sound had come from. Gabe's house, or close to it. It had sounded like a gunshot, sharply splitting the still of the night.

My cat ears weren't picking up any other strange sounds, but I sat my beer on the railing and silently started around the side of my house before stopping. If it was a gunshot, should I be rushing into whatever was happening, or should I call 9-1-1? And maybe it had come from the woods behind Gabe's house, though it had sounded closer. Much closer.

Unsure what to do, my eyes scanned my front yard, then down the dark street. Squinting at the sight of the unfamiliar car I had noted when I had arrived home. It was parked unobtrusively on the side of the road, in front of a house at the far end of the street. I hadn't thought much about it at the time.

Quickly I glanced across the street at Gabe's house, his living room still awash in soft light. But there was no movement inside. Nothing that indicated he had returned home. The house next to his, the one I knew Wade owned and rented out, was dark. The curtains in the front window shut tight.

But my cat ears picked up the faintest sounds in the night now. Scuffling almost, possibly a fight. Was this a burglary? It wasn't even that late at night, barely nine p.m., if that. Who broke into someone's house that early? Sweet Alps didn't have a huge crime problem, regardless of the time of night.

Before I could form a direct plan of action, the high pitched yipping of a wolf cub in distress carried to my ears. The sounds were quickly followed by the bellow of a bear's roar through the air.

Gabe!

Another crack of a gunshot sounded, and the bear roared in anger and pain. *My* bear roared in pain.

Gabe! My cat howled, *hurt. Go. Run!*

My long legs ate up the distance between our houses. Even though I wasn't as fast in my human form as my cheetah's, I

was still pretty fucking fast. I still held a couple of track records at my high school, and one at my college.

Not even caring what I might be running headlong into, my only thought was getting to Gabe. Rounding the side of Gabe's house, I nearly ran face first into the privacy fence that surrounded his backyard in my haste to get to him. Thankfully, there was a gate with a latch leading into his property. My cheetah could clear twenty feet; I just didn't want to take the time to strip and shift and jump the damn thing.

I could hear Gabe panting harshly, his bear huffing, and growling in pain.

Swinging the wooden gate open, I ran inside, stopping abruptly when I realized it was empty. Where was he? I could hear him, so he was close. Next door! The sounds were still muffled, but they were coming from the adjacent yard.

Wade's rental house. The one with the dark-haired man and his son, who had moved in shortly before me. There was another gate, on the opposite side of the fence, and I raced through it. Only to be met with a narrow patch of grass between the two houses and another privacy barrier. This fence had the same gate with a latch. It screamed of Gabe's touch, and I took a brief second to wonder if he had installed them on both fences when Wade had lived there. It was an easy way to move between the separate yards.

My shaking hands fumbled with the latch, the sounds of Gabe's pained grunts and moans making my heart pound nearly out of my chest. I was usually calm in any emergency

situation. My patients counted on it, as babies and young children – especially shifters – could sense tension and anxiety. And parents counted on me being the calming force for their children, and them, when they were injured or ill.

I was so far from a state of calm right now it no longer existed in my vocabulary. All the years and years of training flew right out the window when I finally got the latch open.

My nostrils flared when the warm coppery scent of blood filled my senses. Gabe, still in his shifted bear form, rolled on the ground, bellowing in rage. Before I could reach him, he shifted to his human form, his pain-filled whiskey eyes landing on me. Even from a distance I could tell shock was setting in, the doctor in me automatically assessing.

He shifted once more, just as I slid down on my knees next to him. His gigantic Kodiak bear's huge bulk knocked me to the side. Landing on my ass beside him, I let out a frustrated sound of my own, my cheetah barely contained beneath my surface.

Gabe rolled on the ground, his eyes tossing wildly in his head. The pain was making him shift continuously between forms, and he would exhaust himself if he didn't stop. Blood was flying every time he shifted, but all I could tell was damage had been done to his left arm.

Crab walking to him on my knees, the second he shifted back to his human form I grabbed his good shoulder. Lightning zapped between us, shooting electricity up my arm

and between our bodies. The shock of it landed me back on my ass, and I sat panting, staring at him wide-eyed.

What. The. Actual. Fuck. Was. That?

Mate! My cheetah screamed in my ear, the sound primal and raw, *fated mate! Ours!*

Gabe's eyes – just as wide as I imagined mine were – blinked slowly at me, his mouth open in a wide 'O'. His bear took over, and I was grasping a handful of thick brown fur. He roared at me, trying to shake me off, but I held on tight. Dodging when his bloody paw tried to take a swipe at me.

“Stop it!” My voice was harsh, demanding, and one hundred percent Daddy.

To my surprise and shock, the bear stopped thrashing instantly. Harsh panting, heavy and hot on my skin, filled the air. Pain wracked brown eyes stared at me, but he didn't move. Just watched me warily.

“Shift back, baby bear.” I stoked a soothing hand from his shoulder to the massive paw, filled with razor sharp claws, making sure to avoid those. “Shift for Daddy.”

He did as I'd ordered, staring at me in shock and a touch of confusion, his wide, heavily furred chest rising up and down. Too fast. He was breathing much too fast. Placing a hand in the middle of his chest, ignoring the delicious feel of all that hair beneath my hand, I soothed him.

“Easy, Gabe, easy.” I tried to gentle him with my touch and quiet voice. “Daddy's here. You're going to be fine. Slow your

breathing down for me.”

Sounds from the house started to register in my ears. A large man ran out of the open glass sliders, a gun in his hand. Without hesitation, I covered Gabe’s body with my own. The man paid no attention to us, running past into the woods.

What the fuck is going on?

I didn’t have time to figure it out. Glancing around, I spotted my cell phone in the grass, where I’d lost my hold on it when Gabe had knocked me down. Quickly scrambling for it, I dialed 9-1-1. Holding the phone between my ear and shoulder, I placed both hands on the bleeding wound in the middle of his bicep. The bullet had taken a massive chunk out of his arm, and was bleeding profusely.

Easing off, I took a second to put my phone on speaker and laid it in the grass next to us, relaying information to the emergency services operator. Gabe peered at me wide-eyed, sucking in a sharp breath when I put both hands back on the wound and pushed down hard in an attempt to slow the bleeding.

Hearing a rustling behind us, I turned to see a...what the fuck? Was that a honey badger? I couldn’t be sure the small, dark shape with a white stripe down its back was what I thought it was, because I’d only seen a video of a honey badger once on social media. The thing had been an absolute badass though, and could easily take on my cheetah if it chose to.

The honey badger was moving a bit drunkenly across the yard, stopping long enough to give Gabe and I a quick once over, before its gaze moved frantically all over the yard. He seemed to be searching for something. Or someone.

“Woods,” Gabe’s voice was rough, barely above a whisper and pain filled, but the honey badger cocked its head. “He ran...but they...went after...him.”

That was all the shifter needed to hear. He moved quickly, vanishing into the darkness of the woods.

Hearing the sirens of the ambulance turning down our street, I eased one hand off the still bleeding wound. I wanted to touch his face, brush the sweaty, tousled hair back from his forehead, but my hand was stained red with his blood.

Instead, I went back to putting pressure on his arm. Goddess, he was bleeding at an alarming rate that had me worried. It seemed the doctor in me had checked out for the evening, and in its place was a man covered in his fated mate’s blood. I was almost positive that electric shock between Gabe and I, the way my world had shifted beneath me, signaled that we were fated. My cheetah had all but screamed it at me.

“There was...wolf cub,” Gabe rasped through tightly gritted teeth, “they tried...to shoot him.”

Nodding curtly, I gave him a trembling smile. “And you had to play the hero?”

“He’s just...a kid. Couldn’t let...them...shoot him.”

Of course, he couldn’t.

Paramedics rushed into the yard, and I reluctantly let them take over, moving out of the way.

“Hey doc,” one of them called over her shoulder, and I couldn’t for the life of me remember the woman’s name to save my life. “Fancy meeting you here.”

“We’re neighbors.” I couldn’t take my eyes off of Gabe as they did their job, even though he had his eyes tightly closed now and wasn’t looking at anything. Had he passed out from blood loss? Shock? “I heard the gunshots.”

Nodding, she efficiently started an I.V., and I saw Gabe flinch as the needle pierced his skin. “We might need your help loading him up. He’s a big guy.”

I moved forward, ready to help if needed. Movement caught the corner of my eye, and a sheriff’s deputy stepped into the yard. For the first time, I noticed an abundance of flashing red and blue lights piercing the darkness. Gunshots were rare in Sweet Alps, as was someone getting shot. Looked like the whole calvary had shown up.

“I’m going to need a statement,” the deputy was speaking to me, but I was already following the stretcher as they headed towards the waiting ambulance.

“I’m going with him.” I didn’t even wait to see if the man followed, as I quickly caught up with the EMT’s.

“You family, doc?” The same EMT asked, as I went to step up inside the vehicle.

“I’m...” pausing, I only took a second before stating firmly,
“I’m his mate. We’re mates. Fated mates.”

Chapter Seven



Gabe

Brendan Sinclair was right. Getting shot fucking hurt!

At some point, I was pretty sure I had passed out. Or maybe they gave me something that knocked me out. Whatever it was, the pain had stopped, and I had slipped into a nice, pleasant black hole. But the dull throbbing in my arm slowly brought me back to consciousness.

Before opening my eyes, I took stock of myself. My arm hurt like a mother fucker. It throbbed in time with my heartbeat. It wasn't the excruciating burning pain it had been before, but it was quickly amping up to the way beyond uncomfortable stage. I could do with some more of those make-me-feel-nothing drugs.

Blinking my eyes open, I grimaced. Yep, I was definitely in a hospital room. Not that I hadn't already known that from the harsh, chemical smells that had burned my nose. Vaguely, I remembered the bright lights of being wheeled into the E.R., but now I was in a quieter room of my own. The lighting was dimmed, just a soft nightlight and the lights from a couple machines, keeping the room from complete darkness.

Good, I hated trying to sleep in a completely dark room. My bedroom at home had a Winnie the Pooh nightlight that I used every night. A scratchy hospital gown was stretched over my chest, a rough blanket pulled up to my waist. Why the fuck hospitals had the worst blankets and sheets always confused

me. They preached about resting when you were there, yet they made it nearly impossible to do so. Not to mention the twelve hundred times a night they would wake you up for something.

My right arm was wrapped around something soft, and I rubbed my cheek against it. It felt just like the yarn from the cheetah Brendan had crocheted for me. Pulling back slightly so I could see it, I realized in horror that it *was* my cheetah. Chester was nestled securely beneath my chin, my good arm holding him snugly to my chest.

How had Chester even gotten in my arms?

Jerking, I tried to shove him under the blankets. Anywhere so the nurses and doctors wouldn't see him. Wouldn't see me – a thirty-five-year-old grown alpha – holding onto a stuffed toy for dear life.

The hurried movement jarred my injury, and white-hot pain engulfed my arm. Crying out, I fell back on the bed. Cool hands were instantly on my skin, touching my cheek, brushing the hair back from my forehead. The scent of honey invaded my nostrils.

“Easy, baby bear,” Asher’s smooth voice flowed over my skin like a cool balm. “It’s okay. Leave your cheetah. Chester, right? It’s fine, I promise.”

Opening my eyes, I glared at him. “It’s not fine. They’ll make...” my voice trailed off when Asher interrupted me.

“No,” he raised one sharp brow at me, his tone soft, but no nonsense. He was using that Daddy voice of his. The one I couldn’t *not* respond to. “They won’t.” How did he even know what I was about to say? Did he have some kind of Daddy mind magic? “The nurse assigned to you is a friend. I trust her. She helps me in my after-hours clinic when she’s not on shift.”

His what? Licking dry lips, I asked the question that was in my brain.

“Finn and I have a clinic on Wednesday nights for littles.”

When I just stared at him, confused, he elaborated, sounding surprised. “You didn’t know? Of course, you didn’t.” Asher pulled the chair I assumed he had been sitting on closer to the bed. “Finn and I have a clinic where we see patients who are into little kink. We run it on Wednesday evenings, after regular office hours. It’s in the lower level of his practice.”

Asher poured some water in a cup, then held the straw to my lips. Greedily I drank, before he ordered, “Sip, baby bear, you don’t want to make yourself sick.”

Baby bear. He kept calling me that, and I didn’t *not* like it. In fact, I liked it way more than I should. I also liked the way his voice ordered without ever raising or sounding angry.

“A lot of littles prefer that headspace when they aren’t feeling well. I wanted to give them, and their Mommies and Daddies, a place to be treated when that happens. Where they can stay little.”

My brow crinkled, “And Finn helps you? He’s a baby doctor. I mean a pregnancy doctor.” I knew what I meant in my head, but my brain and mouth weren’t working well.

Asher sat the water on the table next to the bed, smiling, “Littles have babies too. And I needed an extra pair of hands. Finn’s still a doctor. He can treat people for more than pregnancy or omega related issues. And it’s not like we’re overrun with patients. Mostly in flu and cold season.”

It actually made sense, and it was kind of a cool thing to do. When I was feeling icky I always wanted to be in my little headspace. How had I never known about this clinic? This would be handy information to have. Because when I did actually drag myself to my doctor, I hated having to be in my grown-up space. On more than one occasion, I had wished for a Daddy to take care of all the grown-up things at a doctor’s office, so I could just be lost in my little space and be taken care of.

“Does Wade know?” I groused, because really, it would have been nice had he told me his mate did this.

Asher shrugged, “I’m sure he does. I don’t think Wade is the type to let Finn disappear every Wednesday night without some kind of explanation. And Jamie let us hang a flyer in the club’s nursery. It’s not a secret.”

I was going to have a lot of questions for Wade the next time I saw him.

In a rush, the memory of everything that had happened tonight – last night? What time was it even? – flooded through

me, and I jerked upright again. *Fuck!* I needed to stop doing that! It fucking hurt!

Asher was there in a flash, gently easing me back down. His thumb brushed over my cheek, right above my close-cropped beard. Soothing me as I panted harshly while the pain dulled a fraction but was still hella uncomfortable. Reaching over, he pushed the call button. Then pushed again impatiently. When he hit it a third time, I frowned at him, my brows knitted together.

“I’ll answer what I imagine are a bunch of questions as soon as we get you some pain medication. Now, on a scale of one to ten, how bad is your pain? And don’t you dare lie to me, baby bear.”

How had he known I was going to go with a much lower number than I felt? Sighing, I told him, “Not to sound like a wuss, but a twelve, maybe a thirteen.”

He chuckled, as the door opened with a quiet whoosh. A pretty brunette with wide green eyes, dressed in pink scrubs came in. She washed her hands at the sink, before approaching the bed with a wide smile and warm eyes.

“Asher, you were supposed to let me know as soon as he was awake,” she admonished good naturedly. “And don’t try to lie and say he just woke up. I was walking by and heard you two gabbing before you decided to push the call button, more times than necessary. Impatient much?”

Asher flashed his blindingly white, toothy grin at her, while she wrapped a blood pressure cuff around my good arm,

nudging him out of the way with her hips. I bet he got away with just about everything he wanted with that smile of his. It was ridiculous for anyone to have a smile that fucking sexy. She introduced herself as Jacquleen, telling me she would be my nurse until shift changed at seven a.m.

“He needs some pain medication,” Asher ordered, while Jacquleen continued taking my vitals. She raised one dark brow at him, annoyance all over her pretty face. “Excuse you. I know you’re not trying to tell me how to do my job, Doctor Pierce.”

At the tone she inflected on the word “doctor”, Asher had the good sense to duck his head and blush.

“I’m going to get him something right now. I’d tell you to calm your tits, but that’s unprofessional.” Grinning at me, she whispered conspiratorially “Your Daddy was a bit of a basket case when they brought you in. It was all kinds of fun to see Asher Pierce looking flustered and losing his shit. Now, I’m going to get you something for the pain. Do you need anything else? Are you hungry? We keep little things in the fridge. Pudding, Jell-O, applesauce? Anything tempting you?”

Realizing I wasn’t that hungry, and the thought of eating something right now made me a little nauseous, I just shook my head at her and quietly thanked her. Jacquleen left to get me the pain medication, and I glanced at Asher. “Speak. Tell me what happened, and what you know, before she comes back. Those painkillers are going to knock me out and

probably make me loopy as fuck. They always do. My tolerance is worse than a two-year-old's."

Asher blinked, sitting forward in the chair, elbows resting on his knees. And I took a good look at him for the first time since I'd woken up.

His blond hair, always perfectly styled and in place, was ruffled and a mess. It looked like he had drug his hands through it repeatedly. He was dressed in ratty gray sweats and a white and royal blue baseball tee.

I had never seen him this casually dressed, and the sight made my mouth water. Even when I had watched him moving his furniture in, he had been dressed in pressed jeans, and a polo shirt. He was always so put together and polished. Now, he looked ruffled, tired, and worried. Despite that, he still somehow managed to look in charge. And sexy as fuck. Though I was beginning to think that was just Asher. There was an air of authority about him, a casual confidence that just radiated from him.

I was a little envious of it.

"There was a break in at your neighbor's house."

Nodding, I told him, "Yeah, I remember hearing shouting and a gunshot when I was coming back from my shift in the woods. There was a man going after a wolf cub. He was pointing a gun at him. The boy! Is he okay?"

"Shhh, baby bear," he ran a soothing hand down my good arm, and I pulled Chester tighter to me. My skin should not

tingle the way it did when Asher touched me. I was laying in a hospital bed, with a bullet wound, in pain, on who knew what from the I.V. in my arm, and my cock was trying to take notice. Really? He should be down for the count. Instead, he was giving a twitch, definitely interested, but not really up for doing anything about it. “The pup is fine. He got away unharmed.”

“How do you know?” I demanded, pulling away from his touch, because I didn’t need to pop a boner right now. That thought reminded me of something else that had happened earlier, when we had touched, but I wasn’t going to mention it. Not if he didn’t. Maybe not even then. Even though when he touched me now, my skin tingled, a current of electricity running across the surface.

“One, the police were there, and they were here tonight and told me. They will need a statement from you when you’re up for it. But I got more information from Brendan. He and Ryan stopped by to make sure you were alright. Ryan was pretty upset when he found out what had happened, and demanded to see you with his own eyes. I guess he told the staff he was your little brother,” Asher chuckled at that. “You two are about as different as night and day, but it got them up here.”

Smiling at that, I hugged Chester even tighter. Ryan was like my little brother, and Brendan had been my stand in Daddy anytime we played. We might not be related by blood, but we were family. “Did he bring me Chester?”

Asher nodded, “He did. And some clothes for you to go home in.” His eyes landed on my duffel sitting on another chair in the room. “They are going to release you later today or tomorrow. We want to make sure you don’t develop an infection. Anyway, according to Brendan, there’s some drama that went down with his family tonight, at his mom’s house. The whole Sinclair clan was there for dinner, and the little wolf cub landed in Mary’s back yard. Along with the bad guys. I guess it wasn’t just a break in, but had something to do with his brother Jamie’s former employment. That wolf cub is Jamie’s son. That’s how Ryan and Bren found out you had been shot. The honey badger we saw told them. He’s the wolf cub’s omega father.”

“What?” I sounded like a teenage girl watching the latest episode of some mind-numbing reality show, and some major over-the-top-drama had just unfolded. “That’s...what?”

“I don’t have all those details, but that was the quick, edited version. The boy, Matthew, is fine, as is his omega father, Sebastian. And everyone that was at Mary Sinclair’s, which sounded like the entire family.”

“There was a honey badger?” Now that he mentioned it, I was vaguely remembering things.

“Yep,” he touched my arm, the one holding Chester, his voice dropping, “You saved that boy’s life, Gabe.”

Ducking my head bashfully, I mumbled, “I didn’t do anything anyone wouldn’t do.”

“We’ll agree to disagree on that. Because even I was waffling on if I should call the police when I heard that first gun shot. So, I don’t know that most people would put themselves between another person and a gun, even if that other person is a child. They’d like to think they would, but...” his voice trailed off and I could tell he didn’t think most people would make the same choice I had. I didn’t really care; I would make the same decision if I had to do it all over again. Painful bullet wound or not.

“Do you remember what happened when I touched you?” Asher’s voice was quiet now, the teasing gone.

Instead of answering him, I looked the opposite way, staring at the curtains that were closed against the outside light. Blocking out anything that would give me an idea of what time it was. Since Jacquleen had said she was on shift until seven in the morning, my guess was late, or early, however you wanted to look at it.

I wasn’t likely to forget that bolt of electricity when our skin had touched anytime soon. Even through my pain, my soul had known what it had meant.

Fated mates.

With one touch, everything in me that had never felt right, shifted into place. Something inside me had whispered, *Oh, there he is. It’s him.*

But it wasn’t going to work between us.

I knew that. And I wasn't going to put myself through the pain of it.

"I remember," whispering, I continued staring at the ugly brown curtains like they were going to make everything that had happened in the last few hours somehow vanish.

"You know what it means?" Asher asked quietly, and I was saved from answering by Jacquleen coming quietly back into the room. As if sensing the tension between Asher and me, she efficiently injected the medication into my I.V. Telling me quietly to hit the call button if I needed anything, before she left us alone. Smiling shyly at her, I just nodded my head.

Wishing I could roll completely away from him and lay on my left side, I huffed out an annoyed breath. Not that I thought Asher was going to let this go.

Rolling my head on the pillow to face him, I nodded, thankful the drugs were going to knock me out soon. My eyelids were already growing heavy, as the pain eased. "I know what it means. It doesn't matter what it means. I don't want a mate," I lied. "We can walk away right now, and act like it never happened."

The Goddess had put built in out clauses, for lack of a better description, when it came to fated mates. As long as a bond hadn't started yet, which usually happened when two mates had sex for the first time, though it could start sooner than that, you could walk away. Go about your life, and even find a different mate. Maybe not a mate that you would have the

intense reaction to as a fated one, but you could still live a happy life. Happy enough, anyway.

Liar, liar, pants on fire, my bear grumbled in my ear at my assertion that I didn't want a mate. Asshole.

“And I don't want a Daddy. I'm not what you want anyway, I know that.” Were my words starting to slur a bit? Mmm, those drugs were *nice*. Floating on a soft, billowy cloud, the pain in my arm was becoming a distant memory.

“Oh really?” That brow of his was arched again, and there was an amused but annoyed look on his face. That brow of his said so many things when he arched it the way he was always doing. He didn't even have to say actual words. He could just arch his brows. “And you would know what I want, how?”

I waved my good hand in the air, taking a moment to wiggle my fingers. Giggling at how floaty they were.

“I know things.” I whispered, like I knew all the secrets to the world.

“Do you?” There was an amused tone in his voice now.

“Don't you laugh at me,” huffily, I pulled Chester to me, wiggling down in the bed. Asher pulled the blanket up to my chest, smoothing it out gently. Well...that was nice, but he didn't need to be doing nice, Daddy like things for me. It just made me more confused, and would make it harder to put distance between us. The last thing I needed was to give into temptation, and start our bond forming.

Nope, didn't want that. That would be bad. Because when he decided I wasn't what he wanted, and tossed me aside, it would hurt. I knew from experience. I held a gold medal in being not wanted by people I loved. And it sucked donkey balls.

"I'm not laughing, baby bear, I promise. I'm just really interested in hearing all about what it is you think I want."

Blinking my eyes owlshly at him, because it was getting really hard to keep them open, I smirked. "You want a little you can boss around twenty-four seven. You're very bossy. Wear your coat, Gabe. See? Always bossing." I tried to make my voice sound like his, but it still came out in my deep, rumbly baritone. "It's too cold, Gabe, why don't you have your coat on? Bossy Mcbossy Daddy Pants is what your name should be. Not Asher. I mean, of course, you have a name like Asher. No one would name you something boring like..."

Asher tilted his head at me, his lips pursed together tightly, like he was trying not to smile. "Like?"

"I don't know, some boring name. I can't think right now."

Side-eyeing Asher, I saw his lips quirk. He kept those perfectly kissable lips of his clamped tight, so I continued with all the things I was sure I knew.

"I'm not an all-the-time little." I huffed with a sigh. "I can't be that. And I don't want a bossy Daddy anyway. I want a nice Daddy. Like Brendan. He's a super nice Daddy. He never yells, or anything. He's not bossy."

“I’ve been told I’m a very nice Daddy.” Asher’s voice was quiet, but it still sounded like he was trying not to laugh at me.

Anger bubbled up at his words. Anger, and something that felt like jealousy. The alpha in me felt a possessiveness that I shouldn’t be feeling. Which is why I growled, “Who the fuck told you that?”

“Language, baby bear.” His voice was soft, but sharp, and Goddess, my dick actually gave another twitch at his tone. What the actual fuck? It should be deep asleep with the pain killers coursing through my veins, and when the fuck had bossy guys ever turned me on?

I was the one that gave the orders in bed. I sure as shit didn’t take them. My dick needed to pass the fuck out, and remember what it liked and didn’t like. It was clearly confused from the drugs and loss of blood.

“And that! That whole ‘baby bear’ thing.” My eyes closed and wanted to stay that way, so I let them. “Have you seen me? I’m a big fucking hairy bear. Nothing baby about me.”

Soft lips brushed against my forehead, while fingers threaded through the hair at my temple. And oh, my Goddess, it was everything. Forehead kisses were *lovely*. Who knew?

“I call you baby bear because that’s what you are. *My* baby bear.” Asher declared like it was fact. There was a possessiveness in his voice that made my tummy feel all fluttery. As much as I didn’t want to like it, I found myself being warmed from the inside out by the thought of this man owning me. Wanting me to be his. These fucking drugs were

messing with me bad. I hadn't been kidding when I told him my tolerance was shit.

“And we are fated mates, and there's not a damn thing you can do about it.” He continued, not deterred by my silence, my closed eyes, or what I imagined was the sulky look on my face. “I'm not going to let you walk away from this, Gabriel. I wanted you before this, and I always get what I want. So, buckle up, because I can guarantee you are going to enjoy this ride. And I'm going to be the nicest, sweetest, best Daddy you've ever had. Because you deserve the best Daddy there is.”

“Stop calling me Gabriel,” I muttered in annoyance, hearing the poutiness in my voice but not caring. “I fucking hate it. My dad calls me that, and...just please, don't.”

Those fingers of his – those magic fingers – slid down my jaw, caressing. And damn it if my traitor of a face didn't nuzzle into his hand. “I'm sorry, I won't call you that anymore, baby bear. But you need to know that I'm not a pushover, and you will listen when I tell you to do something. Whether to put your coat on, or to suck my dick, you will do as you're told. Because if you don't, I will spank your ass red, so that you remember what it feels like if you disobey me. Now,” those soft fingers brushed the hair from my forehead and I emitted another soft sigh. Even though I was mostly asleep, and drugged up, his words were waging a war inside me between my head and my cock, “we'll talk more when you are coherent. Go to sleep, baby bear. Daddy is here, and I'm not

leaving you alone. You don't need to worry about anything else, besides healing.”

Chapter Eight



Gabe

Feeling that uncomfortable feeling of someone staring at me, my eyes fluttered open to focus on my best friend hovering in the doorway of my bedroom, chewing nervously on his lower lip. If his Daddy saw him gnawing on his lips like that, he'd be in trouble.

“You know staring at someone like that is creepy as fuck, right?” My voice felt rusty and unused. But I was happy as hell to have been back in my own bed the last two days. Even if I remembered very little about what had gone on since being discharged from the hospital. My days revolved around sleeping, Asher waking me up to make me swallow more pills, and then sleeping some more.

But my arm was actually feeling better, the pain a mild throb that was tolerable, and I felt more coherent than I had in days.

Ryan was fairly bouncing on his toes with excitement at seeing me awake, and he reached down and grasped a bright gift bag in his hand. “I’m so happy you’re *finally* awake! I have so much tea for you!”

“Precious, we told you not to wake him,” Brendan’s deep baritone floated down the hallway.

Ryan frowned, then sassily called back, “I didn’t, Daddy! I swear! He woke up all on his own. I’m giving him our present.”

His shoulder length, reddish blond hair bouncing, Ryan hurried into my room, plopping down in the chair I knew Asher had been using the last couple of days. Placing the gift bag next to me, he rushed his words. Something he always did when he was excited. He seemed to be hovering between his little and big side.

“Oh! I was supposed to tell Daddy Asher if you woke up. Hold on!” He started to run out of the room, then caught himself, remembering to walk. His Daddy was always getting on him about running in the house. “Open your prezzie! It’s just some fun stuff until you’re back to work, to help you not be bored.”

Leaning my head back against my pillows, I smiled at his excitement. Rolling my head to the left I saw Chester on the pillow next to me, along with a new stuffie. A new Winnie the Pooh to add to my collection. Over his too-small red shirt, he wore a white doctor coat. In his paw was a stethoscope, with the words ‘Get well’ embroidered on the round circle. I had never seen anything like it, and I couldn’t help the smile on my face. It had to be from Asher, but who knew where he had found it? Immediately I knew he should be called Doc. I didn’t always change my Pooh’s names, but this one was extra-special and deserved an extra special name.

Asher hadn’t left my side since I’d been shot, and he had been in my house since I had gotten home. There was no way he would have been able to miss my love of the silly bear. Between the nightlight in my bedroom, the many stuffed versions of the bear that adorned my dressers, and my binky

on my nightstand, it was obvious I was slightly obsessed with the cartoon bear.

Pulling the stuffie close to me, I rubbed the soft fur against my cheek. My eyes drifted closed and I used my shifter bear hearing to listen to the conversation from my living room. It was generally thought to be bad manners to listen to other people's conversation with our shifter ears, but it was my house. And since I was the topic of conversation, I wasn't going to feel guilty about eavesdropping.

"I didn't wake him up, Daddy, I swear! He woke up all on his own." Ryan's voice was more childlike now, and I knew he had slipped further into his little space.

"He usually wakes up around this time, Bren." Asher's voice assured his friend. *"Ry, would you ask him if he needs his pain pills, or if he thinks just ibuprofen will do until bedtime? He's healing well and those pills make him loopy."*

"I can!" Ryan's feet ran down the hallway, before Brendan's voice softly reminded him, *"Walk, Precious Boy."*

"Sorry, Daddy!"

"And Ry?" Asher called, *"Tell him not taking something isn't an option. He needs to stay on top of the pain."*

Rolling my eyes at Asher, I waited for Ryan to appear in the doorway of my bedroom. The master was located at the very end of the long hallway of my house, with two other bedrooms flanking each side before you reached it.

“Tell him ibuprofen is fine.” I told Ryan – or Ry, since he was in his little headspace – when he popped his head through the doorway.

Ry frowned, his green eyes wide, “Rude! You shouldn’t be listening. It’s not nice.”

Because I knew shrugging my shoulders would probably hurt, I just smirked at him. Apparently, I wasn’t the only one who was eavesdropping, because Asher’s long, lean frame appeared in the doorway. His long legs ate up the distance to the bed, and he held out three brown pills to me, with a bottle of water.

Swallowing the pills, I handed him the water back, watching as he put it on the bedside table. “You have a half an hour to visit, then you need to rest. I’ll get dinner in the oven after Brendan and Ry leave.”

Nodding that I heard him, I picked at the corner of the gift bag until he left the room, and Ry sat himself back in the chair. “Does your arm hurt a lot? Brendan said it hurt really bad when he got shot.”

Brendan had been shot by a stalker that had been obsessed with Ryan when they had first gotten together. The man – someone no one had even suspected – had nearly killed Brendan in his attempt to take Ryan. I’d been terrified for my friend, especially since Ryan had been nearly ready to give birth to their daughter, Charlie. Thankfully, he had been able to carry to term without any complications.

“It did hurt,” I admitted, “now it’s mostly the stitches pulling, I think.” Rolling my eyes at the fact I even had stitches. Honestly, the wound could have healed just fine without them. But Asher, unbeknownst to me, had called in one of his friends, a plastic surgeon, to stitch my injury. He’d said he wanted me to have minimal scarring on my arm.

Which was ridiculous, and I had told him so. My body was covered in scars. Construction sites were notorious for mishaps, no matter how many safety precautions you took. My hands were riddled with tiny marks and scars, and none of them bothered me. One more on my bicep wasn’t going to make me lose any sleep. But it was done, and now I had a row of thirty, small, neatly placed stitches in my bicep. Had my arms not been so massive, I doubted I would have needed that many.

“I was really worried,” Ry’s voice was quiet, and sounded big again. Glancing at him, I knew he had come out of his little headspace. He had always been like that; he could drift in and out of little and big headspace in the blink of an eye, without any kind of sub-drop. I envied him for that.

“I’m sorry.” I told him sincerely. “But I’d do it again.”

Ryan reached over and gave my good hand a strong squeeze. “Open your present! Then I can spill the tea! OMG, so much tea! Wade’s losing his mind! And your Daddy seems super strict on your time limit.”

Frowning, I growled, “He’s *not* my Daddy.”

I wasn't even about to go into the whole fated mates thing. Not yet anyway. But Ryan and I would definitely be having a conversation about it. Just not now. And not here. Not with Asher in the house, with his shifter cat ears listening. And a half-hour time limit.

Ryan giggled, "Uh huh. He didn't get that memo. He's been acting all kinds of Daddy-like for days."

Rolling my eyes hard, I pushed myself up against the headboard, grateful when my arm only gave a half-hearted twinge at the movement. One perk of being a shifter was our ability to heal faster than a full human. Not bothering to answer my friend, I busied myself with reaching into the gift bag. I loved presents. Probably because I seldom got any, so anytime I did, it was extra special.

Inside the bag were two coloring books, a new set of the big crayons that my hands were able to hold better, a LEGO set of Disney's *Brave*, and the board game *Candy Land*. Ryan and I played it at his house, but he knew I didn't have many toys or things of my own. Besides my vast collection of bears.

Smiling, I put each thing beside me on the bed, after giving it the proper amount of oohing and ahing. "This is great, thank you."

"The one coloring book is Disney Princesses, and I made sure Merida was in there." He knew that *Brave* was one of my favorite Disney movies.

"She doesn't get included on many things." My voice was wistful. "Elsa came along and that was that."

Ryan shook his head, “I’ve told you, it’s because she doesn’t get a Prince in the end. Princesses need Princes. Or Princes need Princes. That would be awesome.”

“Elsa doesn’t have a prince,” I pointed out.

It was an argument we’d had many times. Ryan was one hundred percent invested in all the happily-ever-after’s. “And I’ve told you, Merida doesn’t need a Prince. She has her bow and arrow. She can take care of herself. Now tell me the tea. And why Wade is losing his mind. What’s happening? What did I miss?”

“Okay, I’ll give you the rushed, abridged version before your Daddy-not-Daddy breaks up our party.”

Glaring at him, I tugged Chester and Doc closer to my chest.

Ryan just giggled at me, not at all worried about how I felt about him calling Asher my Daddy. Or my not-Daddy. Whatever.

“Sooo,” he drew the word out, “your neighbor, Sebastian, was a British operative once upon a time. Think James Bond, mixed with a side of Q. And the people that broke into his house had something to do with a past assignment and were looking for revenge.”

Thanks to Wade making me watch *Skyfall* about a thousand times, I could actually picture that in my head. Come to think of it, the few glimpses I had seen of my neighbor in the weeks since they had moved in, he did kind of resemble the actor

who had played Q in the movies. What was his name? Ben something.

“He and Jamie apparently had met on an assignment like nine, ten years ago – I’m not really sure. But Brendan would know because he’s talked to Jamie since it all happened. Anyway Jamie and Sebastian are fated mates!”

“What the fuck?”

“Right! It gets better.” Ryan pulled his knees up to his chest and rested his chin on them. “Sebastian’s son, the one you got in front of a bullet for, is Jamie’s son. Who he didn’t know existed! Color everyone surprised!”

“Jamie most of all, I would imagine,” I commented dryly.

“No shit!” Ryan agreed, emphatically nodding his head. “So, we are all at Mary’s having dinner – that’s a whole ‘nother bag of cats I’ll tell you about later –” he rolled his green eyes, “and we hear a gunshot. Then this black wolf cub comes tumbling out of the woods into Mary’s backyard, followed by this guy with a gun. Mary scoops up the cub, and Jamie is acting all in charge, ordering Brendan to take us all into this secret room.”

My eyebrows were clear up into my forehead at this point of the story, and Ryan just nodded his head at my reaction. “I know! I guess Jamie had had a panic room installed in Mary’s house, without telling her, when she was on a cruise or something years ago, and all the quads knew about it, and had the code to get out. So, in it we all go, the whole family, babies and all.”

“Except Jamie.”

“Right, and Mary is pissed about this room, let me tell you. She is the sweetest woman, but holy cow, she is scary when she is mad! Anyway, there’s a computer monitor hooked up to hidden cameras Jamie also installed, so Brendan fiddles with them and we can see what’s happening in the backyard. Meanwhile, the wolf cub shifts and this kid is the spitting image of Jamie. Well, I guess all of the quads at that age. Wade, Quinn, and I are looking at each other like who does this kid belong to and does one of our mates have some explaining to do?”

“Goddess, this is like some kind of eighties daytime soap opera.”

“Tell me about it. So, the kid, Matty – Matthew – he immediately starts working on the code to get the door open. And we are watching the backyard, because we all know Jamie is a badass. Well, the bad guy with a gun is a shifter, a fucking King cobra!”

“Language, Precious!” Brendan’s voice called down the hall, and Ryan just rolled his eyes, and continued with his story. Like he hadn’t heard his Daddy at all, even though he clearly did.

“I fucking hate snakes.” I muttered, shuddering at the mere thought.

“Me too! And it looks like there’s no way Jamie can beat this snake, before getting bit or shifting. He slipped on the wet grass, and this snake is fuc –” he caught himself, his eyes

darting to the open door, “huge, looming over him. The babies are crying, I’m seriously freaking out. Wade is freaking out. I think even Quinn was freaking out a bit, but you know Quinn. It’s hard to tell with him. He was busy with the twins, trying to calm them down. Anyway, all of a sudden, this small rodent looking thing comes running out of the woods, straight for the snake!”

“The honey badger?” I guessed. “We saw him. He ran past us. It’s all still a bit fuzzy.”

“Yep! And he takes that snake out! Bam! Kills him, dead! Honey badgers are ferocious, let me tell you. Who knew?” Ryan accompanied his telling of the tale with a lot of hand gestures and butt wiggles.

At this point, I’m completely invested in my friend’s excited, overly dramatic, telling of what happened the night I was shot.

“Then he shifts, and that’s when all hell really broke loose. So Matty figures out the combination to the room in about five minutes. Kid’s some kind of genius. No, like for real, he’s a genius. Jamie realizes who Sebastian is, and who Matty is. And he is pissed! Jamie is furious, like I didn’t think Jamie was even capable of being that mad, ever. He declares Alpha Law, and disappears. Because that’s what Jamie does.”

“Holy shit!” Declaring Alpha Law was major, and not something anyone really ever did anymore. It was a long-forgotten law, stating an alpha could take his child from their omega parent, for any reason. No questions asked. No one used it anymore, but it was one of those laws that were still on

the books today. And omegas could fight it, but they seldom, if ever, won.

“That doesn’t seem like something Jamie would do.” I didn’t know the man that well, but I had met him at plenty of Sinclair family gatherings the last couple of years. Being friends with three of his brothers’ mates, I had attended plenty of baby showers, birthdays, and barbeques. Jamie was a nice guy, with an easy smile, if a bit mysterious sometimes.

“Yeah, Mary about had a fit over that. Brendan talked to him, and he cooled down and changed his mind. He’s been over to see Sebastian and Matty, and I’m not sure what’s going to happen with them, but I think Jamie is calmer now.”

“That’s a crazy story.” My brow wrinkled, “Wait. Why is Wade losing his mind?”

Ryan rolled his eyes. “Wade is super pissed off at Sebastian. Like he’s being over the top, even for Wade.”

“Why? I mean, Sebastian technically saved everyone, right?”

Ryan threw his hands up in the air, “Exactly! Thank you! Wade will not let go of the fact that all our babies were in danger. Which I get, I do. But we were in a locked room, and Jamie...well, he’s Jamie. I mean, I guess I never really thought he wouldn’t be able to keep us safe. But Wade is all, Jamie would have died taking that snake out, and if he hadn’t killed the snake, it would have gotten into the house, and blah blah. He’s been on google, which is a place Wade Monroe shouldn’t be let loose on. Maybe I’m just choosing to not dwell on what could have happened, and I’m looking at the fact that we are

all safe. And he's pissed that Sebastian stayed away from Jamie for so long, and kept his son from him."

"That seems like that is Jamie's business to deal with and not ours." I told him, frowning some more. Since I tended to keep most of my private life just that, I found it easy to do the same with other people. Their business was their business. "I mean, I'm sure there was a good reason. But not really Wade's business."

"Oh, you are preaching to the choir," Ryan held up his hands in surrender. "Wait until you look at your phone. The group chat has blown up. Wade is seriously going bonkers over all of this. He and Finn went over to his house the day after to assess the damage from the break in slash fight, and Wade and Sebastian got into it. Which resulted in Jamie and Finn growling and snarling at each other. Threats were thrown around. It was a whole thing." Ryan sat back, shaking his head.

"Good grief." I was beginning to think I was lucky I really didn't have family drama to deal with. Well, that was truthfully a lie, but I chose not to deal with it.

"Even Quinn can't calm Wade down. And they've been friends forever, so if Quinn can't make him see things rationally, I don't know what we can do. He's Finn's problem to deal with."

"Stay out of the way, and let him and Sebastian fight it out?"

"Pfft. Sebastian is a badass. I forgot to tell you he put Jamie on his ass on Mary's kitchen floor. Nearly broke his nose too,

without breaking a sweat. And Jamie seems really territorial of Sebastian despite them being apart all these years, so Wade needs to watch his step before he gets hurt. Fated mates will do that to a person.”

“You use the word ‘badass’ way too much,” I snarked at him, making him snort in amusement. “But it does sound like Wade needs to back off. Let Jamie and Sebastian figure their stuff out. I’m kinda glad I’ve been sleeping through all this drama. I like to know the tea; I just don’t want to be involved in the tea.”

Ryan nodded in agreement, “Same, dude. But this is my family now, and Wade is our friend, so...what are you gonna do?”

“Not get involved?” Besides, I had my own drama unfolding in my own life I was trying to deal with. Or forget. Whichever. I didn’t need to be any more involved in this Sinclair family drama, than I already was.

Ryan gave me a look that said I had clearly lost my mind. “You have met Wade, right? You know that’s not an option. He’s going to want us to pick sides. It’s going to be all Team Jamie or Team Sebastian. Make good choices, grasshopper.”

“Pft. I’m not taking sides. I have no beef in any of this, with anyone.”

“Good. You can be the one to tell him he’s wrong and calm down.”

That sounded like nothing I wanted involved in either. Pulling the comforter higher on my chest, I leaned back and gave him my best puppy dog eyes. “I’m healing. I was shot, remember.”

Brendan’s bulk filled the doorway, interrupting our conversation, and Asher was right on his heels. “Precious, it’s time to go. We need to pick up Charlie from Mom. She’s having dinner with Maeve and Allan Rafferty tonight, and we don’t want to make her late.”

Ryan beamed at his mate, standing. “Okay, Daddy.”

Giving me a gentle hug, he whispered in my ear, “I’m so glad you’re okay, Teddy Bear. I was really scared for you. I don’t know what I would do if I lost you. What any of us would do.”

Hugging him back awkwardly with one arm, I nodded against him. “Thanks, Ry.”

Asher returned from showing them out, and then picked up all the presents Ryan had brought. Looking them over one by one, he placed them all back in the gift bag.

“We can play the game after dinner if you’d like,” he told me, holding the bag in one hand and smoothing down the blankets over me with the other. “Or we can watch a movie. I think you can spend some time on the couch after another nap.”

Anger welled inside my chest at his words, and I snapped, “I don’t need another nap. All I’ve done is sleep.” A yawn

escaped me, betraying my words. Dammit!

“You need the rest to heal,” he told me patiently. “I’ll wake you when dinner is ready, if you don’t wake up on your own. Don’t be difficult.”

Rolling my eyes, I huffed out a breath, telling myself not to pout. Brattiness had never been who I thought I was. But Asher seemed to bring it out in me in spades. Begrudgingly, I took Doc from him when he held him out to me, once I had wiggled around until I was comfortable in my bed. “I’m not being difficult. I’m the least difficult person on earth.”

Asher rolled his dark chocolate eyes at me, his lips forming the barest of an amused smile. He bent down and brushed those lips over my forehead, and fuck, if I didn’t melt a little inside. “You are the proverbial bear with a sore paw, right now, Gabe. Go to sleep,” he ordered.

Why did I feel sad that he had called me Gabe and not baby bear? Shutting my eyes to block him out, I bit my lip to keep the words that wanted to escape on the tip of my tongue, where they belonged.

Yes, Daddy, was the last thing I needed to say. But, Goddess, how I wanted to.

Chapter Nine



Asher

Pulling the casserole out of the oven, I sniffed it and smiled. It was a simple recipe of rice, chicken and cheese, but it smelled divine, and my stomach growled. I had missed lunch when Brendan and Ryan had stopped by. Well, Brendan had pretty much begged for me to let Ryan bring Gabe the get-well gift they had for him, saying his mate needed to see his best friend with his own eyes now that he was home from the hospital. Even though I had let them stop into his hospital room the night he had been hurt.

It had been good to see Brendan, and we'd spent time catching up while the two littles had visited. Gossip would be a better word for what they had done, but then so had Brendan and I, even if I would never admit to it. Seemed like Gabe being shot was just the tip of the iceberg for what had happened that night. The town of Sweet Alps was buzzing and the Sinclair name was all over everyone's tongues.

I had noticed that our neighbors, Sebastian and his son Matty, had returned to their home by the time Gabe had been released from the hospital. But it had been relatively quiet on the street since then, thank the Goddess. Though I had caught a glimpse of Jamie Sinclair coming and going several times from Sebastian's since we had returned home.

I had pointedly ignored the raised brows I had gotten from Gabe's work crew when I had walked across the street to pack

a duffel of clean clothes. The only one I had spoken to was the foreman, Stu, to let him know Gabe's condition and that he wouldn't be back to work for at least a week. And to inquire if there was anything that wouldn't be able to be taken care of in his absence. Stu had assured me they could handle things, and he had enough authority to be able to make any decisions that couldn't wait. They were all concerned about Gabe, which was really sweet, and Stu had made sure I had his contact number in case Gabe needed anything. He'd also let me know that my first floor would be finished that day, and they had already started on the master bedroom remodel I wanted done.

With the bedroom remodel being started, I needed to get the nursery furniture ordered. After seeing the touches of Gabe's little side hidden in his house, I knew exactly what theme I would be using to decorate. It seemed a bit of a cliché to decorate for a bear with a bear, but my baby bear did seem to love that silly little cartoon from the hundred-acre woods. Multiple stuffies lined his bedroom dresser, along with a nightlight, his binky, and a sippy cup I had discovered in the kitchen cabinet. My boy definitely loved his Pooh.

Setting the timer for the casserole to cool and set up, I went about pulling out plates from the cabinet. Hesitating over the set of plastic kids plates I found, I wondered if Gabe would want to use them or not. We hadn't had a chance to talk about what had happened between us yet.

Admittedly, I had used the knowledge that the pain pills knocked him out to my advantage the last two days. I had pretty much kept him drugged up and asleep. Knowing it was

the only way the man would actually stay in bed, rest, and do as he was told.

While the bullet hadn't gone through his bicep, it had cut a large groove out of his skin, and he had lost an alarming amount of blood. He needed to take his time and recover from that, and let his arm mend, before he jumped right back into work. Knowing him, he would do something like try to lift a damn two by four, rip his stitches, and go about his day like it was no big deal.

My cat ears picked up rustling noises, letting me know Gabe was awake. My plan was to get some food in him today. Something besides the chicken broth I had been forcing down his throat. The casserole was hearty while still being easy on his stomach. I was hoping to use dinner with him as a good time for us to sort some things out between us.

For whatever reason, he absolutely did not seem to want to even acknowledge we were fated, beyond admitting in the hospital that he had felt it. And while the Goddess had made it so fated mates could walk away from each other before starting a bond, I had no intention of doing that. Whether Gabe liked it or not.

Besides, I had a strong suspicion our bond had already started to form. While it wasn't unheard of for a bond to start before mates had sex for the first time, it was rare. But I had a new awareness of Gabe that hadn't been there before. Almost as if I could feel his thoughts and emotions, even when he wasn't in the same room.

We definitely needed to discuss what we both wanted. And to explore the Daddy/little dynamic between us. Because I knew deep down, he was my perfect little. The one I had been waiting on for years. I think a part of me had known it the instant I had opened that text from Brendan. The one with a picture of Gabe and Ryan asleep on the floor, dressed in their little pajamas, looking cuter than anyone had a right to look.

Hearing slow, heavy footsteps in the hall, I glanced over my shoulder from where I was still staring at the plates in indecision. Gabe looked sleep ruffled, and sexier than any man should after being in bed for days. His dark brown hair stood up all over his head, going in every direction. His beard was a day or two past the close shave he usually kept it at. His blue and green plaid sleep shorts were riding low on his hips, showing off his long, thick, hairy legs. His furred chest was bare, the stark white of the bandage wrapped over his bulging bicep gleaming brightly.

Goddess, those biceps of his bulged without him even flexing, and my tongue licked my bottom lip at the sight.

He ran a hand over his furry chest, blinking sleepily, before his amber eyes focused on me. His hand stilled, his brow wrinkling, and then he outright glared at me. Well, that answered my question of which plate to use for dinner. The man was just one toe shy of angry bear mode, his little side nowhere in sight. Smiling brightly, I pulled plates out of the cabinet.

“I was just about to wake you for dinner.” Dishing up the food, I ignored the daggers I felt him shooting sharply into my back with his eyes.

“You’re still here.” It wasn’t a question, just a flat annoyed statement.

“I am.” Sitting the steaming plates on his dining table instead of the kitchen bar counter, I nodded in answer. “Sit.”

He looked like he was about to argue, then after sniffing the air, he did exactly as I had ordered. Judging by the scowl on his face, he wasn’t happy about it, though. This was a very different Gabe than I had encountered before. Gone was the shy, bashful, soft-spoken alpha. I wasn’t sure if he felt more comfortable in my presence because he knew we were fated, or if he was just surly from his forced confinement.

When he continued to glare at me across the table, I pointed my fork at him. “Eat, baby bear. I know you have to be hungry. And you need to take some more ibuprofen and your antibiotic. Better to have something in your stomach.”

His teeth came out to scrape across his bottom lip, making it pink up brightly. It took all my willpower to stay seated. To not reach over and gently pull his lip out from his teeth, run my thumb over his flesh, and tell him to stop making his lips raw.

His hunger must have won over whatever argument he wanted to voice, because he picked up his fork and took a tentative bite. Honestly, his pinched face looked like he thought I might try to poison him. Silly bear.

“What is this?” he asked, shoving another bite in his mouth.

“Just a chicken and rice casserole. It’s quick and easy. It’s filling and easy on your stomach.”

After a few more bites, he looked across the table at me. His eyes hesitant, and nothing like they had looked just a minute ago. There was a softness to them now, and a hint of his usual shyness was back. Maybe my boy was better when he got some food in him. Note to self; Gabe gets hangry.

“It’s good,” he acknowledged softly.

His praise made my cat preen, and I smiled warmly across the table. “Thank you. I like to cook.”

We ate in silence for another few minutes, until I said, “I wasn’t sure which plate you would want to use. I hope this one is okay, but I can switch them if you’d rather have your Pooh one.”

Gabe’s fork hovered mid-air, before he put it down on his plate. A slight flush colored his cheeks above his beard. “I, um...I don’t use them all the time. This one is fine.”

There was something about the way he said *all the time* that had my nerves zinging. Adding it to what he had said in the hospital when he had been dopey and well, frankly, cute and funny. About me wanting him to be a little twenty-four seven or something. I had no idea where he had gotten that notion in his head, but I added it to the ever growing mental list in my head of topics we needed to talk about.

Frowning, I told him, “I didn’t expect you did. I just wasn’t sure how you were feeling. It’s been an intense couple of days and I thought you might need some little time.”

I knew I was broaching a line he didn’t seem to want to cross. Tough. Everything I had ever gotten in my life was because I wasn’t afraid to cross a line. Now wasn’t going to be any different.

“I...I...” he hesitated, before taking a fortifying breath. “I’m not like Ryan. I can’t just get into my little headspace at the drop of a hat.”

Nodding in understanding, I took another bite of food, weighing my words carefully. “Ryan does have an uncanny ability to slip in and out of his headspace easily. It’s honestly like nothing I’ve ever seen before, and I’ve played in more than a few clubs. I was basing my question on everything that had happened the last few days, and not any preconceived notion of you. You getting hurt, being in pain, and not feeling great. So, tell me, what do you need to get into your headspace?”

“That’s a pretty personal question.” He sipped his water, his eyes not meeting mine.

“We are fated mates,” I reminded him, and he winced, setting his glass down with a thunk. “And I plan on being your Daddy.” Might as well stake my claim. All in or nothing.

The fire was back in his eyes now, and yep, I had crossed *all* of his lines. He’d get over it. We needed to get things settled between us, cards on the table.

“Who said I even want a Daddy?” he growled, his food forgotten. “Or a fated mate for that matter? I didn’t ask you to take care of me. Don’t you have a job to be at? Patients to see? We don’t have anything to talk about. You go back across the street where you belong, and we go back to the lives we had before all this...” he waved a hand in the air, “nonsense. Fuck, it’s like a damn soap opera exploded on our street and this town. I just want my peace and quiet back. Alone.”

Sitting my fork down with a purpose, I rested my chin on my folded hands, blinking at him slowly. My cheetah was just at the surface, which helped with my slow, cat blink. “First, watch your language, baby bear. I’m going to let it slide this time, because you’re frustrated, and we haven’t discussed rules and limits yet. And you are due more pain medication soon. Two, we will be talking about all of this before long. But not tonight. Tonight, we are going to eat, and while I’m cleaning up the kitchen, you are going to take a nice, hot bath. Get cleaned up and into some comfy pajamas. Little ones or big, that’s your choice. We can play your new game, or we can watch a movie on the couch before bed. Again, your choice. But let me make this clear, those are your only choices.”

Gabe started to open his mouth, ready to offer some kind of growled protest, I was sure. The sharp look I shot him had him clamping his mouth tightly shut.

“Third, you are off work until Monday, doctor’s orders, therefore I am off work until Monday. End of story and I don’t want to hear any argument from you. Now, eat your food like a good boy and I’ll get your medicine for you.”

He leaned forward over his plate towards me, and I did the same. Both of us glaring each other down, neither of us blinking. Finally, with a little defeated sound, he picked his fork up and began eating silently, while I got up to fetch him his pills. I would save the heavy-duty pain pills for bedtime, to ensure he got a good night's rest.

When I held the pills out in my palm and his fingers scooped them up, that same electricity that had zinged between us gave us a small shock. Neither of us chose to comment on it. After Gabe had washed the pills down with his water, he mumbled, "Do you always just get your way?"

"Yes." I told him matter-of-factly, because it was true. "I never let obstacles deter me from what I want. And my littles know not to argue with me. Unless they want a punishment. Do you want a punishment, Gabe? Do you want me to put you over my knee and paddle your ass?"

His face flushed bright pink, and something sparked in his eyes, but then disappeared. Interest? Heat? Excitement? I wasn't sure, but he definitely had some kind of feelings about what I had threatened.

He went back to eating his food and not meeting my gaze. When he finished, he carried his plate to the sink, rinsing it, before placing it in the dishwasher.

"I'll clean up," I told him, bringing my own plate into the kitchen.

"I'm used to doing it myself," he shrugged, and I didn't miss the wince he tried to hide from the movement. "I'm going to

take a shower. I feel gross.”

“Bath,” I ordered, starting to put the leftovers away, “you can’t get those stitches too wet yet, so try to keep that arm out of the water, please.”

Nodding was the only indication that he heard me, but when I peeked into his bedroom a few minutes later, I could see the bathtub in the ensuite filling with bubbles. Gabe had his back to me, rooting around under the sink for something. Finally, he pulled out a bucket that he dumped into the water.

Brightly colored plastic ducks bobbed in the water, along with several colorful sea creatures. Ducking out before he saw me spying, or he caught a whiff of my scent with that bear nose of his, I finished cleaning up from dinner. A wide smile on my face as I listened to him playing in the bath with his toys.

Chapter Ten



Gabe

Pushing my brightly colored ducks around the bubbles of my bath water, I tried to forget about the omega making himself at home in my kitchen. I could hear the distant sounds of pots and pans clanking, and cabinet doors opening and closing, then the hum of the dishwasher being turned on.

Asher was beyond infuriating! And hot, but his high-handed arrogance nearly cancelled his model gorgeous looks out.

My bear snorted. *Does it though? Because he's fucking beautiful.*

Quiet, you, I'm trying to not adult at the moment, thank you very much.

And is he arrogant, or just really, really, really confident? Either way he's smoking, and that's why you're mad. Bad case of blue balls is what's got you all upset, and I'm fairly sure that pretty kitty in your kitchen has the cure for that.

Shutting my bear out, I hummed softly as I maneuvered my neon-colored ducks around the bubbles that were mid-chest on me. Being careful to keep my bandaged arm out of the water. The last thing I wanted right now was for Daddy Asher to harp about me getting it wet.

I did not just call him Daddy Asher. Ugh. Asher. I did not need Asher riding my ass about one more thing.

And why was he still here anyway? Rolling the tight muscles of my shoulders, I tried to turn my brain off of all the adult thoughts running through it. I didn't want to adult. I didn't want to think about big people questions and problems. I didn't want to try to understand why Asher was still invading my space. Or why I hadn't thrown him out yet.

Would it be so bad to let Asher act like my Daddy for one night? The little side of me wanted very badly to just let him take over everything. To see what having him for a Daddy would feel like. Would this time be different than that one time I had tried to see what playing with a Daddy of my own would be like? The time I had tried and failed miserably.

Asher was the first omega Daddy I had ever met. He was all swagger and boldness. Always in Daddy mode, the way he gave orders and just expected them to be obeyed. It was infuriating.

And, okay, the way Asher was so self-confident and bossy was hot as fuck. My dick definitely liked it. He took notice every single time Asher tossed out an order. I had no doubt Asher would be like that in bed too. Top vibes rolled off of him in waves. That would make us very incompatible, no matter what the Goddess said about us being fated mates. I knew I would never be the kind of little Asher was looking for, or the mate he would want. Fate had a messed-up sense of humor, for sure. She had really gotten this one wrong.

But did she? My bear huffed. Look at all your friends who have found their fated mates. Didn't they think Fate had gotten

it wrong too? And look at them now.

Only Wade, I told him, and Quinn. Maybe Brendan for like a minute. Ugh, stop talking to me with logic. Go take a nap or something.

Turning off my thoughts, I swirled my hands through the water, trying to find my purple seahorse. I loved it the best out of all my sea creatures. He could chase my ducks around.

“You’re not getting that bandage wet, are you, baby bear?” Asher’s silky voice ran up my spine, and I swiveled my head around. He was leaning his long frame against the door jam, that slight smile he sometimes wore when he looked at me, turning his lips up at the corners. How long had he been standing there, and why hadn’t I even noticed?

The words, “*No Daddy, I’m being careful,*” nearly slipped out, before I caught myself. Instead, I just shook my head, and whispered sulkily, “I’m being careful.” Even I knew I sounded like a brat.

“Good. I’ll change the bandage when you’re done.” He moved into my bedroom, and I heard the sound of drawers opening and closing.

“It’s rude to go through people’s things, you know?” I called loudly.

Asher’s blond head appeared. “Then tell me which drawer your little pajamas are in.”

My nose wrinkled at his words. He had said it was my choice, but my little side was screaming to be let out, and to let

him just take over for the night. What would it hurt? It was just a couple of hours. Then I could go to bed, and he could go home, where he belonged. I really didn't need to be watched over every single minute. Probably hadn't needed to be in the first place, truthfully. I hated to admit it even to myself, but it had been kind of nice to have someone there and worried about me.

"Bottom drawer of the wide dresser," I sullenly told him, "right side."

He rooted around in my drawers for a minute, before calling, "Do you want to play your new game, or watch a movie?"

"Movie." I was dying to play the game Ryan had gotten me, but I was feeling a little tired. How that was possible after all the sleep I had gotten the last couple of days was a mystery, but I was. Besides, I had a gigantic U-shaped sectional, and it would be easy to keep Asher at a distance on it, since the man seemed determined to spend the evening with me.

"Little movie or big?" he asked, standing in the doorway holding my favorite pair of pajamas in his hands. Seeing them draped casually over his arm, I felt my cheeks heat in embarrassment. They were covered in my favorite Disney princess, and there was no mistaking her red hair and bow and arrow.

They would help me slip into my little headspace, because Asher had me wound tight. I was too aware of him, and it had me on edge. His scent was invading my house, lingering everywhere he had been. I had noticed it when I walked down

the hall to my living room. The air smelled like the sweetest honey and my mouth had literally watered with want, my dick twitching with need.

Sitting across from him at dinner, it took all my concentration to not outright stare at his beauty. His cheekbones could cut glass. His lips were pink, bowed and made for kissing. And his eyes reminded me of melted dark chocolate, rich and decadent. They were such a contrast to his sun-kissed hair.

And that body of his. *Fuck me*. He was long and lean, toned and lithe, and he moved with the sensuous grace of the cat he was. My fingers itched to reach out and stroke him, to see if his skin was as soft as it looked. Would he purr beneath my stroking hands? Would his skin and slick taste as sweet as his scent, like honey?

Shrugging like I wasn't thinking about how the man would taste in my mouth, I absently answered his question about the movie, "Big, I guess."

Asher stared at me for a minute, his eyes narrowed, before disappearing back into the bedroom. I could hear him moving around, but I couldn't see what he was doing. And I tried to see, leaning over the tub to catch a glimpse of him. Finally he stood in the doorway, his arms full of my dirty sheets.

"I made the bed with fresh sheets. I'm going to take these to the laundry room, and be back to wash you up. I like '80's movies, by the way. Still want a big movie?"

Wrinkling my nose at him, my mind whirled at the casual way he announced he was going to wash me. Plus, he had changed my sheets. There was somehow something even more intimate in that task than him washing me.

Was this what it felt like to have a Daddy? A good Daddy? Sure, Brendan had been my stand-in Daddy, sort of, when Ryan and I played. But I was well aware he wasn't my actual Daddy, and I wasn't getting the full-on Daddy treatment. He was just making sure his little and I didn't eat enough candy to give ourselves tummy aches – which we had done – colored, picked up our toys, and had a safe place to play.

He didn't dress me, or cuddle me, or discipline me. He didn't make sure I had a good day, or ate lunch, or went to bed at a decent hour. Those were things he saved for Ryan.

“You're kind of young to like old movies, aren't you?” I would bet Asher was a good five years younger than me.

He snorted, throwing his head back with laughter. “Old movies? My dad would cackle at that if he was still alive. My parents were teens during the eighties, and they raised my little brother and me watching them. At least my dad did. My omega mom died when I was ten. So yeah, I like old movies, I guess. In fact, one of my all-time favorite movies is from the eighties. And if you want to know how old I am, all you need to do is ask?”

There was a lot of information packed into those few sentences. Asher's mom had died when he was young. His dad had raised him after but was now deceased, and he had a

younger brother. And he had the same taste in movies that Quinn's mate, Lachlan did. Though Lachlan was in his early forties.

"How old are you?" Moving my green duck in the water, I tried to pretend I wasn't that interested in the answer.

"I'm thirty-one."

Oh, he was older than I had guessed. Closer to my age, but still younger than me.

"How's *The Princess Bride* sound?" he called, walking down the hallway with my dirty sheets.

Not bothering to answer, I leaned back in the tub, pushing my ducks from one side to the other with my good hand, while letting my bandaged arm hang over the side of my tub out of the water.

When Asher returned, he held an empty pitcher in one hand and one of my thick bath towels in the other. "You didn't answer me about the movie."

"Never seen it, so fine I guess." I yawned into my wet hand. "I'll probably fall asleep, honestly. I can't believe I'm tired after sleeping for two days almost non-stop." Yeah, I was pretty much out of the sliver of little space I had managed when I'd first submerged myself into the warm water.

"You've never seen *The Princess Bride*?" he gasped, like I'd just admitted to being a serial killer. "That's bad parenting, right there."

A flash of hurt washed over me, before I shoved it down. But he must have seen a glimpse of it before I pushed it down because the joking smile fell from his face. “I’m sorry, Gabe, I was only joking. I didn’t mean to insult your parents. Dammit, sometimes my teasing misses the mark. I’m sure your parents are lovely. They raised you, didn’t they?”

Blinking because I had something in my eye, and not because of any feelings his words had evoked in me, I whispered, “They really aren’t, but thanks. Your joke was fine, I’m just tired and out of sorts. Like you said, a grouchy bear with a sore paw.”

He stared at me so long and intently, I fought the urge to squirm under his gaze. This was not a topic I wanted to talk about. Ever. With anyone. And why his innocent joke had hit me the way it had, proved just how off kilter I was feeling.

Sinking down beside the tub, he quietly instructed, “Tilt your head back.”

“Why?” My lips pursed in confusion.

“Because I’m going to wash your hair for you. Then I’m going to wash you, get a clean bandage on your arm, and put you in your cute pajamas. After you can rest on the couch, watch the movie, and just relax. Maybe try to slip back into your little headspace.”

“I don’t need a keeper, you know?” Asher ignored my pouty tone as he poured warm water over my hair, massaging the shampoo into a frothy lather. His strong fingers buried in my hair felt absolutely marvelous, his fingers stroking over my

scalp had my dick rising in the water. Thank Goddess for bubbles, though I had a feeling the little moans escaping my mouth told him just how much his innocent ministrations were affecting me.

There was no hiding my hard cock when he ran the soapy washcloth over my grimy skin, clearing the sweat from the last couple of days away. But he said nothing as his hand caressed over my length, then was gone just as fast. I moved my duck around, ignoring his intense gaze on me.

“Relax, baby bear,” Asher whispered, drying my body with the towel once I was standing on my plush blue bath mat. “Nothing is going to happen tonight. We haven’t discussed anything yet, and you’re still healing. Besides, I can see your mind whirling with about a thousand questions, in way too many directions. Just let Daddy take care of you tonight. Nothing more, nothing less.”

He tugged my pajama top over my head, smoothing the blue material down my chest and over my hard abs. Before holding out the matching short bottoms, he looked up at me from where he was kneeling in front of me on the floor.

And Goddess, if that wasn’t about the prettiest picture there ever was. His pink lips were inches away from my dick, which had somewhat deflated in the bath. But his warm breath ghosting over my thighs, so close to my dick, had all my blood running south. My dick filled out before both our eyes, thick and long, pointing at him from the thick patch of dark hair nestled at my groin.

Asher's hand rubbing over my body made every cell on my skin come alive. I could tell he hadn't even been trying to make it sensual, but everything he did just naturally had a sensual side to it.

My body was at war with itself, my head even more so. Just on the edge of tipping over into little space, but I was also very aware of Asher as a man and my body was responding as one.

“Do you need a pull up or diaper?”

His question brought me blinking out of my confused thoughts of trying to figure out what to do. Were we both just going to ignore the fact that I was rock hard and my cock was practically eye level with him, waving in his face? Hell, if I tipped forward a millimeter, I would hit him in the face with it.

“What? No, I...no.”

He gave me a soft smile, “It's fine if you want one, either of them.”

Shaking my head, I cleared my throat. “No, I'm good.”

“These are cute,” he commented, reaching up and running a finger over my sleeve. “I'm not sure which princess this is, though. I haven't kept up like I should, especially considering I'm a pediatrician.” He gave me a self-deprecating smile.

Running my top teeth over my bottom lip, I couldn't meet his eyes. Maybe he could just ignore my throbbing dick, knowing I was on the verge of little space, but I was finding it difficult to. Maybe he didn't want to embarrass me if it was

just a normal reaction of him touching me, dressing me, being so close to me.

“Merida,” whispering, my voice sounded small and shy. Apparently my little side had no problem ignoring my dick either. “She’s my favorite princess. She has a bow and arrow, and a bunch of little brothers. And she doesn’t need a prince to save her. She’s very brave. Belle is my second favorite.” I confessed, telling myself I should just stop talking.

“I’ll remember that.” And for some reason, I believed him when he said he would.

I expected him to hold out the matching pants to me, so I could finish getting dressed. Instead, he sat back on his knees, looking up at me from underneath his golden lashes. His eyes were deep pools of molten chocolate, the pupils wide. His high cheekbones were flushed, and his chest was moving up and down much faster than it had been a minute ago.

The tantalizing scent of honey filled the small space of my bathroom, invading my senses, and a pearly drop of precum pulsed from the tip of my aching cock.

Asher licked his lips, and my own breath caught in my chest. All sense of my little headspace faded to the background of my mind. I had a beautiful omega kneeling at my feet, staring up at me and licking his lips, while my aching dick bounced in front of his face. Practically slapping him on his cheek, a drop of precum pearling at the tip.

You have your mate kneeling in front of you, my bear growled in my ear, annoyed with me and not afraid to let me

know it. *Your fated mate.*

Asher's long, slim fingers grasped both of my hairy thighs, and I nearly choked on my own spit. His hands rubbed over the course, thick hair on my legs, creating delicious friction. "You have gorgeous legs, Gabe. Thick and hairy. So hard with muscles. Your thighs look like they were carved from stone by a master artist. I want to lick them."

"Asher." One word. His name. Whispered in a rough plea.

I needed to touch him. I needed him to keep touching me. I needed his mouth on me. I needed so many things, and I needed them all now.

"Let me?" He shuffled forward on his knees, moving even closer to my leaking tip. The muscles of my thighs bunched, as his breath ghosted over the hot skin of my flesh, making me shiver. "Please, Gabe, I need to taste you." He was practically begging.

Let him? I'd let him do anything he wanted at this point. There was no way I was going to stop whatever was about to happen. It didn't matter how ludicrous I probably looked, towering over him. Dressed in nothing but a tight pajama top, covered with a cartoon princess.

He was my omega. *Mine.*

And I was his alpha. I knew it like I knew my own name.

The Goddess Fate had determined it, and who the fuck did I think I was, trying to defy her?

Cupping the back of his head with my large hand, I gently pushed him forward until my tip bounced against his pretty pink lips. Grasping my steel length at my root, I tapped his lips with the wide head. Watching as the drop of precum fell onto his bottom lip, glistening in the light of the bathroom. Asher's pink tongue darted out and he lapped it up, a sound very much like a purr falling from his glossy lips.

“Suck me.”

It was my turn to give the orders.

Chapter Eleven



Asher

“Let me?”

Shuffling forward, I ignored the hard floor digging into my knees. Truthfully, I barely felt it. My senses were filled with the man standing in front of me. Staring down at me with his whiskey colored eyes. The long, thick, glorious length of him *right there* in front of me. He smelled like pine, fresh earth, and the darkest musk. His scent was intoxicating. I wanted to have him roll around in my sheets, just so I could smell him all night long.

The one, pearly drop of precum on his tip transfixed me. My mouth watered, and the scent of his musk amped up a notch in the warm bathroom. His scent lingered in the air, mixing with my own omega pheromones, and the smell made my hole ache. I could feel myself growing damp with my slick.

I needed him in my mouth. “Please, Gabe, I need to taste you.”

His big hand cupped the back of my head, pushing me forward just enough, until his tip bounced against my lips. That pearly drop fell onto my bottom lip, and like a cat with a bowl of cream, my tongue darted out to capture his essence. My cheetah purred beneath my surface as his taste exploded on my tongue. Salty, tangy, with just a touch of sweetness. It was heaven in my mouth, and I wanted more.

And the way he looked! Standing there, holding his thick cock in his fist, wearing nothing but his little pajama shirt. A contrast of childlike innocence, and pure alpha manliness.

Goddess! The combination was magnificent and ticked off every single one of my boxes, along with a few I hadn't even known were simmering beneath my surface.

“Suck me.” His voice was low, throaty and gruff, but there was no mistaking it for the command – the order – that it was.

Oh Goddess, how I loved being ordered around by a domineering alpha! There was no little side showing in Gabe's eyes now. Not one hint of his usual shyness either. No, he was all alpha, and he knew exactly what he wanted.

With him towering over me, all hard muscles covered in thick, delicious hair *everywhere*, wearing nothing but his little pajama top...holy Goddess, I don't think I had ever witnessed anything sexier.

Heat engulfed my body, like a flame had been lit under my feet, and it burned upwards. If I didn't know I was on birth control and my heat wasn't due until November – having a scheduled heat once a year was marvelous – I would swear my body was going into heat.

Then it dawned on me what I was feeling. We were fated mates. Our bond was starting as I had guessed, and it very likely was throwing me into a mini-heat. It wasn't a full-blown heat where I would be out of my mind with want for an alpha, but one caused by *my* alpha. The Goddess may have put some “out clauses” into the fated mates thing, but She'd also put in

some fail proof ones of Her own to make sure her pairings stuck it out. Little mini-heats that made most birth control ineffective, that more times than not resulted in a pregnancy.

Well, we weren't anywhere close to being ready for a baby. A baby was in my plans, but not for at least two to three years. Besides, my baby bear still hadn't gotten his head wrapped around us being fated mates yet. And we hadn't dealt with me being the Daddy and him being the little.

It was a good thing I loved sucking cock, and was a complete and unashamed cum slut. I loved cum on me as much as I loved it in me. It would make things easier for us to thwart any baby making plans Fate might have in store for us.

Not having to be told twice, I opened my mouth. Stretching my lips and sucking just the wide, spongy head of his cock into my mouth. Gabe's hand moved from cupping the back of my head to grasping my hair in his fist. It was just the perfect amount of pain and pleasure, and I felt my slick starting to coat the backs of my thighs in my jeans.

Gabe braced his legs, spreading them wider, and when I glanced up at him through my lashes he stared down at me intently. His gaze pure fire, need, and want all rolled into one. More than that, this was a side of Gabe I had only seen the barest glimpses of. This was a Gabe who knew exactly what he wanted, and wasn't afraid to ask for it. No, demand it. This Gabe wasn't shy, wasn't bashful, and wasn't worried if his strength and size was going to hurt someone.

This Gabe was all domineering alpha and I was there for it.

Goddess, how I wanted him to leave his mark on me. Fingerprints, love bites, even scratches. I wanted to know he had been inside me, and I wanted the world to know it too. And when he fucked me, I wanted to feel his cum oozing out of my ass for days. But tonight wouldn't be the night for any of that.

It was too soon, and we hadn't had the opportunity to discuss anything that had happened between us. Nor had we had a chance to go over any rules between us as Daddy/little, or discussed each other's limits.

None of that was going to stop me from enjoying the taste of him though.

My hand covered his where he held his cock towards me by the base, and I nudged his fingers away, grasping him tightly. Tonguing his slit, I spread it wide, and he bucked hard against my face. A sound somewhere between a moan and a growl escaped his throat. The sound was primal, raw, and it made me feel powerful. I had made him sound like that. It was a noise I wanted to hear over and over.

"Fuck!" His baritone went straight to my own hard dick, and with my free hand I unsnapped my jeans, freeing myself. Pulling off his dick with a loud pop, I let it bounce in the air, while I stood up. His eyes were confused for a second, and I saw a flash of disappointment before I pulled his head down to me. My mouth latched onto his, my tongue invading the warm recesses of his mouth. The taste of him was still on my tongue, as I filled his mouth.

Tearing myself away from his mouth, I shoved my jeans down, then kicked them into a corner. Gracefully, I slid back down to my knees, grasping his length and giving it a few hard pumps before I stretched my lips around him once more. His girth stretched my mouth farther than it had ever been stretched, but I swallowed, loosening up my throat. He slid in an inch, then another, then another.

Breathing out of my nose, I took him as far back as I could, then gagged when he slid in past my comfort zone. Tears gathered in my eyes then ran down my cheeks, but I didn't stop sucking. His hands were buried in my hair, pulling roughly. Knowing exactly when to let up before the pleasure pain became this side of too much.

Saliva ran down my chin as I slurped him, my hand moving up and down the inches of him I absolutely couldn't make fit. My alpha bear was huge all over! His was the biggest, thickest cock I had ever had in my mouth, and my ass clenched and fluttered thinking about it filling me.

He would stretch my hole, split me open, and I would feel him for at least a week. And my Goddess, I absolutely couldn't wait to have this alpha buried inside me as far as he could go.

Gabe's thumb ran over my cheek gently, sliding through the tears that were leaking out of my eyes. He shifted his stance, and his cock hit the soft spot in the back of my throat, making me gag. But still, I didn't stop sucking him. I couldn't get enough of him. His taste, his smell, the feel of his velvety skin

inside the wetness of my mouth. I kept trying to push past my gag reflex just to have more of him.

My cock was aching, hard and dripping, and I grasped it with my free hand. My own hand moved on myself in time to my sucking pulls.

“Fuck, Asher,” Gabe’s voice was raw, husky and dark, “you look completely debauched. And so fucking beautiful like this. Tears, spit covering your chin, taking my cock like you were born to suck me.”

Pulling off, I gasped, my chest heaving for oxygen. “I was born for it. Born for you. Tell me when you’re going to come.”

He grasped me by my hair, tugging painfully, forcing my chin up to meet his blazing eyes. Shaking his head slightly, he growled, “What? You’re too good to swallow my cum?”

Blinking the tears out of my eyes, I swallowed, wincing at the rawness of my throat. My voice was gravel as I declared, “I’ll swallow your cum anytime, baby bear. But this time, I want you to come all over my face. Shoot your cum all over Daddy. I want to feel it dripping down my cheeks and chin, so I can lick it up.”

I had about two seconds to register the shock on Gabe’s face, before it was swept away by pure primal lust. He shoved his dick back towards my mouth and I opened up like a hungry guppy. He wasn’t gentle, not in the least, as he fucked my face, and not one part of me wanted gentleness from him.

His hips slammed forward, over and over, and the only thing keeping me from sliding backwards was my strong thigh muscles and Gabe's hands tangled in my hair. Holding my head still, so that all I could do was open my mouth wide and take what he was offering.

And take it I did.

My face was slick with sweat and tears. My chin dripped saliva, my scalp stung from the pulls on it from his hands, and my chest was heaving from breathing through my nose noisily and around his dick. The only sounds in the room were his panting breaths, the obscene slurping, moaning noises I was making, mingled with my mewling, high pitched whines.

The back of my throat felt raw and bruised from his forceful thrusts. My jaw ached almost to the point I wasn't sure I could take much more. But still he snapped his hips at my face. Goddess, the man had endurance! My own hand on my dick had nearly brought myself to orgasm more than once, but I had backed it off, edging myself. Waiting for him.

I didn't want to come until I felt the scalding splashes of his cum splattering my face.

Finally, finally, he pulled off, grasping his glistening cock in his fist. His other hand dug into my shoulder tightly, as he pumped his cock. Once, twice, then he was shooting his cum all over my face.

Closing my eyes against the sting, I raised my chin a notch and opened my mouth hungrily. Feeling the scalding wetness bathe my skin. My cheekbones, forehead, eyelids, and chin.

His fingers dug deeper into my shoulder with each spray, and my own orgasm tore through me. My cum covered my hand, my body shaking, my slick dripping from my ass and down the backs of my thighs.

My chest heaved with my labored breathing. Cum was sliding down my closed eyelids, matting my lashes, and I knew I couldn't open my eyes yet. I felt Gabe move away from me, taking his warmth with him. My tongue darted out and lapped up whatever cum I could, marveling in the taste of him.

The sound of running water filled the room, then a warm washcloth gently cleaned my face.

Blinking when his finger tilted my chin up, his ruggedly handsome face came into focus. His thick brows were drawn over his eyes, his forehead wrinkled. Reaching a finger out, I smoothed the wrinkles away, smiling dreamily at him.

“That...Asher...fuck. I bruised you.” His fingers brushed over my shoulder in a feather light caress, where minutes before he had held onto me as he had sprayed all over my face. “Fuck, I'm so sorry. I...I can be too rough sometimes.” He looked away from me, not meeting my eyes, embarrassed. “I'm too big and clumsy. I don't know my own strength. Fuck.”

Grasping his hand tightly, I brought it to my lips and placed a kiss in the middle of his palm. Loving that even though my fingers were long, his hand was still twice the size of mine. He made me feel smaller than I was, and I adored it.

“You were perfect. That was perfect.” Touching his freshly bandaged arm, I whispered, “You didn’t hurt your arm, did you?”

He shook his head, staring at me with so many questions in his wide, gorgeous eyes. The unsure, shy, somewhat introverted Gabe was back. “It’s fine. Are you...?”

Standing I took the washcloth and wiped my cum off my stomach, then reached around and cleaned up my slick. “Baby bear, I’m more than okay, I promise you. You didn’t hurt me. And I can’t wait to have your cum all over me. I’m a bit of a cum slut.” His brown eyes grew wider at my admission. “You should probably know that. And I don’t think I’ve ever tasted, or smelled, any cum more delectable than yours. I’m going to need more of it. Much more.”

When he just stood there, looking at me like he hadn’t understood a word I had just said, I casually pulled my jeans back on. Holding his pajama bottoms out to him, he held onto my shoulders as he stepped into them with little fuss. Probably because he was still silently chewing on everything that had just happened. I could practically see the wheel’s in his brain spinning.

And oh, my goodness, did he ever look cute in those pajamas. Making a mental note to check the size so I could buy him a few more pairs. I had only seen two pairs when I had been digging around in his drawers. But my baby bear definitely needed more pajamas like these.

“You look adorable, baby bear. Still up for watching a movie before bedtime?”

Flipping off the bathroom light, I brushed by his watchful form. Not that the blowjob, and my own orgasm hadn't been relaxing enough for me to fall asleep. It had, and all the interrupted nights of watching over Gabe, and waking him to take his meds was starting to catch up with me.

But Gabe looked anything but relaxed. No, he looked unsure and wary again. He definitely wasn't at all in his little space.

Someone, at some point, had hurt my baby bear, I was sure of it. But I knew pushing him for details or answers before he was ready to give them to me, wasn't how I should approach him. I was honestly surprised he'd let me push him the past few days as much as he had. Better to not tempt my luck.

Gabe's eyes narrowed a fraction, and he fidgeted from one leg to the other, tugging at the hem of his shirt. Silently, he nodded his head in the most adorable way. He might say Ryan slipped in and out of little space at the drop of a hat, but I had witnessed him doing nearly the same thing tonight, and I wasn't sure he was aware of it.

“Go get settled, and I'll be there in a minute.” The words were spoken softly, but said with all my Daddy authority. He scurried from the room, his feet shuffling on the carpet, and I was grateful he hadn't put up an argument.

Picking up his crochet cheetah, I grinned, holding it to my chest. It gave me a little thrill knowing he had specifically asked Brendan to make it for him, even before we had been

officially introduced. As if deep down, he had known we were somehow connected. Brendan, knowing I had a crush, had gleefully told me that Gabe had asked him to make him a cheetah, when he was making Ryan a fox to go with his wolf.

Grabbing Gabe's Pooh binky off his nightstand, I smiled softly, running a finger over the cartoon.

His stuffie, binky, and a movie were just what my baby bear needed for a good night's rest. All the other details we needed to work out between us could wait until morning.

Chapter Twelve



Gabe

The smell of bacon had me stumbling down my hallway and into my open concept living room, kitchen, and dining room. Scratching my rumbling belly, I ran a hand over my face, trying to wake myself up. It was way past my usual time to get up, and even though all I had done for pretty much the last several days was sleep, my brain felt sluggish and sleep fogged.

The bacon scent now mingled with the lusciousness of my dark roast coffee in the air. Ah, that would cure my sleepies. Asher stood at my stove, his back to me, stirring eggs in a pan. The sight of him there – in my space – nearly took my breath away. He looked so *right*.

Even though he had been here since I had been released from the hospital, after last night it felt like everything had changed between us. Nibbling on my bottom lip, I hovered on my side of the long counter that ran the length of my kitchen, and served as a bar eating area.

Shuffling one foot then the other, I tugged at the bottom of my pajama top, suddenly unsure in my own house. My shyness, which seemed to mostly disappear in Asher's presence, was suddenly back in full force.

“Sit down, baby bear,” Asher's voice instructed, without him even turning around. He scooped a good portion of fluffy scrambled eggs onto a plate – a full size plate, I noticed –

added several strips of bacon, and three slices of buttered toast. I slid onto one of the tall bar stools at the same time Asher placed the steaming plate of food in front of me. My stomach let out a ferocious grumble and Asher grinned at me. His smile was dazzling, like a damned toothpaste commercial, I swear, and my heart jumped right up into my throat.

“I hope you like bacon and eggs.”

“Thank you,” my voice came out softer than I wanted, and I cleared my throat. “Is there coffee?” Wincing slightly at my asinine question, when the coffee aroma was heavy in the air.

He arched one of his golden brows at me, something I noticed he did quite often. My friend Quinn rolled his eyes for most every emotion he felt, and Asher did the same with that brow of his. That arched brow of his spoke its own language.

“There is, but how about some juice? Or milk?” he cajoled.

“How about some coffee.” I wasn’t asking, and my tone said as much. And Goddess, how this man could make me go from shy to annoyed in under two point two seconds, had to be some kind of record. “Do not stand between me and my coffee. It’s been days.”

Pointedly, I ignored the slight whine I heard in my voice. But it had been way too long since I had had a cup of coffee. Enough was enough.

“Look, at this point, it’s for everyone’s safety.” Biting off half a slice of bacon, I chewed and stared him down. “Besides,

I feel pretty much normal again. And my stitches itch like a son of a bitch.”

Asher poured me a cup of liquid gold, and I took a long appreciative sniff, inhaling the rich scent. Taking my first sip, I closed my eyes in pure joy. Asher chuckled, tugging at the bandage he had wrapped around my arm last night.

“Let me take a look at them,” he fussed with my bandage, while I made a valiant attempt to shovel food into my mouth with my other hand. Now that I actually had food in front of me, I was downright starving. “Hmmm, I’ll be right back. You’re healing fast.”

He disappeared out my front door before I could respond, and I had nearly scraped my plate clean in the ten minutes he took to return. Looking over at the stove, I tried to see if there was anything left in the pan. Asher was a damned good cook, I would say that much for him. Those eggs had been fluffy and light, and I could go for some more of them.

He sat a black leather medical bag on the counter before asking, “You want seconds?”

Nodding, I stood with my plate. “I can get it, you don’t need to wait on me.”

That arched brow of his was back, and he took the plate from my fingers, nodding his head at my seat. “Sit.”

And fuck if I didn’t sit. Sliding another full plate in front of me, he leaned against the bar, sipping from his own cup of

coffee. I wasn't sure if his need to wait on me was a Daddy thing or an omega thing, but I liked it more than I should.

“I'm going to take your stitches out. They're ready and it will save you a trip to your GP. And then, I think we'll have a play day today.”

My fork froze halfway to my mouth, and I just stared at him. Blinking once, twice, three times. It probably looked like I had a weird eye condition the way my lids were flying up and down.

Play day? Gulping, I wondered what exactly that meant.

“Goddess, take a breath, baby bear,” Asher chided. “You look like I just told you someone died.”

“I just...what does that mean? A play day?” I knew what it meant to me, when Ryan and I played, but...

Draining his cup, he walked over and poured himself a refill. Guess I wasn't the only coffee fiend this morning. “You need it. And I know we haven't talked about any of the stuff that's happened between us. Not the fated mates thing, or you being little and me being a Daddy, or anything in between. But trust me when I say you need this. Your little headspace was close last night, a few times, but you never got there completely.”

“You left out talking about the blowjob.” Because, well, if we were going to talk about anything, we should probably talk about that. He had pretty much sucked all of my brain cells out through my cock, while simultaneously letting me know he was a cum slut. I felt like that – all of that – needed to be

talked about at some point. Might as well throw it into the mix. I might still be processing all of it. “Or are we just going to ignore that it happened?”

Asher grinned at me over the rim of his cup, his dark eyes sparkling. “I filed that under the fated mates thing. That and you’re freaking smoking hot, have a rocking body, and I find you incredibly sexy. While I would normally have gone over limits with you, and how you feel about any kind of sexual advances while you are in your little headspace, things got away from us. That’s on me. As a Daddy, I know better, so I apologize for that. So, nothing else happens sexually until we talk.”

Wait. What? Was he apologizing for giving me the best blow job in my entire life, or because he felt like he had done something wrong as a Daddy? My experiences with Daddies were so limited, so I really wasn’t sure. Brendan was the only nice Daddy I had ever come across, and he and I were one hundred percent not doing anything sexual. But I also wasn’t sure I was ready for a talk about limits. Or rules. Or fated mates and futures.

All of that terrified me and I’d rather just not deal with it.

But I did want to know more about this play day, as he was calling it.

Reaching out a finger, Asher brushed it gently across my forehead, where I was sure my brows were knitted together. “You’re thinking awfully hard, baby bear.”

“You confuse me,” I finally admitted, pushing my almost empty plate away. Asher picked up my last slice of bacon off my plate, taking a delicate bite with his straight, white teeth. Watching him eat a piece of bacon should not be as sexy as it was. Goddess, what the fuck was wrong with me? Did I have some long dormant food kink that was just now making itself known?

“Why?” he asked.

Shaking my head, I looked away from him. “You just do.”

No one would ever accuse me of being great at articulating my feelings.

Instead of pushing me for more, Asher quietly dug into his bag, then quickly and efficiently snipped the stitches from my arm. Gritting my teeth each time he pulled a stitch free of my skin, I looked away until he was finished. I never could stand the feel of stitches being taken out. It skeeved me out. Couldn't really stand them going in, either, but at least I was numb for that part. And as long as I didn't look at any of the needles, I was usually fine.

“Looks good,” he declared, after poking and prodding my arm. “Minimum scarring.”

Looking down at where his fingers rested just beneath the pink line in my skin, I reminded him, “I don't care about scars.”

Tilting my chin with the finger of his other hand, he forced me to look at him instead of peering at my arm. “I know you

don't. But I want only the best for you from now on.”

Gulping, I stared at him, breathing in his warm honey scent which was making my mouth water. “I...Asher...?”

At a loss for words, all I could do was lose myself in the dark depths of his eyes.

An undeniable urge to kiss him washed over me. The kiss we had shared last night had been too brief, and had tasted of me. I wanted to find out what Asher tasted like without my cum mixed in.

Never had I ever wanted someone as much as I wanted Asher, or as quickly. But the thought of allowing myself to hope for even one second that I could be what he wanted, that I could be enough for him, that he might want me forever, terrified me.

Because I knew, deep down, I wasn't what he wanted. I wasn't what any Daddy wanted. I never had been. Hell, my own father hadn't wanted me, and no Daddy had ever wanted me either. I was a failure as a son, and a failure as a little, and some might even say a failure as an alpha.

I had been so sure of where my life was headed, and the choices I would have to make. And now I was filled with nothing but confusion. I couldn't fathom that I might, just might, be able to have everything I had ever wanted. Wouldn't let myself even begin to hope for it. Hope brought hurt, and I couldn't let myself dwell on that.

The thought of failing Asher made me want to cry. In less than a week, with one touch of our skin against skin, my whole world had been rocked to its very core.

Before, Asher had been annoying, bossy, and the beautiful guy who liked to tease me. Even if I could never quite wrap my head around figuring out if he was teasing me to be mean, or because he was flirting with me.

I'd fought my attraction to him tooth and nail, and I had fought my little side when Asher would go into Daddy Dom mode. With him constantly harping about me wearing my coat, or whatever else he felt I should be doing, because the little inside of me had wanted to do what he told me to. Wanted to be his good boy.

He had been in full on caretaker Daddy mode the last few days, and dammit if I hadn't lapped it up. It had felt so good to have someone taking care of every little thing for me. To be taking care of *me*. I couldn't remember the last time anyone had taken care of me besides me. It got so tiring sometimes, always being big. Always being the one in charge of things. It had been so long since Ryan and I had played, and I was feeling overwhelmed by everything that had happened. Asher was right, I did need to be little. Desperately.

Maybe I should just stop fighting it – Fate, him, all of it – and give in and see where this thing between us went. What would it feel like to have a Daddy of my own? All the time. What would it feel like to have a mate? To have them be one and the same seemed like more than I could ever hope for.

Even though it was exactly what Ryan had with Brendan and they were ridiculously happy, I was still afraid.

Despite being afraid that I was probably going to end up being hurt once more – having my heart broken into a million pieces – I heard myself ask, “What are you proposing?”

Chapter Thirteen



Asher

Gabe had looked so sexy sitting at the bar in his kitchen, it took everything in me to keep my hands to myself. He was all sleep rumped, his thick brown hair a mess going in every direction. The stubble of his beard needing trimmed, and still wearing his little pajamas. I fought with myself. Wanting to Daddy him, while fighting the urge to drop to my knees in front of him and suck him off again.

Just thinking about his thick cock had my mouth watering, as I'd watched him eat the food I had prepared him. My hole was wet, fluttering, reminding me it was empty and had been for far too long. Patience was what I needed to have now, and by nature I was not a patient person.

I should have never let things get as far as they had last night, without having a talk with him about limits, among other things. This wasn't a one off, one and done, blowing a random guy in a club bathroom. Though it had been way too long since I had done that too.

No, this was my mate – my fated mate – and my little. Even if he was still fighting all of it. Oh, he hadn't said as much. He didn't need to. Gabe wore his emotions all over his face. They practically swam in those light brown eyes of his. I would bet he wasn't even aware that I could read all his thoughts like I was reading a book.

That and his emotions seemed to roll off him in small waves that I was more than aware of, through what had to be our bond. If he could feel me, he hadn't given any indication, but part of that might be what had him spinning.

One minute he was all shy little, and the next he was all confident alpha. And fuck if I hadn't found myself loving the mixture of the two. Gabe was the whole package for me, the one I had been searching for...well, since I had realized I was a Daddy at nineteen. I wasn't about to let this man second guess anything that was happening between us. He was one sexy alpha, mixed with adorable little. He was what I had been waiting for, dreaming about, for more years than I cared to count. The one thing I had almost given up on finding.

“Well,” taking another sip of my coffee, I thought about how to approach how I wished us to spend the day. He was already hovering close to his little headspace, even if he wasn't aware of it, or didn't want to give in to it. “I don't know about your bear, but my cheetah is chomping at the bit to be let loose for a run. How does shifting and heading out into the woods for a few hours sound? Let our animals out to roam free for a while?”

Gabe rubbed the back of his neck, but he nodded. “My bear did start grumbling after he woke up from all the sleep he's had. He likes to shift every day usually. But I'm not running. I don't do that. Unless there is some kind of emergency. I already scare most of the shifters around here. A giant ass Kodiak bear running would really set them all off. But knock yourself out. I couldn't keep up with you if I tried. And I don't

run in my human form, so don't get any crazy ideas of expecting me to go jogging with you, either. I've seen you out there running at the butt crack of way too damn early."

Chuckling, I looked down into the dark brew of my cup. He was right about not keeping up with me. My cat could get up to over seventy miles an hour, and he loved to run. But it saddened my heart to hear him talk about himself that way. The thought of other shifters being scared of this sweet, gentle man, and shunning him, made me ache for him. And I had seen him in his shifted form plenty of times. He was huge, but he was also lovely. All broad, burliness, and soft, delectable fur. I ached to run my hands all over him to see if he was as soft as I imagined.

Someday I would do just that, but I didn't need to freak him out any more than I could already feel he was on the verge of.

"You don't need to run, baby bear." Smiling gently at him, I rinsed my mug in the sink. "I'll run and come back to you. My cat usually wants a nap after a nice sprint, so maybe I'll just stretch out next to you in the sun."

"Okay." He nodded in agreement. "I usually just like to walk a bit, so I'll just follow you."

I had seen him many times just walking alone. I usually watched him from one of the many perches in the trees I had found. Sometimes I would see him playing with a white wolf and some wolf cubs. That was Wade with his babies, I knew. Finn joined them when he could, his large wolf watching out for them all.

Gabe frolicked a lot with Ryan's fox, and I would usually stop to watch them alongside Brendan's silver-streaked wolf. It was cute to watch Gabe play with his friends, letting them climb on him like he was their own personal jungle gym. Or playing their own version of tag. It hadn't escaped my notice that they were the only shifters he usually spent time with.

Lately, when I had encountered him in the woods, he was usually all alone.

I would need to get with Brendan and Finn, and see if we could schedule a time for all of us to shift and be in the woods together. I had seen Gabe with his friends children, and knew he adored playing with the young pups. He was always so gentle with them too.

One day, he was going to make a wonderful father.

"Well, my cat likes to play, so if you want to play any of the games you play with your friends, we can do that."

In reality, the doctor and Daddy in me wished he would just take it easy. Even though I knew he was probably perfectly fine and almost completely healed. Being a shifter came in handy sometimes. We weren't immune from illness, but we did heal faster than full humans. And unlike humans, we couldn't contract sexually transmitted diseases, which was rather nice.

But the image of my hands covered in his blood while I had applied pressure and tried to slow down his bleeding, was going to be etched in my brain for a very long time. Probably forever.

“I’m happy to just walk,” Gabe drained the last of his coffee. “I’m still a little tired. I’m not sure how that is possible, even. I think I’ve slept more in the last four days than I have in four months. I should check in with Stu and my crews before we go.”

“I’ve talked to Stu every day,” I told him. “He has everything handled. But you can check in after our shift if you still feel the need.”

The look in his eyes changed, going straight to irritation, bordering on anger. So, he didn’t like me stepping into his work territory. Noted. Not that I wouldn’t feel the same if our roles were reversed. But it had just been a natural part of me as a Daddy, to check in with Stu, and keep him updated on Gabe’s condition. And to let him know to bother me with anything that came up that he couldn’t handle in Gabe’s absence.

Okay, hearing it in my head, I might have overstepped a tiny bit.

My brother used to tell me I always thought I had to be in control of every situation, and that I had a tendency to boss people around. Pushing thoughts of Shay back down where they belonged, I kept my attention focused on Gabe.

“He was just across the street,” I defended, “and I was checking on the progress of my reno. They were all worried about you and wanted updates. They care about you a lot.”

His heavy brows knitted together, causing his forehead to wrinkle like it had earlier. “Why do I get the impression it

went beyond you checking on your reno, and keeping them up on my condition? Like you were making sure I wasn't bothered by them or work."

Shrugging, I gave him an unapologetic look. "Because I was."

"Hmmm," was his pursed lipped response.

Yeah, we really needed to have some conversations.

"Do you want to talk now or after we shift?" Better to just rip that band-aid off.

"About?" He stood, scratching absently at his belly, his voice conveying innocence at my question, while his eyes remained narrowed.

He knew exactly what we needed to talk about and was avoiding it.

Waving a hand in the air, I leaned against the bar. "Fated mates? Daddy/little? Limits, expectations, rules? Safe words? Take your pick."

Gabe swallowed hard, and I gave him the time he needed to collect his thoughts. This was one time I needed to not push. Shay was right when he would tell me I was bossy. I never looked at it as being bossy though. Did I know what I wanted, went after it, and didn't let anything stand in my way to get it? Absolutely.

Did I know how to be a good Daddy, and make my little's life easier? Again, absolutely.

I had always been confident, and making decisions and running things had always come easily to me. It was part of what made me such a good Daddy. Finn always jokingly called me a Daddy Dom, and maybe I was. Though I didn't think I was overly strict with my littles, I did expect them to follow the rules and accept the consequences when they didn't. I'd always thought of myself as more of a caring Daddy, but maybe I was both.

Huh. Maybe Finn was onto something. The man was a Dom himself – though not a Daddy – so he would probably know.

“After our shift.” Gabe finally decided quietly. Nibbling on his lower lip, a habit I had discovered he did when he was feeling unsure of himself and one I would need to break him of, he whispered, “Is that okay?”

Oh, this man. One minute fire flared in his eyes, and the next he was all sweet, quiet shyness. It was ridiculous how attractive I found both qualities in him.

Finally giving in to my desires, I reached out to touch him, brushing a lock of his wild hair back from his forehead in a soft caress. “I told you it was your choice. There's no right or wrong answer, Gabe.” Sighing, I stepped back out of his space. “Look, I've been told I can come on strong on occasion.”

The loud snort he uttered interrupted me, and he rolled his eyes. “You think?”

Pursing my lips, I quelled my need to use my Daddy voice on him. Okay, Finn really might be onto something with the

whole Daddy Dom thing.

“Because we haven’t talked about rules yet, I’m going to let your rude behavior slide. This time.” Arching my brow at him, I crossed my arms over my chest and waited. Shay had told me once my brows spoke an entire language on their own. Why the fuck my little brother was invading my brain today I had no clue, but I needed to not think about him right now. The pain I felt every time Shay popped into my head made my chest hurt.

Gabe looked down at his feet, a pink hue blooming on his cheeks, right above the line of his beard. “I’m sorry, that was rude.”

“It’s all right, baby bear.” I’d almost swear his cheeks got pinker when I called him by the pet name that just fit him so well. Hmm, we’d need to revisit *that*. “As I was saying, I want us to discuss things, be honest with our feelings, and what we want for the future.”

“If we even want a future.” Gabe’s voice was stronger this time. “Fate made it so people could walk away for a reason. You keep talking like this is a done deal between us. Like, hey, we’re fated mates, let’s upend our lives together and live happily-ever-after. This isn’t a fairy tale, Asher. Or some movie made in the eighties, with a hero always going on about ‘*As you wish*’, trying to rescue a frankly annoying as fuck princess. I’m not some princess that needs rescuing, Asher.”

Putting a hand over my chest in pain, I gasped. “How dare you speak about Princess Buttercup that way!”

“Oh, I dare all right. She needs to spend some time with Merida.” He crossed his big arms over his big chest, and gave me a look that dared me to say differently.

Well, we would agree to disagree on that last issue. Actually, both of them. No, he wasn't a princess in need of being rescued. But he was a man in need of love, and a little in desperate need of a loving Daddy. Both of which I could be. Scratch that. Both things that I was determined to be for him. If that made me bossy and controlling, so be it.

This thing between us was happening, and the sooner he got on board with it, the better off we would both be.

“Well why don't you think about what it is *you* do want during our shift.” Softening my tone, I remembered that I was positive that someone had hurt him badly. Until I was able to find out who had hurt him, I needed to try to rein in my own natural instincts of being a human bulldozer. “Then we can talk about what we both want from mates, and between a Daddy and a little.”

He was back to chewing on that bottom lip of his, and despite just telling myself all of that, I stepped into his space once more. Gently loosening his plump, red abused lip from his teeth, I ran my thumb over the puffy skin. “You're going to make them bleed, sweetheart. I don't know who hurt you, but I can promise you that I will do my very best never to hurt you. You don't need to be scared, and I know you have no reason to trust what I'm saying to you, but I would protect you with my life.”

That deep frown of his reappeared between his brows, and I could almost see his thoughts running wildly through his head. If he kept frowning like that, he was going to give himself a horrible headache. I'd be lying if I didn't admit that me being the cause of that look nearly broke my heart in two.

Finally, he nodded. In agreement, or understanding, or just because he wanted me to shut the fuck up and let him think, I wasn't really sure.

“We'll talk after our shift.”

With those parting words, he walked over to the door that led to his garage and disappeared from my view. Following quickly, I reached his backyard just in time to see his furry brown bear butt ambling towards the woods.

Chapter Fourteen



Gabe

WWMD? What would Merida do?

My bear snorted at my thoughts. He usually did when I would ask WWMD. While Disney princesses weren't my usual go to for life advice, I did feel that Merida seemed to have her shit figured out, for the most part. It was always my go to little movie, and I strived to be more like her.

To be brave.

To believe in fate and destinies.

Was Asher my future?

Fate certainly seemed to be trying to tell me he was.

So why couldn't I seem to wrap my big bear brain around the fact that Asher was my fated mate, and he was a Daddy. And an omega. He was everything I had been wishing for.

Because if it seems to perfect, it usually is, my bear chimed in, tearing himself from the patch of purple and yellow wildflowers he'd stopped to sniff in the cool woods. But Asher seems genuine. And nice. And he's like sex on a stick, dude. I mean, why haven't you jumped on that!

Plopping my furry bear butt down in a patch of warm sunlight, I raised my face up to it. The day was just a little nippy. Spring was trying to invade us, even if it hadn't quite gotten there yet. The ground beneath me was still damp and cold, but my bear fur kept me nice and warm.

A rustling sound had my ears perking up. The sound merged into running feet – well, paws – and my fur ruffled as a streak of yellow with dark brown spots whipped by me. Asher's cheetah was in a full on run, and it was beautiful and breathtaking to watch.

His sleek body stretched out as he ran, and man, could he run! He was always so fast when I would see him. Majestic and so beautiful, he had taken my breath away from the very first day I had glimpsed him.

I had been so enamored by him, I had gone home and googled cheetahs. Marveling in their speed and beauty, and the funny way they made a little chirping sound instead of roaring. I couldn't even tally how many hours of my life I had lost engrossed in watching YouTube videos about cheetahs. It was kind of embarrassing.

Asher disappeared from my sight, and I sighed, pawing at the grass and dirt in front of me. It would have been nice if Ryan or Wade would have been able to shift and play with me this morning, but they were both at work. Maybe I would throw it out in our chat and see if we could all figure out a time to shift together, like we used to. Bring all the pups. One of my favorite things was to let all the pups climb on me. Roll around with them, play tag. It was fun, and it had the added benefit of wearing them out.

Quinn might even join in. Though usually his black leopard preferred to laze in the sun, flicking his long tail at us in

amusement or annoyance. One was never sure what Quinn's mood would be.

Closing my eyes, I let the sounds around me wash over me. I loved being in these woods, just taking a few quiet minutes to enjoy the world around me. Birds chirped overhead, the sound of scurrying animals reached my ears. Mice, rabbits, squirrels. Maybe a raccoon or even a skunk. The wind moved the leaves on the trees with a soft caress.

Then the sound I had been waiting all winter to hear perked my ears up. Water rushing. A little ways off the well used path most shifters stayed on and used, was a clearing. And a stream. During the summer months, the water ran fast and clear, skimming around some well placed boulders. I had discovered it one day, a few years back, quite by accident. Now it was one of my favorite spots.

Frolicking in the water was ranked at the top of my list of fun things to do. I would roll around in all my bear glory, with no one to see me. Splashing around made me happy and always made a bad day better. I had entertained the idea of putting in a pool, but my backyard wasn't really big enough for it.

The stream had been frozen the last few months, buried under snow and ice. But I could hear the rush of it now, the bubbling, and I smiled broadly. Heaving myself up, I headed to my special spot. There was no better place to go to figure out my what-the-fuck-is-happening-in-my-life moments than there.

I wanted to run to it, but made myself stay at my slow, steady pace. When my bear ran, it literally shook the earth. People – even shifters – got freaked out when they saw a fifteen-hundred-pound Kodiak bear running around. Just because I hadn't smelled, seen, or heard anyone else in the woods, I was always conscious that someone might be around. Better to keep myself in check than unintentionally terrorize someone.

Breaking through the clearing, the wide stream came into sight and I grinned, chuffing. The sun was shining bright and warm here, with no treetops to block it from view. The water ran fast, the current going at a good pace, and it was crystal clear.

Picking up my pace, I jumped a little into it, rumbling as the coldness of it splashed up around me. And boy, it was cold!

Icy, in fact. The snow had melted into it, and we hadn't had enough consistently warm days to even make it a little bit warm. I didn't care. This was my happy place, and my fur protected me well enough-ish.

Best of all, I could think for a minute.

What do you want, Gabe? My bear asked, slamming a big paw onto the mirrored surface of the water. *Figure your shit out already.*

I'm fucking trying. Give me a minute. You know sometimes I just need a minute. Shush!

Better not let your Daddy hear you cussing.

He's NOT my Daddy.

My bear chortled, splashing at the water. Freezing droplets landed on my fur and I shook them off. *Keep telling yourself that. That man did not get that memo. He seems pretty determined.*

He's fucking bossy.

So? He's a Daddy. Daddies have rules, don't they?

We haven't gone over those. He's just bossy anyways.

Thought you wanted someone to be in charge, so you didn't have to.

Snorting at my bear's in your face logic, I rolled on my back in the shallow water, staring up at the sun and the blue sky. Kicking my feet, I waved my paws in front of my face. If someone came across me acting like this, I would die of embarrassment. But to my knowledge no one had ever found my spot. At least not while I was ever here. I hadn't even ever shown it to my friends.

When I'm little. Not when I'm big. I answered my bear.

So, tell him that.

Ugh! It's not that easy!

Yes, it is! You are being stubborn for no good reason.

This was why I hated having conversations with my bear. He could just never let me be.

And he was usually right. Which pissed me off.

Asher wanted to talk about everything when we were done shifting, whatever *everything* entailed.

But what *did* I want?

Hadn't I just been wishing a week ago – had it only been a week? – that I wanted a Daddy and a mate? A life with someone and pups? Hadn't I been bummed because I thought I would have to choose between one or the other?

Now Fate had tossed what appeared to be the perfect embodiment of all those things right in my lap, and I was what?

Freaked the fuck out, is what I was.

That night at Sinful Playgrounds was still embedded deep inside me. The laughter, the sneered words, the cruelty of it. The mean Daddies and littles. It had hurt me. Deeply. And I wasn't ashamed to admit it to myself. But admitting something to myself and sharing that with others, how badly it had all made me feel, were two different things. Knowing I would probably need to talk to Asher about what had happened, about why I had reservations about trusting a Daddy, made my stomach hurt. Sharing feelings and past hurts just wasn't something I did. Even as much as I trusted my friends, and I trusted them one hundred percent, I didn't easily open up to people. Especially about things that deeply hurt me. Keeping things compartmentalized, and locked far, far away, was my usual mode of operation.

Sitting up in the water, I huffed at myself in annoyance. Knowing I needed to figure out what I was going to do about

the problem that was Asher Pierce.

What you need to do about him? My bear chuckled. *You need to do HIM, is what you need to do.*

I'm trying to think here, thank you very much. Be quiet.

But my bear wasn't wrong. Doing Asher had moved to the top of my bucket list. The man was ridiculously sexy. He smelled heavenly, like the purest, sweetest honey. His scent made my dick hard anytime I was near him, and conjured up images of me licking him all over. I wanted to be buried balls deep in the man, with his sleek limbs wrapped tightly around me until you couldn't have slid a piece of paper between the two of us. Wanted to feel my knot swell inside him, impossibly large, stretching his hole farther than he had ever been stretched, locking us together. Filling him with so much cum, that even my knot couldn't hold it all in, and it dripped out of him.

Just thinking about the blowjob he had given me had my belly swooshing with butterflies of desire. Fuck, the man had looked sinful with his lips stretched wide around my cock. Remembering all that wet, warm heat from his mouth had a shiver of need running across my fur. The way he had sounded when he had gagged on my length and girth, tears streaming down his dark eyes pooled with raw want...I had never craved anything as much as I had craved Asher in that moment.

Except maybe when he had demanded I shoot my cum all over his face. Seeing my spend dripping off him, that satisfied gleam in his eyes...Goddess I wanted to cover every inch of

him in my cum, rub it all over his skin, until the scent of it overpowered his natural sweet scent and everyone knew he was mine.

But Asher oozed top energy all over the place. I wasn't naïve enough to think all omegas were bottoms, and all alphas were tops. But I was one hundred percent a top. And I could already see that being an issue. Discovering I didn't have one verse bone in my body had been an unpleasant and painful experience long ago, and it still made me grimace thinking about it.

So that was problem number one.

Problem number two was the fact that even though I wanted a Daddy, desperately, I had no clue what to do with one. The closest I had come to any kind of interaction with a Daddy was Brendan. Because I wasn't going to count what had happened at the club those years ago. None of those Daddies had stepped in to even watch over me. They stood by and watched as a Daddy had been cruel and mean, and not at all what I thought a good Daddy would be.

So, while I had some practical experience with seeing what type of Daddy I would want when Ryan and I played, I still didn't know what having a Daddy of my own would actually be like. Maybe I was so used to being without a Daddy, I would hate having one.

Asher's Daddy side had shown itself on more than one occasion, and the little inside me wanted to give in to him every single time. No questions asked. The truth of it all was

that Asher scared me. Not physically. But it seemed too easy with Asher, these feelings he evoked inside of me. Both my big side and my little side.

You're scared to death he is going to hurt you, my bear whispered, aren't you?

He's too perfect. He's all my dreams come to life, big and little ones, in one person. It's not real. It can't be. And it will hurt too bad when it's not. I'm not sure I'd be able to survive that heartbreak if it's not.

But how will you know if you don't give him a chance?

Stop coming at me with logic! Can't you just be on my side and let me be in my thoughts, whether they make sense or not?

Not when you're about to do something stupid and push away exactly what we need in our life! Don't be a dumb fuck! WWMD?

What would Merida do?

If you had a chance to change your fate, would you?
Thinking about one of my favorite lines from the movie had me grumbling loudly.

Fate.

Fate said our destinies were wound together. That we were fated mates. That we had been born to be with each other.

Did I really want to walk away now, before our bond had a chance to take hold, before finding out if Fate was right?

Would I even be able to? I could have kicked him out of my house at any time over the last day, but something kept holding me back.

Not that I thought for a second that Asher would even go. He hadn't left my side at the hospital. Hadn't left my side since I had been released. Didn't the man need to get back to his own job? He was a pediatrician for fuck's sake. Who was taking care of his patients, while he was taking care of me?

Before my wayward thoughts could spiral in any more crazy directions than they already had or I came to any conclusions, a streak of yellow broke through the clearing.

Sitting up straighter, I realized I didn't know exactly how long I had been in the water, but my ass was numb with cold despite the protection of my fur. So a fair amount of time was a good guesstimate.

Asher's cheetah stalked – there was no other word for the way he slinked towards me – to the edge of the stream. His mouth was making those almost bird-like chirping noises I had seen in the videos. The high-pitched sounds were fast paced and even though I couldn't understand what they meant, their tone let me know he wasn't happy with me.

Goddess, he was magnificent! His spotted face was dissected by two curved, black lines that started at the edge of his eye and wound down to his jaw. His eyes were slanted and tilted up, and held a look that couldn't be mistaken for anything besides annoyance. His yellow fur was liberally spotted, and his long tail had a black tip. He paced the edge of the water,

chirping at me madly, finally opening his jaws wide and emitting what I expected to be a pissed off roar.

Only it wasn't. The sound that came out was what I would only be able to describe as a loud meow. Like a house cat on steroids. It was cute as fuck, but I scrambled to get out of the icy water, because my bear could tell he wasn't happy.

He might not have roared at me, but that black tipped tail of his was swishing back and forth quickly. I knew what that meant. Anyone who had spent any time with any version of a cat knew what that madly flicking tail meant.

Asher was not happy with me. At all.

He was so unhappy he shifted into his human form, hands planted on his narrow hips. His very gloriously naked hips. Once out of the water, I shifted too, because we couldn't communicate in our animal forms, and well...Asher had shifted so it seemed the right thing to do.

Standing naked in front of him, looking down at him, I gritted my teeth, trying not to shiver. Because I had been in the water way longer than I had thought, and I was fucking freezing. I could almost see the lecture forming in his eyes.

"I've been looking for you for half an hour," he finally said from between clenched teeth.

"I'm grown." Very aware I sounded like a petulant child.

Grumbling, I wrapped my arms across my chest, trying to look defiant. When really, I was just trying to warm my hands up in my armpits. Playing in the water with my paws had

pretty much turned them into blocks of ice. I wasn't about to let him know that though. "And in case you didn't notice the big ass bear you zoomed by, that was me. Not much is going to put me in danger."

Besides, these woods were completely safe. Barring the night I had been shot, nothing much happened in Sweet Alps. That night had been a one off, weird as fuck thing, that probably would never happen again.

Pinching the bridge of his nose, Asher closed his eyes, taking another deep breath. It wasn't like I could even blame the man. I had been acting like a bona fide brat with him, and fuck all if I knew why he brought that side out of me. Even as a kid, I hadn't possessed one ounce of a bratty bone.

"We aren't even going to discuss how cold I can imagine that water is." Finally he looked at me, keeping his voice calm and steady.

Rolling my eyes at him, I snarked, "Don't even say anything about me catching my death of a cold. We all know that's an old wives' tale, and you, doctor, should know that better than anyone."

"I was going to remind you that your body's immune system isn't one hundred, what with being shot and the massive amount of blood you lost. Sitting in freezing cold water isn't good for most people. We aren't going to discuss the fact that you just took off, without a word as to where you were going, and vanished. But know this, you pull that shit when I'm your official Daddy, and I'll blister your ass. And not in the fun

way. You'll be taking a pillow with you to sit down comfortably."

My face flamed at the image of me stretched out over his slim lap, ass in the air, as his hand came down hard on my cheeks. Fuck me if that didn't make my cock fill with blood and stand at embarrassing attention.

Asher glanced at it, his lips smirking.

"Home." He pointed a finger in the general direction of the woods. "Now."

Opening my mouth, I was about to voice some kind of protest, but he shook his blond head and cut me off at the pass. Waving his finger with more emphasis, he sharply told me, "Don't. Do not argue with me, Gabriel –"

"Gabe!" That did get a growl out of me, because I hated being called by my given name. My dad did it – he was the only person that did it – and I fucking hated it. My dad did it despite me telling him repeatedly that I preferred Gabe.

Asher took another loud breath in. Boy, I did seem to make him sigh an awful lot.

"Gabe," he amended, and I nodded slightly in acknowledgement. "We've been out here long enough. We're both chilled. How does hot chocolate, comfy pj's, a nice chat about wants, expectations, and rules sound? Followed by some time for you to be little? Maybe a movie, your choice? Or we can play with some of the new toys Ryan brought you?"

Well...that all sounded good except for the talking part, but I knew we couldn't avoid it for much longer. We weren't getting anywhere by avoiding it.

And the man had said hot chocolate. The goosebumps prickling all across my skin were a testament to just how cold I was. That and my flagging dick. Thank the Goddess that thing was shrinking down to a manageable size – well, not really, because even soft it was still pretty meaty – but getting hard at the mention of being spanked as punishment was... nope, wasn't going there right now.

“With marshmallows?” Because I took my hot chocolate seriously, and if he made hot chocolate without marshmallows we had nothing further to discuss about anything.

“Mini ones. And whipped cream.”

Shifting back into my bear form, I nodded my head in agreement and ambled in the direction of home. I was pretty sure I heard Asher mumbling something about stubborn, pigheaded alphas, and bratty littles. But I ignored him and kept walking. His cat loped by me, looking back every few feet to make sure I was still following him.

Chapter Fifteen



Asher

Swirling the whipped cream over the steaming cup of hot chocolate, I made a nice little mound over the mini-marshmallows before calling it good. The amount of sugar in this one cup made my teeth hurt just looking at it. While it was well over the amount of sugar I would want my boy to have most days, Gabe deserved a little extra sweetness today.

He entered his living room after changing into a pair of well-worn gray sweats and a t-shirt with his company logo stretched across it. I tried not to stare at the distinct outline of his thick dick in those sweats, and silently thanked whoever the fuck was responsible for the invention of sweatpants.

I would have preferred for him to change into some of his little clothes, but we were about to have a grown-up conversation, so I allowed him to have his suit of armor without commenting. Handing him the hot mug, I sat across from him on his U-shaped couch. The thing took up most of his living room, and was comfy and soft. He had a dark coffee table in the middle space between it, and the middle cushion faced the wall where a huge television hung there.

Sipping my own mug of chocolate, minus the mound of whipped cream, I gave him a minute to sip his own sugary concoction. My plan for after our shift had been for him to have some little time. But we couldn't keep putting off talking about rules and expectations any longer, and I would rather

have it all out of the way before he slipped into his little headspace.

Finally, after a minute of us both quietly sipping our warm concoction, I broke the silence. “Do you even want a Daddy?”

Well, probably not the best way to break the ice, and it hadn't been how I had originally planned to approach this, but Gabe was throwing up mixed signals left and right. Better to cut right to the heart of things.

His startled amber eyes flew up and he stared at me in astonishment. “I...what?”

Leaning forward, I placed my cup on a coaster on the coffee table, then settled back comfortably on the couch, my legs curled up under me. I repeated the question.

“I...” he was biting his bottom lip again, and this time I let him be. Finally, he nodded his head. His voice was soft, and a bit wobbly, his Adam's apple bobbing, “Yes. In theory. I mean, I don't have any practical experience with having one.”

“But you are open to having one?”

Instead of answering, he nodded his head. It looked like he hadn't bothered with running a brush through the brown locks. His hair was still going every which way on his head, and he looked adorably ruffled.

“And you agree that we are fated mates?”

Instead of answering, he took a big swig of his chocolate. A white mustache of marshmallow or whipped cream, or both,

appeared above his top lip. His tongue darted out and he tried to lick it off.

This man was so fucking adorable I wanted to squeeze him. “You felt the same thing I did that night?”

“Yes, I felt it, but –”

Holding up a hand to stop him, my voice was firm. “If you’re about to tell me all the things fated mates can do to ensure their bond doesn’t form, and to walk away, don’t bother. That’s not happening.”

His lips pursed together, the little bit of white mustache still left there, pulling down with the movement. “I get a say in this too, bossy britches.”

Raising my brow at him, I said nothing, just stared at him hard. He might not be in little headspace, but I never stopped being a Daddy.

Huffing, he rolled his eyes and waved his mug at me in a silent nod to continue.

“I think you need some time to be little today,” I told him, watching as his eyes grew wider. “It’s Friday, and you’re cleared to go back to work on Monday. I’m sure you’ll have plenty of stresses and catching up to do.”

“Didn’t you need to work this week?” He was still frowning at me, something he seemed to do quite often. I didn’t know him well enough yet to know if it was his natural state, or if it was just me that put that look of consternation on his face.

Leaning forward to snag my cup, I swallowed another sip of my chocolate. “My partner is covering. This was an emergency, and I was needed here. You needed me here.”

He rubbed two fingers across his brow, back and forth, and I stared at his long, thick fingers. I felt a trickle of slick between my ass cheeks staring at the sight of those thick fingers. Imagining how they would feel inside me, stretching me, filling me up. Heat washed over me, and I fought the urge to fan myself with a hand.

Everything on this man was thick. In actuality, he was an inch shorter than Brendan, who was six foot five. But Gabe was broader than Brendan, more muscled, just... more. He seemed supersized. And even though I was tall for an omega, I still had to look up to him, which I loved. If Gabe wrapped me in his arms, his entire body could curl around me and hide me from view.

“You shouldn’t consider me an emergency,” he looked down at his lap, plucking at the faded material that covered his thigh. “I’m used to being on my own. Taking care of myself.”

There was something in his voice, his tone, an unspoken hurt and I wasn’t sure what had caused it. But this man had definitely been hurt. Deeply. By someone. Another Daddy? Maybe by more than one someone’s?

“You’re my mate, Gabe.” Moving to the middle section of the couch, I sat cross legged facing him. Close enough that I could feel the heat from his body. Could smell his delectable alpha scent. Musk, pine, and fresh earth. The scent had wafted

up from his sheets when I had pulled them off his bed last night, and if I stopped to sniff them before I dropped them into the washer that was my business.

The man smelled good! Like the kind of good, that when you got done fucking, you didn't change the sheets until that smell faded.

“You will always come first. Before my patients, or my business. Before anything. You will always come first.” It was the truth, and I needed him to hear it. If I had to say it every day for the rest of our lives, I would.

He swallowed hard, his teeth scraping that poor, red bottom lip of his, and his whiskey eyes glistened. Reaching a hand out, my finger scraped the marshmallow off his top lip, bringing it to my mouth to suck it off. I heard his sharply indrawn breath at my touch, and watched as the soft bulge in his sweats started to fill out. The outline of his dick thick and unmistakable.

“We don't even know each other,” his voice was low and raw, tinged with disbelief at my words.

“Doesn't matter. We're fated.”

“We don't even know if we're compatible,” he argued.

“We are.”

“How are you so self-assured about this?” he cried, dropping his head into his hands. “About everything?”

Shrugging, I ran a hand over the top of his soft hair, soothing. “I just am. I know what I want. And I don't let

anything stop me from getting it.”

He looked at me through his lashes. “And you think you want me? Us?”

“I wanted you before I knew we were fated.” Smiling gently, I tipped his chin up with a finger, “I thought I was making that pretty clear. Though you didn’t seem to appreciate my flirting attempts.”

Side-eyeing me, he blew out a breath. “Is that what you were doing? Sounded a lot like you just constantly telling me to put my coat on. Or, throwing acorns down on me. Those stung, by the way. Though, I will admit, I’m usually clueless when people are flirting with me, at least according to my friends. My flirt game is pretty weak.”

Not apologizing for my past behavior, I told him, “Well, you needed to put your coat on. We won’t even talk about you playing in an icy stream this morning. I can’t turn off the Daddy in me. Now, would you like to have some Daddy/little time? Get into some little pj’s, watch a movie, play, whatever you want to do.” Glancing at my watch, I saw the time. We still hadn’t touched on about a thousand things we needed to talk about, but I could feel Gabe was getting anxious. He didn’t believe the words I was saying to him. Maybe what he needed was proof of what I felt convinced could be between us?

“How about this, it’s almost lunch time. How about I fix us some lunch and after, we can play that new game Ryan brought you. Then you can play with some toys, or we can

watch a movie and chill on the couch until dinner. After dinner, a bath, a story and bed. You want to give it a try? See how we do as Daddy and little, and go from there?” With a smile that usually got me my way, I gave him the options.

“I thought you wanted to talk about rules and stuff?” He sounded like he’d rather have a root canal than talk about his feelings.

Nodding, because he was right, I cupped his jaw in my palm. “I think we can get by with the basics for today. Traffic light system for safe words. No punishments beyond a time out. We treat it like a scene at a club.”

At the mention of a scene and a club, something flashed in his eyes, and I felt him stiffen against my hand before he relaxed once more. Well, relaxed for him. He wasn’t what I would consider super chill to begin with.

Shaking his head, he mumbled, “Not like at a club.”

Frowning, my mind whirled with what was wrong, desperately trying to put pieces together. Had something happened to him at a club? In a scene? Gabe was an alpha, and not your typical little.

While it was easy to say the kink community was open about all kinds of things, and for the most part they were, there were still people who had prejudices. There were still people who kink shamed, even in a kink club.

The reality was, Gabe wasn’t your typical little. Any more than I was a typical Daddy. Though I had never had trouble

finding a little to scene with for a few hours. It never went further than that, because I was an omega and all the littles I had met so far had also been omegas. Sexually, it just didn't work for me. But it worked well enough for us each to be wrapped up in a scene and get a few hours of enjoyment.

But being an alpha little, especially one the size of Gabe? That had to be hard. Most Daddies were alphas, looking for omegas. "Did something happen at a club, baby bear?"

Looking at his lap, his hands clenched tightly together, he muttered, "I don't want to talk about it."

While every instinct I had wanted me to push on this, I backed off. Pushing Gabe wasn't going to get me the answers I was looking for. "Fair. So, you be little, and I'll be Daddy. How's that sound? No expectations, and the only rules are you listen to what Daddy says, and tells you. This is about you, Gabe, what you need. And I think you need to get into your little headspace." Squeezing the back of his neck in a gentle caress, I added softly, "I think you desperately need it."

He nodded.

Once again, in agreement, or defeat, or just to shut me the fuck up, I didn't know, but I would take the small victory. Regardless of the reason, he agreed, and my heart pounded madly in my chest realizing I was going to finally get to be this little's Daddy. He was surely the most precious little I had ever seen, and I couldn't wait to see him fully immersed in his headspace. The brief, quick glimpses I'd had the pleasure of

seeing hadn't been nearly enough. All they had done was fuel the fire that was burning in me, threatening to consume me.

This man was the whole package. My whole package. He was sinfully sexy with a mouth-watering body. He smelled like every temptation there was on earth. He was equal parts shy unsureness and strong, self-confidence, even though he didn't recognize it in himself. And he tasted like the best nectar of the Gods when I had blown him. I would swear I could still taste his sweet saltiness, and it made me crave more of him. Just thinking about it, the feel of that wide cock stretching my mouth, making me gag, had my ass cheeks sticky with slick.

Now I needed to get Gabe to realize it too, because there was still a hint of doubt in those light brown eyes of his. A touch of skepticism to the hard set of his jawline.

It was time to step up my Daddy A game.

Chapter Sixteen



Gabe

Choosing to keep my sweats on instead of changing into my little pajamas had caused frustration to flare in Asher's dark eyes. I had stood firm, not wanting to let him know that I only had two pairs of little pajamas, and they were both dirty. Besides, my sweats were comfy and warm.

Sitting at my dining room table, I swung my legs, though I had to sort of swing them back and forth sideways since they were so long. Asher had brought me my Pooh binky a few minutes ago, and I was sucking on it happily. Watching him move around my kitchen like he lived here, while I set up my new Candy Land game Ryan had bought me.

The board was colorful and had lots of yummy looking candy places to visit on it. Picking up the colorful plastic gingerbread men pieces, I popped my binky out of my mouth. "What color do you want to be...Asher?" I saw his back stiffen when I paused to figure out how I wanted to address him, and then landed on using his name.

Daddy was intimate, and I wasn't sure I was ready to address him that way yet. But it had been right on the tip of my tongue, and had nearly rolled easily off of it. Asher turned from the pan where he was cooking something that smelled yummy, and gave me his beaming smile. "Whatever, baby bear, Daddy isn't picky. You pick for me." He had none of the issues I did about addressing himself as Daddy.

Nodding, I picked up the blue and the red piece. “I’m blue, because it’s my fav’ite color, and you can be red.”

“Sounds good.” Asher placed two plates at the opposite end of the table. “Come eat first, and then we can play.”

Moving down I saw he had placed my food – grilled cheese, cut in triangles – on my plastic Pooh and friends plate. I liked this one the best, because it had all the characters from the Hundred Acres Woods. I was trying to find stuffies of all of Pooh’s friends, but I had only managed to find Eeyore, Piglet, and Tigger. And Pooh, of course. I had lots and lots of Poohs.

He was just so cute, and cuddly, and sweet. Pooh didn’t scare the other animals, because he was a relatively small bear, besides his round tummy. Some days, I wished I was Pooh when I shifted, with lots of friends to play with and keep me company.

My friends always reminded me of Pooh’s friends, though I would never tell them that. Ryan reminded me of Piglet because he was sweet and my bestie, and always tried to see the positive side of things. Quinn was without a doubt Eeyore, with his sarcastic, eye rolling personality. Sure, he didn’t mope around like the donkey, but there was just something about the two of them that seemed similar. And Wade was, without a doubt, Tigger. Bouncy, full of sass, and didn’t give a fuck about knocking someone over with his attitude.

Picking up a triangle of sandwich, I bit into it, moaning as the melted cheese hit my tongue. “Yummy.”

Asher grinned at me, taking a bite of his own sandwich. “I placed an order for some groceries to be delivered for dinner. I was thinking something easy. Chicken nuggets and fries. I can pop them into the air fryer. Sound good?”

“Nuggies!” I found it surprisingly easy to slip into my little headspace with Asher.

“I figured you would like nuggies,” Asher took a drink of his water, and I picked up my sippy cup, mimicking him. The milk was cold on my tongue, and I wrinkled my nose, pushing the cup away. “Don’t like milk. Yucky.”

“It’s good for you. It makes your bones strong.”

“Blech.” Shaking my head, I pushed the cup further away from me. I kept the stuff for cereal and cooking, not drinking.

“Water or juice?” Asher questioned, picking up my cup and pushing away from the table. At least he wasn’t going to make me drink cooty milk. One Daddy point for that.

“Juice, please, Da...Asher.” Phew, that was close, and that word just wanted to spill right out of my mouth. Nope, I wasn’t thinking about it now. That was a big problem, and I wasn’t dealing with big problems at the moment. Only little problems.

Asher slid my sippy in front of me, now filled with cold apple juice, and I sucked it down. “T’ank you.”

“You’re welcome, sweetheart. Daddy will remember no milk to drink for you. Even though I’m not happy about it.”

“It’s ucky,” I insisted, because it really was. Even adding chocolate couldn’t save it for me.

“So,” he went back to eating his sandwich, before it got cold, “how old are you? When you’re little, just so Daddy knows.”

Gulping, I looked across the table at him with wide eyes.

“There’s no right or wrong answer, baby bear.” He must have seen the moment of panic flash across my face. “It’s just helpful for me to know. We didn’t talk about all the things we should have – again – and that’s Daddy’s fault. I don’t usually make these rookie mistakes, but you seem to make me forget myself.”

Instead of answering him, I held up three fingers. Ryan was about six when he regressed, but I was much younger. And I had felt self-conscious when he had asked my age.

“That’s a great age,” Asher commented, picking up the other half of his sandwich. “Do you use pull-ups or diapers? I know you said no last night, but you hesitated. You can tell me if you do.”

Feeling the heat run across my face, I shook my head, popping a bite of grilled bread in my mouth. Chewing meant I didn’t have to answer for a few seconds.

“Baby bear,” Asher’s voice was soft, but told me he wanted me to answer him with actual words. Bah, words. Words were so overrated.

“I don’t use diapers,” I whispered, scraping my teeth over my bottom lip. “But I like pull-ups, sometimes. I don’t go

potty in them, I'm a big boy.”

“It’s okay if you did go potty in them,” Asher assured me, not looking at all upset by anything I had just said. He probably wasn’t. Even though he was younger than me, I had a feeling he had been a Daddy a long time, and had probably had more than one or two littles in his time. The way he had casually thrown out the words *scene* and *club*, made me think he played at Jamie’s club, often and frequently. That was probably where he and Brendan had met. “When do you like wearing them?”

“Um, if I’m really tir’d, or I don’ feel good.” Admitting that was easier than I had thought it would be. The only other person I talked to these things about was Ryan. And while I had worn one of my pull-ups once or twice on our playdates, I didn’t know if his Daddy knew I wore them or not.

“I wish I had known when you were in the hospital,” Asher told me, reaching out and squeezing my hand briefly, then releasing it just as fast. Every time we touched, there was still that little bit of an electrical shock. Now it was more like when you touched something and got zapped by static electricity, and not like the lightning zap that first time. It still made my tummy feel funny, and my dick want to chub up in my pants.

“It’s okay. I just like the...I don’ know...the feeling of them. They make me feel...” shaking my head, I couldn’t find the right words for how wearing them made me feel.

“Safe?”

Was that the correct word? “Maybe, yes, prob’ly.”

We finished the rest of the simple but delicious meal in silence. Asher cleaned up our plates, loading them into the dishwasher while I waited impatiently in front of the game. Shuffling the stack of cards, I placed them face down in the middle of the board.

“Okay,” Asher slid into the seat across from me, “how do we play this?”

Walking him through the easy game, we ended up playing two rounds, with each of us winning once. When I suggested a tie-breaker, he looked at the time. “Let’s save that for another day. How about a movie, and maybe the LEGO set that Ryan gave you. We can put it together while we watch.”

“You want to help me do LEGO?” I wasn’t even sure my wide hands would be able to deal with all the little pieces of blocks. Crayons had been a nightmare for me, until Ryan had gotten me the larger, fatter ones that he used at the daycare for the little kids. They had worked much better for me.

“Sure do,” he told me, closing the lid on the game, “I’ve spent many hours of my life putting together LEGO sets with my little brother. They’re fun.”

“I don’ know if I’ll be able to do them.” Holding up my hands, I spread my fingers wide. “My hands are really big.”

Asher stood in front of me, and put his hand against mine. His was so much smaller, his fingers not even reaching the tops of mine. I looked like a giant next to him. And Asher wasn’t short, like most omegas. But where he was lean, I was all wide bulk.

Seeing our hands like this, touching, it would have been so easy to curl my fingers around his, to hold his hand in mine. The big part of me wanted to. Wanted to curl my hand around his, pull him tightly up against me, and kiss his lips like we had last night. The other part of me – the little part – was wallowing in having a Daddy all to myself, giving me all his attention, and letting me find peace in being little. In not having to think about any big problems, or any problems at all. It made me all warm inside, and I wasn't ready to come out of that headspace yet.

“My brother's an alpha too,” Asher told me, stepping away and putting a couple of inches of distance between us. His high cheekbones were tinged with pink, the pupils of his eyes dark and round. “Not as big as you, but he's big. At least he was the last time I saw him. If there's any really small pieces, I can help you.”

That seemed like what a Daddy would do. I knew it was something Brendan would do for Ryan, so I followed Asher over to my comfy couch. I wasn't sure when he had put the LEGO box on the coffee table, but it was already there waiting for us. The sight of Merida on the cover, her red hair bright, and her bow in her hand, made my heart happy.

“What movie do you want to watch, baby bear,” Asher asked, remote in hand.

“*Brave*,” I didn't even hesitate or think about it. It seemed fitting since we were putting a Merida LEGO set together. Besides, this was my favorite movie. Asher had made me sit

through one of his favorite movies – and okay, I *had* liked it despite the annoying princess – but if he didn't like this movie, we were going to have some serious issues. "Disney channel."

Asher queued the movie up and started it. My eyes were glued to the screen, as he sorted the LEGO pieces out. Finally tearing my eyes away from the TV, I clapped my hands excitedly when I saw what Asher had placed on one side of the pieces. "Daddy! It has her bow!"

That word had finally slipped out, and I wanted to take it back, but I also didn't. Somehow it just felt right.

"I take it she has a bow and arrow?" he asked me, beaming brightly. Had he not been paying a bit of attention to my movie? He didn't say a word about me calling him Daddy, but I could tell by his bright smile and shining eyes, he was pleased by my slip.

"She does!" I told him enthusiastically. "And she has little brothers t'at turn into bears – but that's not why I like it, they are black bears – and her mommy is really nice. And there's a pretty black horse with a white snout and legs, named Angus, and she doesn' need a prince. She is brave all by herself."

Ryan always wanted to watch cartoons with cars, or fire trucks, or talking dogs that were firemen. He loved fire trucks with a passion, which I did not get at all. But each to their own. If we did watch a princess movie, my bestie wanted one that had a prince swooping in to save the day. I usually just watched this one when I was alone, so I might have gotten a bit carried away telling Asher all about it.

Sighing softly, I whispered, “I wish I was brave like her.”

Asher turned to me, a frown marring his perfect features. “Baby bear, you are brave. Look at what you did for that wolf cub. You saved his life. You put yourself in grave danger. Daddy doesn’t even like to think about what could have happened to you that night. I think you’re the bravest person I’ve ever met.”

Before I could think about how to even respond to that, other than to start blinking rapidly at the heat prickling behind my eyes, and to rub at the lump that was in the middle of my chest, a sharp knock sounded at my front door.

Eyes wide, I stared at Asher in horror. Who was here? Whoever was here was going to see me with all my toys out.

“Easy, baby bear,” Asher ran a hand down my arm, in a soothing gesture. “It’s probably the grocery delivery. You’re fine, just relax. Daddy will get the door. You keep playing and watch your movie.” Kissing the side of my head, he unfolded himself from where he had been sitting on the floor in front of the coffee table.

Hearing the sound of a voice tinged with a British accent, followed by the melodic sound of a child, I knew it had to be my neighbors. What were their names? Sebastian? And Matthew? Either way, I should probably greet them and see why they had stopped over.

Shaking my head, I tried to come out of my headspace and be big again. Gah, I hated being jerked out of little space. I

much preferred to ease out of it at my own pace. Truthfully, I preferred to drift off to sleep as a little, and wake up big.

Shuffling slowly to the door, I could see Asher had it pulled open just enough so that you couldn't really see inside. I heard, "We just wanted to thank him personally for what he did for Matty. We would have dropped by earlier, but thought a few days for a lie in and a kip was needed."

"These are from my Uncle Quinn's bakery," the child's voice piped in, "and they are quite lovely. His scones are quite impressive. For an American."

Blinking at the way the child spoke, sounding very grown up, I came up behind Asher. Sensing my presence, he glanced at me over his shoulder.

"Ah, you're awake," he lied smoothly, holding a huge gift basket wrapped in cellophane. I recognized Quinn's bakery logo on the side. The basket appeared to hold an assortment of scones, muffins, cookies, and what Lachlan had deemed better-than-sex brownies.

The man wasn't lying. Quinn's brownies were decadently sinful. Though Quinn claimed the ones he had made that had caused Lachlan's declaration were ones he only made for special occasions and once in a while. Still, he had put the title on his logo. Home of the better-than-sex brownies. As a selling point, it wasn't a bad one.

"This is Sebastian and Matty Hollingsworth." Asher introduced them. "The boy you saved."

Smiling, I got a good look at the boy in question. I had only seen him briefly that night, and he had been in his shifted form. He'd been a blur of black fur, blending into the darkness of the night, as he had run into the woods away from danger.

He was tall, and good Goddess, if he wasn't the spitting image of Jamie Sinclair – all the Sinclairs since they were identical quads – I would eat my hat. Black hair, and the Sinclair ice blue eyes stared back at me, his smile wide and dazzling, and slightly crooked.

“Thank you for what you did for me that night,” he told me, his accent cute and warm. “Your bear was lovely. I've read all about Kodiak bears before, but I had never seen one in person before then.”

“Oh, well,” stammering, I rubbed a hand over the back of my suddenly blazing hot neck, “um, it was nothing. I mean, you're welcome. Thank you for the goodies. I love your... Uncle Quinn's bakery. He's a good friend of mine, so I go there probably more than I should.” Patting my rock-hard stomach, I told myself to stop rambling like an idiot.

But there were three sets of eyes staring at me. And I'd stumbled over calling Quinn his uncle, remembering at the last minute that this kid was Jamie's.

This was the guy Wade was all up in arms about. Honestly, he seemed nice enough. Wow, I really needed to go through my messages and catch up on all the tea. Sebastian wasn't an overly tall omega, and he was a tad on the skinny side. He had wavy hair, a short, dark beard, and hazel green eyes. He was

cute, but his looks dimmed standing next to Asher's golden beauty.

"We didn't mean to disturb you," Sebastian was saying, in what I thought sounded like a very posh accent, "we just wanted to see if there was anything you needed, and to drop this round as a thank you. I would also like to take care of any medical bills you have pertaining to your gunshot wound."

Shaking my head, I assured him, "That's not necessary."

"It was our fault you got hurt." He insisted.

"You weren't the one holding the gun, so it wasn't. I didn't do anything special. It was no more than anyone else would have done."

Asher wrinkled his nose and snorted loudly, and I could tell he had a different opinion on the matter, but he kept his mouth shut.

"Jamie has lots of money," Matty interjected, "it would be no bother for him to pay for you being hurt."

"Matthew," Sebastian's voice held a warning tone only a parent could master. Or a Daddy.

Matty's blue eyes flew to his father. "What? It's true. I've seen his financials. He's doing right jolly good for himself. He won't miss a few thousand."

Sebastian pinched the bridge of his nose, not unlike Asher had done earlier, and sighed heavily. "Do we need to have another discussion about you hacking into things you shouldn't?"

“You said no more government agencies,” Matty reasoned, shrugging his narrow shoulders, “you didn’t say anything about Jamie’s bank, or his club’s financials.”

“Goddess, you hacked into his club?” Sebastian sounded like a parent at the end of their rope, and I bit my lip to keep from chuckling at their exchange. Especially since Matty couldn’t be more than eight or nine, and had apparently already hacked a government agency? Is that what kids nowadays were doing? Didn’t they play video games, like normal kids?

“Only for a minute,” Matty sighed, “he shut me down pretty quick. He’s got extremely good cyber security. I got in three different times, and he knocked me out within seconds. I’ll get past him eventually.”

“Don’t count on that,” Sebastian muttered, smiling tightly. “Well, please send your bills over when you get them, and we’ll leave you to the rest of your evening. I don’t think a simple thank you can convey my gratitude. You saved my son’s life, and nothing will ever be repayment enough.”

Closing the door after they left, Asher leaned his back against it. “Well, there’s no doubt of that child’s parentage. He is definitely a Sinclair.”

Nodding, I agreed, taking the basket of treats and setting it on the counter bar in the kitchen.

Facing Asher, I saw he was fanning his face. “Is it hot in here?”

“I don’t think so,” I told him, standing in front of him, “and I tend to run hot. But it feels okay.”

He hadn’t moved, and he looked breathtaking. His cheeks were flushed a rosy color, his eyes wide, his hair perfectly mussed. And he smelled divine. At first, I had thought the scent was coming from the gift basket, and some of the sugary smell had been. But now I realized most of it was coming from Asher.

The sweet, honey scent was surrounding him, surrounding me. It made my mouth water, and my cock hard, tenting my sweat pants. Thank fuck that had happened after my unexpected guests had left. That would have been embarrassing.

“Oh fuck,” Asher whispered, his eyes wide, as he realized what must be happening to him about the same time I did. “I think...”

Pinning him against the door with my heavy body, my hands rested on the wood beside his head. I could feel the heat of him through our clothes. Could smell him everywhere. Desire shot through me, clouding my mind. My brain felt foggy and sluggish. My dick felt like it was throbbing in time with my heartbeat. Only one thought ran clearly through my head.

Mate.

Fuck.

Claim.

Breed.

“Are you in heat?” I rasped, bending my head down closer to his, running my nose down the side of his neck. Over his mating gland, which was pronounced and fluttering rapidly. As rapidly as I could feel his heartbeat against our tightly pinned chests.

Blinking, he stared up at me, his eyes so dark they looked like molten chocolate kisses, his pupils blown. Running his tongue over his lips, he breathed out, “I...not a full blown one, but something is definitely happening. My heat’s not due until November.” He swallowed, shaking his head to clear it, “I’m on birth control. It’s not due until November.”

“It’s the fated mates thing. A mini-heat.” My lips captured his before I could think about anything else. I needed to taste him. Just him.

He was as delicious as I had imagined, like candy, without my cum tainting the natural essence of him. He moaned quietly, a needy, desperate mewl. Swallowing the sound, my tongue learned every inch of his mouth, every crevice, and hollow. I couldn’t stop kissing him, and he clung tightly to me. My breathing sped up faster than it already had been. We lost track of time as we leaned against the door, tasting and teasing each other, hands roaming aimlessly.

Asher moved restlessly against me, rubbing, clutching at me desperately. I pushed him into the hardness of the wood with my body. Flexing my hips, I scraped my dick against his, groaning as our cocks rubbed together through the thin material of our sweats.

Asher going into heat, or having what some people described as a mini heat, had always been a possibility. But I'd forcefully pushed it to the back of my mind. Thinking if it happened, we'd deal with it.

A mini heat sometimes was brought on when fated mates found each other. While Fate might have made it so people could walk away and break a bond before it had a chance to fully take hold, She wasn't stupid either. She had stacked the deck nicely in her favor. Throwing an omega's body into overdrive, causing them to go into some sort of varying degrees of heat – depending on who you asked – and making it nearly impossible for their alpha to resist them.

Resistance was the last thing on my mind. For the first time since meeting Asher, I didn't want to resist one fucking thing.

My brain had blipped into a haze of desire, want, and pure, raw lust for this man. This omega. My omega. My mate.

Asher brought one of his long legs up and hooked it over my hip, causing my cock to rub against his taint. I could feel the heat and dampness from his hole, and my cock aimed for it, like it had a road map straight to what it wanted.

Fuck, I needed inside him right fucking now.

Hefting him up by his thighs, I picked him up. Asher wrapped his legs around me in a tight vice grip. His legs while much thinner than mine, they were hard as steel with muscles from running. His fingers clung to my shoulders, digging in, and I loved the bite of his blunt nails against my skin. He was taller than me in this position, and I found it such a turn on

looking up at him. Grasping a handful of his ass in each palm, I kept him locked tightly against me.

Tearing my lips away from him, and gasping much needed air, I growled, “Tell me what you want, Asher?”

He moved against me like a snake, his legs tight, his torso in a sinuous dance. His hands slid up into my hair, tugging at it, and I gasped at the slight pain. His touch went straight to my cock, which was painfully tented in my sweats and begging to be set free. I would need to release it soon.

“Your dick buried so deep inside me, I’ll still feel you next week,” he nipped at my bottom lip, and my dick jumped in my pants, a wet spot forming from the precum I was leaking. “I want to be covered in your cum.”

“We need to get one thing clear,” growling, I tugged his head back just as roughly as his hands were pulling on mine, “I’m a top. Regardless of what I like to do in my downtime and in private. I don’t bottom. I’m not verse. It’s not up for discussion or debate. In the bedroom, I’m the boss. Understand?”

Asher threw back his blond head and laughed throatily, and my gaze was glued to his bobbing Adam’s apple. A rumbling sound was coming from deep inside his chest, vibrating where our skin touched.

Purring. He was fucking purring.

And fuck if the sound didn’t cause my already throbbing cock to jump and leak even more than it was already doing. It

was a heady, powerful feeling knowing that I made this stunning man purr.

He leaned into me, dragging me closer, his hot breath ghosting over my ear. Shivers ran across my skin.

“Oh, baby bear,” he whispered seductively, “let me assure you that whether you are big or little, top or bottom, I’m always Daddy. I can promise you I love to take a big, alpha knot as well as the next omega.”

Pulling back a little, he looked down at me, his pert ass bouncing in my hands as he writhed against me. “It’s sweet that you think I can’t top from the bottom. Wrong, but sweet. Now take me into the bedroom so I can ride that fat, juicy cock of yours, until I walk funny. Or better yet, can’t walk at all.”

“Yes, Daddy.”

Chapter Seventeen



Asher

Gabe tossed me onto his unmade bed, and I bounced a little, laughing from somewhere in the back of my throat. He was tearing at his clothes, watching me with hooded eyes heavy with lust. Legs spread, pushed up on my elbows, I watched as each delectable inch of him was unveiled to me.

His broad chest was first, covered in that thick, dark fur. It wasn't the first time I had seen his naked chest, of course, but this time – this time – I could touch him any way I wanted to. That patch of fur made a beeline down his rock-hard, etched stomach, like an arrow pointing the way to the best treat ever created. Dark, curly hair, a shade darker than the hair on his head surrounded his thick, gorgeous, dripping cock. It stood out proudly from his body, wide and long, the head an angry purple color.

Feasting my eyes on him, I licked my lips. The man was large, his body heavily muscled. But he didn't have muscles from hanging out at any gym. No, these were muscles carved out of hard, manual labor. And he was fucking beautiful. Like some Greek statue come to life, covered in thick muscles and mounds of hair for me to run my fingers through.

My mouth watered, my nipples tightened, and my hole fluttered and gushed. My dick was hard as a rock and throbbing. My sweats were stained with my fluids, both front and back.

Gabe put one knee on the bed, and grabbed me by my slender ankle. With a tug, he yanked me down to him.

“These need to come off,” he growled, pulling at the elastic at my waist and tossing my sweats over his shoulder. My shirt quickly followed.

Then he stopped, staring down at me, eyes wide and pupils blown. Laying back, I stretched my lean body, arching my back. My fingers tweaked one of my nipples, pulling at it, while my other hand slid over the wet head of my own cock.

Stroking, using my pre-come as lube, I tugged on my dick, moaning obscenely. Gabe watched the show I was putting on for him, his tongue licking his bottom lip. Leaning over me on the bed, he captured my lips with his in a demanding kiss, simultaneously slapping my hand away from my dick.

“Mine!” he growled, replacing my hand with his. His hand covered my entire dick, squeezing, measuring, and stroking. Gasping, I clung to him, marveling at his touch. The possessive way he had taken ownership of me had me nearly coming right then.

“Gabe, I need you,” I whined, breathless.

“Do you?” he teased, nipping my bottom lip, then moving onto the long column of my throat. He licked and nipped, driving me mad. When he sucked hard at the delicate skin over my mating gland, I nearly came off the bed.

“Enough!” I growled, yanking his mouth off me, and forcing him to look me in the eyes. He looked lust-drunk, amber eyes

wide and dark. Lips a deep red and swollen from our kissing, his face flushed. “I want you inside me right now, Gabe. I don’t need prep. I like a little burn, and I want to feel you stretching my hole with that massive cock. Besides, I’m practically gushing slick.”

Gabe’s eyes widened, and he snickered. “Massive cock?”

My hand gripped the appendage in question tightly, and he hissed, eyes nearly rolling back in his head. My fingers barely went around his thickness. “You have seen this thing, haven’t you?”

“Once or twice.”

Instead of giving me what I wanted, he jammed three fingers into my hole and it was my turn to hiss sharply.

“Fuck, yes!” Arching my back off the bed, I spread my legs as wide as they would go, bucking against his thick digits. Needing more.

“You’re so fucking wet, Asher.” He slid his fingers out, then slammed them back in when I mewled in protest. Clinging to his shoulders, I fucked myself on him, making loud, animalistic noises. I wasn’t a quiet lover, and I didn’t hold back now.

“You like that?” Gabe demanded, adding a fourth finger and all I could do was shake my head and babble nonsense. My balls were drawn up as tight as they could get to my body, and my spine tingled each time he pegged my prostate with those thick fingers of his. Fuck, I’d never been fisted before, but his

fingers were so big I felt like this was pretty close to what it would feel like.

“More!” Demanding, I reached my hand down and grasped his wrist, trying to force more of him inside me.

“Fuck, Asher,” Gabe growled, “I’m not going to fist you.”

My screamed protest died on my lips, when Gabe leaned over me and swallowed my cock down his throat. His wet, scorching mouth and his broad fingers was all it took and my cum was shooting down the back of his throat. He swallowed rope after rope of my cum, finally releasing my softening cock with a pop of his mouth.

Panting, I lay in a boneless heap, his fingers still deep inside me, stretching me wide. Watching as a dribble of my cum escaped his mouth and his tongue darted out to catch it.

Gently, he pulled his fingers from me, leaving me gaping and empty. I could feel my slick sliding down my taint and onto the backs of my thighs. Never had I ever been so wet and open for any alpha.

Reaching for him, I whined, “Gabe...”

He shot me a sinfully wicked grin, pulling my wide spread legs even farther apart, then draped them over his shoulders. Bending me almost in half, he filled my empty hole with his wide cock in one quick thrust of his hips.

Air escaped through my clenched teeth, and all I could do was drown in the pure ecstasy of being impaled by my alpha.

Heaven.

Pure heaven.

Mixed with a sweet burn of pleasure and pain, that even his fingers hadn't prepared me for. I could happily stay like this, filled to the brim with him, for the rest of my life.

Nothing else mattered in that moment, not the fact that Gabe had slid into me without the extra protection of a condom. Normally, I would demand it, but with him, right now, I didn't care about it. Didn't want it. Wanted to feel nothing between us.

All the things I knew about fated mates, heats, and the ridiculously high pregnancy rate even with the use of birth control, was pushed aside by the sheer pleasure of having Gabe filling me with his wide cock.

"Move!" I demanded, when he hadn't after that first thrust. Gabe's eyes were clenched tightly closed, his jaw locked. I tried to buck against him, but in this pretzel position it was nearly impossible for me to get any traction to move.

"Stop!" Gabe hissed, "or it's going to be over before it begins. Give me a second, Ash. You feel..."

When he remained silent, I whispered, "Like what?"

Blinking his eyes open, he stared down at me. Gone was the shy man I had witnessed in the past. Gone was the bashful, hesitant little that I had played with today. He was one hundred percent pure alpha.

I may have been giving him the orders, but he was the one in control now. And fuck if that wasn't a turn on. My body

shivered as I waited for him to give me – give us both – what we needed.

And when he did, it was like nothing I had ever experienced before.

His strokes were short and fast, and he nailed my prostate with each stab of his cock. Like the damn thing was flashing a red light at him, a beacon in the night. Curling my feet around his neck, I locked my ankles, arching against him with each stroke. Grasping his hard biceps in my hands, I stopped thinking, held on for dear life and enjoyed the ride.

When the base of Gabe's cock seemed to be getting bigger, stretching my rim farther than it had ever been stretched, burning enough that tears pricked my eyes, I screamed. My dick was bouncing against my stomach, and his knot was stretching me, stretching...oh Goddess, he was going to tear me in two!

“Fuck!” Gabe's voice was harsh against my shoulder, as he forced himself to stop moving, to be still. Our ragged breaths filled the room, where before it had been nothing but skin slapping against sweaty skin, and keening, guttural moans. “Fuck! I forgot a fucking condom. I need to pull out.”

When he tried, I screamed in pain, as his knot yanked at my tender, stretched, puffy hole. Clinging to him, I gasped, “It's too late for that.”

He looked down at me worriedly. “Do you need me to stop? Is it too much? I don't need to come. We can just wait for it to go down.”

Laughing roughly, which made Gabe clench his teeth and grab my hips, I ordered, “Don’t you dare stop. You feel so good, Alpha. You’re so perfect.” Stroking my hands down his arms, I soothed him. That frown of his was back, between those thick brows of his, and I smoothed it out with a finger.

“Fuck me, Gabe,” I kissed his chin, then the corner of his mouth. “Make me yours.” Nipping at his bottom lip sharply, I felt his cock jerk inside me, and he slipped the last way in, his knot locking us tightly together.

He moved slowly this time, short, little thrusts, and I knew he was making sure his knot didn’t catch on my rim and cause me any more pain. The burning had faded though, and in its wake was nothing but pleasure. Fullness. I was full of my alpha, my mate, and it was the most exciting, pleasurable thing I had ever felt in my life.

Reaching down, I tugged at my cock, and Gabe pushed into me, again and again. My thigh muscles were screaming from the position I was in, but I felt surrounded by Gabe on all sides. The heat of him engulfed me, the smell of him was all around me, on me, covering every inch of my skin. Sweat dripped from both of us, our breaths coming in nothing more than panting gasps.

Then I was coming, all my muscles tightening around him like one tightly pulled rubber band. Gabe’s dick got impossibly bigger, and then he was rigid above me, grunting harshly. His hot cum shooting inside me, warming me from the inside out, and I felt whole.

This.

This was what I had been waiting for my entire adult life.

This big, perfect gorgeous man.

My mate.

My alpha.

Gabe eased my legs off his shoulders, and rolled us, so that I was draped comfortably over him to wait for his knot to shrink.

Rubbing my cheek into the sweat matted fur that covered his chest, I felt blissed out. I wanted to stay like this forever. His hands stroked over my skin, my hair, and my fingers played with the silky soft hair on his chest for long, peaceful minutes.

Until Gabe whispered hoarsely, “This was a mistake. We shouldn’t have done this.”

Chapter Eighteen



Gabe

To say I was freaking the fuck out might have been the understatement of the century. My knot was still locking Asher and I together, my dick buried deep inside his tight hole, and it was gripping me like the best vice. And fuck it all, I could stay inside him the rest of my life and die a happy bear. His long limbs, covered in a thin sheen of sweat, were sprawled over me, his cheek resting in the hair of my chest. The fingers of one of his hands repeatedly threaded through the curly hair that covered my skin there.

At my words, all his muscles tightened including his hole, zinging aftershocks through my dick. Resulting in me shooting more cum inside him, though not as violently as I had come earlier. More of a steady dribble.

Asher raised his head and searched my eyes. His expression was incredulous, his eyes wide, before they narrowed at whatever he thought he saw in my expression. His lips pursed in a hard line of displeasure.

“Are you fucking kidding me right now?”

Yep, he was angry. Not that I blamed him. My dick was buried about as far inside him as it could get without coming out the back of this throat. The sex had been even better than I imagined in any of the wet dreams I had of him – and there had been plenty before I’d been shot.

But all of this was happening way too fast for me, and it had my head spinning. It felt like all of me was spinning – spinning completely out of control – and had been since the first night he had put his hands against my skin.

I needed space. Time to think. To process. To breathe.

To figure out if Fate had gotten it right or completely wrong.

To make sure Asher wasn't going to realize I wasn't what he wanted for a little, long-term, and end up breaking my heart. That was something I would just as soon avoid if I could. Call me a coward, but I didn't think I would be able to survive it.

Rejection was something I was all too familiar with, and frankly, it sucked. It hurt. It left scars that no one could see. But they were there, and they didn't really ever go away. You just learned how to continue on, each day, and block them out. Avoid the people and situations who had caused the hurt in the first place.

It was why my dad and I barely spoke, and had an almost non-existent relationship.

It was why I avoided Jamie Sinclair's kink club with a passion.

It was why I stuck to app hookups that offered no strings, and seldom even names.

But Asher had barged into my life without a second thought. Made himself right at home, barely asking my opinion on the subject. And damn, if I wasn't getting used to him being there.

Asher would be too easy to love. And I feared his rejection would be something I would never get over. At least not for a very long time.

I had never been anyone's first choice. I had never been the ideal alpha or perfect little. I had been a disappointment to my dad from the moment of my birth.

I had absolutely no reason to believe that Asher would be any different than anyone before him. That the only reason he was here now was anything other than some deluded sense of necessity. Fate said we were meant to be together, so now he was stuck with me.

Fate gave us an out, and I was going to make it easy for him to take it. Before I got anymore into my feelings than I already was.

Asher raised up on my chest, then huffed out air sharply through his teeth. Wiggling his hips, he tried to move away from me, but my knot was still clamping us firmly together.

Stilling his movements with my hands, because I didn't want him to hurt himself and all his writhing around wasn't going to make my knot go down anytime soon, I exhaled sharply. "Stop that. That's not going to make my knot go down. You're just making it worse."

Asher pursed his lips at my growly tone, glaring down at me with those dark brown eyes of his. Finally, his muscles loosened, and he laid his head back on my chest. Puffing out warm air against my sticky skin, he breathed, "Explain yourself."

Staring up at my bedroom ceiling, I blinked rapidly, pushing the hotness that burned behind my lids away. Because he just naturally spoke with the authority of a Daddy, and everything in me automatically wanted to respond to it. And I loved it and hated it about myself, at the same time. “We didn’t use a condom. You’re probably already pregnant.”

As explanations went, it was a complete cop out. The thought of stopping to put a condom on had entered my muddled thought process for about half a second. Normally, I was the poster boy for safe sex, always keeping my dick covered. But with Asher...yeah, I hadn’t given one fuck about the possibility of him getting pregnant. My main focus had been sliding into his hot, wet warmth and breeding my omega. Everything else had taken a backseat to be dealt with later.

He was silent for so long, I leaned my head up to see if I could read his emotions on his face. He was staring at the opposite wall, his hand clenching and unclenching in my chest hair, tugging gently. Finally, he whispered, “I’m not pregnant. I’m on birth control. And shifters are immune to STDs, so there’s nothing to worry about.”

Snorting, I tossed an arm over my eyes. “Are you joking? I might have believed that if every single one of my friends hadn’t met their fated mates, given into whatever this not-quite-a-heat thing is, and bam! Pregnant. I mean, you’re their kids’ damn doctor. You do know that Quinn and Wade were both on birth control and still got pregnant? Ryan wasn’t, but that is only because he was told he was infertile. Fate doesn’t

fuck around when She decides something. Birth control or not, odds are you just got pregnant.”

“I’m not pregnant,” he insisted once more, his voice forceful. Asher clearly was riding the I’m-in-denial-train. “I don’t plan on becoming pregnant for at least a couple of years. And even if I am, we’ll deal with it. But I’m not.”

“We’ll deal with it?” Moving my arm, I peered at him skeptically. “You don’t even know if I want kids. You don’t know anything about me. We’ve barely met. You haven’t even taken the time to ask me how I feel about any of this. Or what I want. You’ve just taken over my life. Practically planned a future out for us, and you haven’t stopped to consider that I might not want any of it. I’m kicking myself for getting caught up in any of this.”

Well, that seemed to do the trick for making my knot wilt like a flower caught in one-hundred-degree temperatures. Asher must have felt it too, because he put enough distance between us that my dick slipped from his body in a rush of cum and slick that pooled in my groin area.

He moved over to the opposite side of the bed, putting even more distance between us. He sat, his back to me, feet flat on the floor. His arms wrapped around his chest, and he stared down at his bare feet. Not saying a word, just staring at the dark gray carpet of my bedroom.

Rubbing a hand over my forehead, I could feel a tension headache beginning to brew. Considering I had just had the

best, most mind blowing, sex of my life, I should be nothing but sated, relaxed, and well on my way to a nice nap.

Asher took a deep breath, the sound loud in the quiet of the room, his back muscles rippling with the movement. He seemed on the verge of saying something, then caught himself with a shake of his head. Silently he stood up and stalked to where his clothes had been tossed on the floor.

Sitting up, I watched his jerking movements with wary eyes. My chest felt tight with anxiety. And something else I couldn't readily identify and didn't have the emotional bandwidth to figure out. Not right now, at least. Pulling the sheet up, I pooled it around my waist, using it to wipe up some of our mixed fluids on my skin.

Asher pulled his shirt over his head with jerky movements, then ran his fingers through his messy hair. Even with sweat drying the blond locks that were mussed to hell and back, he still looked beautiful.

“Asher –” my voice sounded garbled and raw, but I needed to say *something*. To make him understand that I just needed a *minute*. Words, expressing my feelings, never came naturally to me. Sharing my deepest thoughts about *anything* wasn't something I did. Not even with the closest people in my life. Trying to articulate all I was feeling, my reasons for feeling them, left me tongue-tied and unsure of myself.

He held up one hand, “Don't, Gabe. Just don't.”

“I just need –”

He gave me a sad look, which had me shutting my mouth, and caused my stomach to do some kind of strange dip that I didn't like. "I know what you need, baby bear, I always have."

What could I even say to that? Continuing to stare wide-eyed at him, I tried to swallow around the lump that had formed in my tight throat.

A look of profound sadness washed over his face, and he roughly whispered, "Who hurt you so badly?"

"No one." Shaking my head, my fingers fiddled with the edge of the sheet, plucking the now damp spot away from my skin. Denying the truth had gotten easy over the years. So easy I could even sometimes lie to myself. But I wasn't ready to share my truths with him. Not yet. Did it make me a coward? I knew it did, but I couldn't change who I was deep down.

He nodded in resignation, but I could tell he didn't believe me. "I hope someday you'll trust me enough to tell me. That you'll let me in." Running his teeth over his bottom lip, he sighed, "I'm going to go."

"Asher, I—"

Fuck, I didn't know what I wanted. I had told him fucking him had been a mistake. But the thought of him leaving was making my chest hurt. Even though he was doing basically what I had been asking him to do for a week. What the fuck was wrong with me?

"I'm going to go," he repeated, but he didn't seem mad any longer, just sad and resigned. "My brother always told me that

I was too forceful. That I didn't always listen to what people were saying to me. That I did whatever I wanted to do, and just expected people to follow along. That I'm bossy, and arrogant, and well, a bunch of other things I don't need to go into. But I think he was right, as much as it pains me to admit that."

My mouth opened, but nothing came out. What did I say to all that? I had wanted him to leave from that first night in the hospital. Had wanted him to leave me alone, and he had flat out refused. Long before that night I had been doing my best to ignore him, while at the same time letting him get under my skin. Terrified of the feelings he stirred inside of me. All the things he made me want. Made seem possible.

Now he was finally doing what I had been asking him to do, and I felt like I wanted to throw up, or cry, or beg him to stay.

All of the above.

"I've done exactly that to you since the night you were shot, and we found out we were fated," he nodded his head, but it was a gesture aimed at himself and not me. Like he had just realized the answer to some puzzle about himself. "I've just bowled right over you, didn't hear you when you asked me to leave. When you said you weren't sure and needed a minute. So, I'm going to give you a minute. Forty-three thousand, two hundred of them, in fact."

My mind whirled in confusion, and I gaped at him. "What?" I croaked.

“You have one month, baby bear. One month to wrap your head around this.” He waved a hand in a circle in the space in front of him. “All of this. You and me. Fated mates. Because this thing between us is happening. You’re my mate, and I’m yours. I’m your Daddy, and you, my sweet, stubborn baby bear, are my little. My perfect boy. So, figure your shit out because this is happening. And there’s not a damn thing you can do to stop it.”

Blinking at him, I could feel my mouth moving, but no words were coming out. I was like a fish out of water on the shoreline, flopping around. Slowly dying inside.

He paused in the doorway, turning back to look at me sadly. “You know, maybe you should watch that movie of yours again. Because I was paying attention to it, even though I know you thought I wasn’t. Fate and destiny, Gabe. Fate and destiny is what that movie is all about. It’s not just about being brave, which you are, by the way. You’re the bravest person I’ve ever met, except when it comes to your own happiness. I’m yours, and you’re mine. And I think I’ve known it since the first time I saw you. I was drawn to you like a moth to a flame. Have been every single time I’ve seen you anywhere. My soul knew that you were my destiny.”

All I could do was gape at him, his words running through my mind, pinging here and there.

“And you can call me bossy, and say I want to be in charge of things, but we really know that you hold all the power in this. Not because you’re an alpha asshole either. But because

you're my little and I'm your Daddy. One month, baby bear. And then I'm coming for what is mine.”

I wasn't sure how long I sat on my bed after I heard the sound of my front door opening and closing. Long enough for the cum and slick that I hadn't wiped up completely to dry on my skin and start itching. Long enough for the sun to go down and for darkness to paint the sky.

Instead of getting up and cleaning myself off, I yanked the blankets over my head, hiding from the world. Hiding from the world was my go-to method of dealing with anything that was hurtful. Hide away, until I'd pushed the feelings so far down they couldn't touch me. Then carry on like nothing had happened.

Reaching a blind hand out, I grappled until I felt the yarn of Chester and the fluff of Doc. Asher had made sure every day to place them on my nightstand so that they were waiting for me at bedtime. Pulling them both to my chest, I hugged them tightly, blinking back my stinging tears rapidly.

Snaking my hand out from underneath the blankets again, I stretched until I felt the hard plastic of my binky. Popping it into my mouth, I sucked loudly, sniffing even louder. Pulling my knees up to my chest, I curled into my stuffies, and let the tears I'd been holding at bay fall hotly down my cheeks.

I had been so wrong.

This hurt worse than anything those mean alpha Daddies and littles had said to me in the club that night.

It hurt worse than any of the anonymous online comments in the Daddy/little groups I had gone into, to try to connect with a Daddy. Or other littles to play with.

This hurt worse than my own father's rejection of me, blaming me for my birth and events beyond my control.

This hurt ten thousand times worse.

My bear grumbled and roared beneath my skin, unhappy with me and not afraid to voice his anger.

I wanted my Daddy.

I wanted my mate.

Had I just made the worst mistake of my life?

And what was going to happen in a month?

That thought repeated in my head until exhausted from crying, I slipped into a nightmare plagued sleep.

Chapter Nineteen



Asher

The glass of my front door rattled when I slammed it behind me, with more force than was probably necessary. But I needed to let out my frustration on something, and the door seemed the safest bet.

Breathing heavily, I was assaulted by the smell of Gabe still clinging to me. His natural scent. His cum. All of it mixing with mine made my dick harden and twitch in my sweats. They were still a bit damp from me leaking all over them earlier. I'd toss them in the laundry after I had a shower. Maybe the hot water would help relax me. My hole was still twitching, aching and feeling empty without Gabe's thick cock filling it up. His knot stretching it so deliciously.

I was angry.

Not with Gabe, but with myself.

I had done exactly what my brother always accused me of doing. Taking over, pushing, without a thought about the other person's feelings. Which was the farthest thing from the truth. Gabe's feelings, his happiness and well-being, were my top, number one priority.

Is it though? My cat sounded as annoyed with me as I felt. Not like you've been doing great in the Daddy department. What happened to rules? Limits? Any of this ringing a bell?

Wincing at my cat's reminder of just how spectacularly I was failing with all of that, I ran a hand through my hair in agitation. All of my rules as a Daddy seemed to fly right out the window when I was near Gabe. I had never handled a little the way I had been handling him. It wasn't right, and I would need to rectify it.

The man was more skittish than an unbroken, nervous horse. I didn't need to start off by not introducing expectations for him, or allowing him to voice any of his own. My behavior with him would be grounds to get me banned from my favorite kink club.

Instead, I had let my feelings, hormones, and my own omega needs take over.

Being near Gabe, just being in the same room with him, his scent around me, made me lose all control. And while Gabe seemed to lose all his shyness in the bedroom, outside of it, he very much needed a Daddy to guide him and take care of him. Not one who seemed to be flying blind, and making up rules as we went. I knew better, and I was too experienced with kink to have allowed this to happen. It was the first thing I planned to make up to him when the month I'd given him was up.

It didn't help that every bone in my body was screaming for me to turn around and run right back over to his house. To snuggle him and rub myself all over my mate. Already I was missing him. Our bond had definitely started forming. I felt off kilter not having him within my sight, near me. And waves of anxiety were rushing over our bond, and I knew they were

from him. It was killing me to not run back over there, and soothe him.

This was going to be the longest month of my life.

Pounding footsteps above me snapped my attention from my self-deprecating thoughts, and I glanced up to see Gabe's foreman, Stu, hurriedly coming down my stairs. Wiping his hands with a dusty towel, he looked worried until he saw me standing there. Probably due to my undeserved abuse to my front door.

I'd kind of forgotten there was still a crew working here today. All of my focus had been on my mate.

Stu slowed the last few steps, his gaze taking me in. I could only imagine what he saw. He wrinkled his nose slightly, then turned his face into a bland mask. Yep, the poor beta probably smelled my stink from across the room.

"Hey," I offered as a greeting, "I didn't realize you guys were still here. It's Friday night. Don't you have someplace you'd rather be?"

Stu chuckled, shoving the rag into the back pocket of his work jeans. He was probably in his late thirties or early forties, with dark red hair, sprinkled with a few strands of gray. "Is that your polite way of asking me to get the hell out of your house, Doc?"

The man had started calling me Doc from day one, and no matter how many times I had told him to just call me Asher, he had persisted. Once I had realized that Gabe had dubbed the

bear I had gotten him Doc, I hadn't minded in the slightest Stu's nickname for me.

Feeling shame creep up my neck at my rudeness, I shook my head. Hopefully my parents weren't looking down at me from above, scowling that they had taught me better manners, because they had.

"No, absolutely not. Honestly, I'm not even sure what time it is." It was still light out, but the sun was starting to dip down on the horizon. We were sort of in the in-between months, where the days were getting longer, and some days the temperatures felt like Spring, but could still surprise us with a cold snap.

"I'm just teasing you," Stu grinned, a hand resting on the banister. "I was just finishing up in the master and the... nursery? Future nursery? The third-floor master suite," he finally landed on. "Tidying up. It's done though, unless you want to change something. Our floor guy came in and finished up yesterday. Oh, and there's a quote on the kitchen counter from the garage contractor. He came out two days ago, took measurements and such. His card is with it. You still need to get the roof taken care of, but I think the boss man has you down for end of July or first week of August. Always better to do those when the weather is nicer. Might be hot as Hades up there, but better than trying to do it in the snow and rain."

"Future nursery," I answered his question, when he finished updating me on the progress I had missed. He didn't need to know it was a nursery for his boss and not future children.

Thinking of future children reminded me of Gabe's insistence that I had just gotten pregnant. How had I managed to let myself lose all control and common sense? I had knowingly let him knot me without a condom. Blaming the mini heat, fated mates hormones for my stupidity was what I was going with. The possible pregnancy issue I was absolutely not going to deal with until there was something to deal with. "Thanks for taking care of all this stuff this week. I really appreciate it."

"You were taking care of the boss man," he ran a hand through his hair. "Gabe is great, and a super boss, but he is the epitome of a bear with a sore paw when he gets so much as a snuffle. Cranky! None of us envied you this week. And we appreciated knowing he had someone looking out for him. Put our minds at ease. He's got some close friends, but they have families, you know? It made us all feel better knowing you were making sure he was all right."

Stu and the rest of the crew had always grilled me for updates on their boss when I would run across the street for something, when Gabe was resting, and I felt okay leaving him alone for a quick minute. It spoke volumes for how respected he was as an employer, and made my cat purr in pleasure for our mate. He seemed to have great employees working for him.

Stu had mentioned Gabe's close friends, but not any of Gabe's family. We hadn't discussed it, and when I had looked on his medical records for an in case of emergency contact, Ryan had been listed. Another thing to add to the ever-growing

long list of items to ask Gabe about. He had been correct when he had said we really didn't know each other well.

"That's an excellent description of him," running a hand through my messy hair yet again, I tried to stealthily put it to rights, knowing it was probably a lost cause.

"Well, I'll get out of your hair and let you get on with your evening," Stu started to go around me to make his way to the door. "I'm sure you want to get back over to Gabe."

"No, I'm...ahh...no," shaking my head, I put my hand on the smooth new rounded ball on top of the stair banister. Like the rest of the banister, it shone brightly under the decorative crystal chandelier in the foyer. "I'm staying here tonight. He's been cleared by his doctor. He's good to return to work on Monday." Not exactly the truth, but close enough.

I heard rather than saw Stu stop, and turn back to face me. When I looked over my shoulder, he had one hand paused on the front door knob, a strange expression clouding his face.

"Everything okay?" He seemed like he wanted to ask something, but was hesitating.

"Do you mind me offering you some advice where Gabe is concerned?" He looked uncertain and wary, but he wasn't shying away from meeting my gaze.

Turning to face him, the air left my lungs in a rush. The man wasn't stupid. He, and the rest of Gabe's crew, knew I had been basically shackled up with their boss for a week. And I reeked of Gabe, cum and slick.

Had I been paying any attention to my surroundings, and not focused on getting out of there before I changed my mind and climbed back into Gabe's bed, I would have waited until I was sure all of Carmichael Construction had gone home for the day.

But this man knew Gabe. By the easy way I had seen them work together when they had started the reno on my house, I could tell they had known each other for years. You didn't spend five to six days a week with someone for that long, and not get to know them.

Shoulders drooping, I nodded, "I would honestly love any advice you can throw my way."

Stu's shoulders wiggled with his snort of laughter. "Look it's not my business what's going on between you and Gabe, but well..."

"Yeah, I know you can smell me, and I haven't been hiding that I've been sleeping at his house. So, just give it to me. I'm sure we're the hot gossip for you guys right now."

"First, I would shut down any talk between the crew about Gabe with anyone, but especially with a client."

Wincing at his reminder that I was a paying client, I nodded solemnly.

"Gabe is one of the best men I know, certainly one of the best alphas I know. But he's a sensitive soul, and I think – I know – he has been hurt by people. He doesn't talk about it, but you can tell. Gabe isn't one to divulge much about his

private life, or anything really personal. But there's a hurt there that runs deep."

I certainly did know. Instead of saying anything, I just silently listened.

"Just be easy with his heart, Doc."

Eyes wide, I couldn't help the cry of indignation that flew out of my mouth. "Easy with his heart? That man is the most pig-headed, stubborn...stubborn..." at a loss for words I just repeated, "stubborn bear!"

Stu cackled at that, grinning like a loon, "That he is! Most people don't even realize that about him. They get suckered in by his shy looks, and his bashful blushes, and his quiet, soft-spoken words. They forget that he is an alpha underneath all that, and a bear one at that. He may not carry himself like one all the time, but it's there, Doc, just under the surface. But just give him time. Sometimes he likes to have some space to think about things, chew them over for a bit, before he comes around. I promise if you do that, the wait will be worth it. Because Gabe's one of the best there is. Maybe the best man I know, come to think of it. And he deserves someone like you, Doc, he really does. Even if he thinks he doesn't."

Shuffling my weight from side to side, I told him, "You don't even know me, Stu."

"I know enough. You get to know someone real good when you spend weeks in their space. Trust me on that." Tipping his head at me, he ended with, "Have a good night, Doc. I'll see you Monday to go over any details you aren't happy with, and

any questions you have. Seven a.m. work for you? I'll make sure you get to work on time. Can't keep the little kiddos waiting."

"That works fine, and thank you, Stu," I told him kindly.

"Good luck, Doc. But something tells me you don't need it."

I wasn't sure how long I stood there staring at my closed door after Stu had departed. Finally, after making sure all the downstairs doors were locked up, I made my way up the two flights of stairs to the third floor.

The entire floor had been turned into a master suite, with a luxurious spa bathroom, reading nook, fireplace, and a massive walk-in closet. Walls had been knocked down, and some added and now there were only two doors that separated the hallway on this floor. One on each side and directly across from each other.

Pausing outside the one on the left, I slowly turned the knob. The walls had been painted a robin's egg blue, and deep navy carpet, plush to the touch, covered the floor. While I had left the hardwoods throughout everywhere else, this was one room I had wanted carpeted. My boy didn't need to be playing on hardwoods and bruising his knees.

Standing in the middle of the room, I turned in a small circle, smiling. Imagining what it would look like with the extra-large furniture that would soon fill it. Books and toys, and clothes to fill the closet and dresser that would soon be in the corner. A rocker over there, wide enough a Daddy could rock his little, while reading to him before a nap or bed. Pictures on the wall,

maybe some wall decals. And curtains to cover the large windows, to block out the sun during naptime.

I knew exactly how I wanted to decorate this room after spending a week with Gabe. I would place the order tonight for everything I wanted and would need.

This room was for Gabe, and I was going to make it perfect. And I had one month to get it done for him.

Chapter Twenty



Gabe

This might go down in the books as one of the worst weeks of my life.

I was an idiot.

I had sent my mate – my fated fucking mate – away.

My Daddy. I had sent my Daddy away.

Yeah, there was no denying it. I had already called him that. The word slipping out of my mouth like melted butter. And deep down I wanted him to be my Daddy, I knew it.

And I had sent him away.

So, I could *think*.

Grr, thinking was fucking overrated.

What the ever-loving fuck was wrong with me?

The entire week I had been plagued by nightmares, that left me waking up in a cold sweat. I could never remember them clearly. I would just jerk awake, covered in sweat, my heart pounding, and the most profound feeling of loss stealing my breath away.

I found no joy in shifting, or even trying to get into my little headspace each night. When I did try to play, color, or even watch my favorite movie with my binky and my stuffies, it just felt all wrong. Like something fundamental was missing.

Like your Daddy? My bear groused unhappily.

Worst of all, I was snapping at my crew, when they had done nothing wrong.

Truthfully, I should have been praising the fuck out of them. The week I had been off, and basically unavailable, Stu had kept everything running smoothly and on time. All my guys had kept things going, and I was grateful to them for it.

Which was why I was walking into Quinn's bakery at seven on a Friday morning. I planned to suck up to my guys with coffee and baked goods. Quinn didn't make donuts, but he made scones and muffins that were to die for. Along with brownies and cookies that would be great on break. I'd just get an assortment of stuff, and a couple of to-go carafes of coffee. Sort of a thanks for putting up with me being a complete dick this week and please don't quit.

And Asher had kept his word, damn him.

He had left me alone this entire week. Not even a text. Or a friendly wave when we would be heading out our front doors and down our driveways at the same time each morning.

And then there was the debacle of Wednesday morning. His day off.

The day I had made a fool of myself, and nearly driven off the road leaving our sub-division, when I had seen him jogging. Endless golden legs and his perfect round ass, barely covered by what had to be the smallest pair of running shorts ever created. With each thump of his sneakers, the barest hint of his ass cheek had peeked out, like the ripest, juiciest peach.

He'd had earbuds in his ears, listening to who knew what, as I'd slowly driven by. Telling myself not to look, just keep driving. But nope, my damn eyes didn't listen to anything my brain said. And I'd turned my head to look.

No one should look that good covered in a fine sheen of sweat, high cheekbones flushed, golden hair tousled. He had looked the same when we had been making love. Fucking. When we had fucked. Not making love. We weren't going to call it that. Nope. Not going there.

He'd looked at me, and for just an instant I had seen something in his eyes – a hint of sadness – then he had given me that wicked, closed lipped smile of his. Like he knew every single thing I was thinking. And then he'd fucking winked. Like he had when we'd first met.

Jerking the wheel hard I had nearly run off the road, before I'd quickly corrected my steering.

Asher's winks were going to be the death of me.

“Your usual today, Gabe?” Keegan, one of Quinn's newest employees, smiled brightly at me. He had been hired before Thanksgiving as seasonal help, but Quinn had asked him if he was interested in staying on and he had accepted a full-time position.

Keegan had a quick smile that lit up his freckled face, and dark auburn hair that shone brightly under the bright bakery lights. He was friendly, and always remembered the regular customers' names, and their favorite orders.

Smiling at the kid – because if he was old enough to drink, I would eat my hat – I shook my head. “I need to get a big order this morning. An assortment of stuff. And a couple carafes of regular and Americano. Sorry, I should have called it in.”

Keegan beamed, as he started constructing a to-go box, waving off my apology. “Treating the guys? That’s awesome. I’m sure they’ll appreciate it.”

Running a hand through my hair, I shuffled my feet. “I hope so. I’ve not been at my best this week, so I’m trying to make it up to them.”

Keegan’s red head bobbed, as he started filling the box with various baked goods. I was thankful they weren’t too busy. The big rush was usually six in the morning and just before eight, from what Quinn had said on a couple of occasions. It seemed like I had caught them in a lull between customers. I always hated when I would have a big order and the line would get backed up behind me. I hated being the cause of anyone waiting and could always feel the eyes of the people impatiently standing behind me.

The door chimed as another customer came in, and I moved closer to the register. Keegan was busy filling the box, chattering good naturedly about the weather, and the upcoming Easter holiday, and I didn’t know what all. Josh, Quinn’s baking assistant, came through the swinging doors that led to the kitchen, and Keegan must have relayed my coffee order. Josh started filling the carafes, saying something about needing to make another pot of Americano.

I was about to turn to the customer that had come in behind me and softly apologize for the wait, when the scent of honey washed over me like a tidal wave. Gasping, my nostrils flared, and I reached out to grasp the counter in front of me. Mind fuzzy, a bit dizzy, I felt all the blood from my head rush south. Straight to my dick like I was a fucking teenager who got hard if the wind blew on them. Fuck, I was not getting a chub in the middle of Quinn's bakery!

Down boy, I snarled at my wayward dick, turning my head but knowing before I looked who would be standing there.

Asher.

Daddy.

Mate.

He was giving me that closed lipped smile of his, a knowing gleam in his dark eyes. Like he could read all the thoughts that were running wild in my head. Or he knew exactly why I had turned my body slightly away from him.

Why the fuck were Quinn's counters so low? A guy couldn't even decently hide his hard on in here.

"Good morning, Gabe," Asher purred.

Every time he purred my cock throbbed.

I hadn't exaggerated the sound of his voice in my head, or in the sex-fueled dreams I'd also had this week. In between the nightmares. The way his silky voice sounded, the way words just rumbled out of his mouth. Nope I hadn't imagined any of it. Always said with this small inflection to his tone, like he

was amused by the entire world. Or he knew some damn secret. My secrets. Probably knew exactly how that voice of his made my dick dance in my pants.

Clearing my throat, I mumbled, “Good morning.”

“How have you been?”

Keegan brought the box filled with scrumptious treats over, closing the lid. “We’re just waiting on the pot to brew, and I’ll have your carafes.”

All I could do was nod tightly. It was taking all my willpower to not reach down and try to adjust the hard length of my dick, that I was positive everyone could see. Well, I mean the four of us that were here at the moment.

“What can I get you, Asher?” Keegan was practically bouncing on the balls of his feet this morning. Goddess, Quinn needed to stop letting his employees have free coffee.

“Just my usual coffee, thanks.”

Keegan poured the cup, sitting it on the counter. “Is it okay if I ring up Asher while you wait, Gabe?”

Taking a step back, I nodded silently.

“Actually, put his on my bill,” Asher instructed, and my head whipped up.

“What? No.” Protesting, I opened my wallet. “That’s not necessary.”

Asher shrugged, handing Keegan two cards. “I’ll take the rewards points. Besides, I want to. Your guys did a fantastic

job on my house. We'll call it a thank you."

"Put it on my bill," I growled, "I should be thanking you for wasting a week of your life taking care of me."

Josh plunked the second carafe of coffee down, eyeing us both. He flapped a tanned hand at us. "All y'all figure out who is paying for what."

Keegan bounced on his feet some more, "Oh, happy birthday, Asher! Do you want your free treat?" He handed Asher back his loyalty card, and I remembered as an added bonus to using it, you got a free goodie on your birthday. Quinn had grumbled about the gimmick but Josh, Lachlan, and Wade had talked him into it as a good marketing strategy. They weren't wrong.

Asher shrugged, "Sure. I'll take one of Quinn's better-than-sex brownies, since I see he's made some today. Better grab it while I can, since he only makes them once in a while. I can eat it with lunch."

"It's your birthday?" Stammering, I wanted to roll my eyes at myself. Keegan had just said it was.

Asher grinned, "All day."

Well, fuck. I felt like that was information I should know. It wasn't like I would magically know it, and logically I knew what I was feeling made no sense. But logic had flown out the window the minute Asher and I had touched, and it had yet to return.

“Okay,” Keegan peered at us both from beneath his auburn bangs, “whose card am I running?”

Slamming my debit card on the counter with enough force to shake it, I growled, “Mine!”

“Gabe –”

Handing him the bag that contained his better-than-sex brownie, and then giving him his coffee, I hissed, “It’s your birthday, Asher. Just take the damn coffee. Please.”

He took a sip of his coffee, staring at me while he swallowed the hot liquid, and I fought the urge to squirm beneath his heavy-lidded gaze. Or slap a hand over the front of my jeans, where I was sure my raging boner was visible for all to see. “Thank you.”

Keegan handed me my card, and I slashed my signature across the bottom of the receipt without even looking at the total. Snatching up my box and the to-go carafe holder, I did the only thing I could do.

I fled back to my truck. Like a coward.

Banging a hand against the steering wheel, I rolled my head on the headrest and stared at the ceiling of my truck. Taking some slow deep breaths, the scent of honey finally cleared out of my sinuses enough that my dick started to deflate.

Snatching up my phone, I dialed Ryan’s number.

“Hey!” My bestie’s sunshiny voice always put me in an instant good mood. You couldn’t help but be happy when Ryan was around.

“Hey,” I sighed, sounding miserable to my own ears.

“What’s wrong?” he demanded. Quickly followed by, “Whose ass needs kicking for making you sound like that?”

That got a snort laugh out of me, because Ryan was the least likely to kick anyone’s ass. “Are you working today, or do you have class?” Honestly, I was usually good about knowing his schedule, but I had lost track of every single thing the last few weeks. Too busy being wrapped up in my own bullshit.

“I’m working all day. Do we need a lunch? We need a lunch, I can tell. We’re doing lunch.”

Smiling, because he always knew what I needed just by the tone of my voice, I agreed. “We need a lunch. I need to talk. Or I need advice. Both? Honestly, I don’t know what I need.”

Bullshit, my bear growled, you know exactly what you need. That hot ass man back in that bakery. Our mate. Our Daddy. You’re just being fucking stubborn and I’m about over it.

“Where are you working today?” Ryan asked, “I need to stay at the daycare today, but if you can pick up something, we can eat in the office. Away from little ears. Well, I’ve got Charlie today, but she’s too little to tell secrets.”

“Off Main, so I can pick up something at the diner,” I told him, starting to feel a little more settled now that Asher wasn’t standing right next to me. Smelling way too sweet and delicious, looking at me with those dark chocolate eyes, and purring with that voice of his. And knowing I would be able to talk some of this out with my bestie helped too.

“I’ll call in the order, and you can pick it up. Noon good?”

“It’s perfect.” Turning over the ignition, I fastened my seatbelt. “Thanks, Ry.”

“Always, Gabey.”



Asher

Sliding into my desk chair, I pulled my better-than-sex brownie out of the sack, and took a bite. Not the healthiest of breakfasts, but it was my birthday, so I was allowing myself the indulgence. My eyes rolled to the back of my head as tart-sweet raspberry filling and decadent chocolate mixed on my tastebuds. Moaning loudly, I thought these brownies were aptly named.

Opening my eyes, I saw my nurse, Seth, leaning casually against the open door frame of my office. Seth was a smallish omega, who made up for his stature with his larger-than-life personality.

“Is that a better-than-sex brownie?” he demanded, one hand planted on his hip. He was wearing bright fuchsia scrubs today, and his grayish-blue eyes were lined with dark eyeliner that made them pop from across the room.

Swallowing, I stealthily tried to cover the remainder of my chocolate delight with the bag. “It’s my birthday treat and I’m not sharing.” Okay, that sounded a bit pouty, but I didn’t care. He would have to pry this brownie out of my cold, dead hand.

And since I never did anything on my birthday, I was going to enjoy this little bite of ecstasy. Other than my staff, I didn’t have anyone to celebrate my birthday with, so I usually just pretended it was any other day. Sometimes I would go to

Jamie's club and play with a willing little. But that definitely wouldn't be happening this year.

My staff usually brought a cake or cupcakes to the office when someone celebrated a birthday. Janet, our office manager, was great about making sure everyone remembered birthdays and felt special on their day.

Jax, the other doctor I shared my practice with, nudged Seth out of the way with an elbow, balancing a white pastry box in her hands. "I brought birthday donuts."

"Donuts for a birthday?" Seth peered critically at the window on the top of the box. "Cake is for birthdays."

"What?" Jax huffed, pointing, "those have sprinkles. Screams birthday to me."

"He's trying to hide one of those better-than-sex brownies from The Sweet Spot," Seth whispered loudly, totally ratting me out.

"The fuck?" Jax shot me an evil glare.

In answer, I popped a corner of the brownie in my mouth, moaning obscenely, then slapped the back of Seth's hand when he inched towards my treat.

"Ow!" He jerked his hand back, waving it back and forth to make the sting go away.

"Hands off my brownies." I smiled, showing all my teeth.

Janet popped in then, her arms full of a huge box from what also looked like The Sweet Spot. "I brought muffins. Keegan

was extra bouncy this morning.”

Nodding, I agreed with her, taking another exaggerated bite of my brownie and grinning at Seth as I chewed loudly.

“He’s adorbs though,” Seth sighed, “even though he’s a redhead.”

“Hey, I love me some gingers,” Janet scolded him, shoving papers aside on my desk so she could set her box down. “Don’t be knocking the gingers.”

“Goddess, that’s a lot of sugar,” pointing to all the boxes, I finished off my brownie with a contented sigh.

“Seems the right amount to me,” Jax took a muffin from the box Janet had opened, while Seth grabbed a donut for himself. One with sprinkles.

Plopping his butt on the edge of my desk, he gave me a mischievous look over his donut, fluttering his lashes at me. “So, boss, any big birthday plans today?”

Shrugging, I tossed my trash in the basket under my desk. “Why would I? It’s just a regular day. You know I never do anything special.” Not with my parent’s gone and my brother and I not speaking to each other. The day had just become another day.

My three employees exchanged glances, having a whole silent conversation right in front of me. Complete with bugging eyes, shaking heads, and hand gestures.

“Well,” Seth must have won – or lost – the bet, or whatever had been going on between them, “we figured with that hickey

you showed up to work with earlier this week, maybe you'd have a little something-something going on tonight.

Tugging at the collar of my dress shirt, I felt heat creep up my neck. "How did you know about that?"

Jax laughed. "Remember when the Harper kids threw up all over you earlier this week, and you changed your gross shirt for a scrub top? Yeah, *everyone* saw that love bite. I do love those V-necked scrubs."

Face palming at the memory, I felt heat flush my face.

"Gotta love cold and flu season," Janet grinned.

"Give us the tea!" Seth demanded, bouncing on his feet in a good impersonation of my barista that morning.

"What tea?" Picking up a file, I pretended to be absolutely absorbed in whatever I was pretending to read. The thing could have been upside down and written in hieroglyphics for all the sense I was making out of it. "There's no tea. I don't even like tea."

"Hmmm," Jax murmured, "let's see, shall we? You suddenly need a week off for personal leave," she put air quotes around those last two words, "then you are pretty much not answering your phone, and you come back with a dark love bite on your neck. Nearly on your mating gland."

"Nothing you want to share?" Janet urged. "Nothing at all?"

"Don't you people have anything to do?" Shooing them with my hands, I motioned for them to get to work. "Surely there are snotty nosed children waiting to be seen."

“Gah, you’re no fun, Asher.” Seth pouted prettily. “I share all my sexual exploits with you.”

Nodding, I reminded him dryly, “And I have asked you to stop many, many times.”

“Come on,” Jax led everyone out, “let’s let the birthday boy be. We’ll figure this out sooner or later.”

“I love a good mystery.” Janet said as they moved down the hall.

My hand crept up to my collar, as if I could feel the fading mark on my neck through my shirt. It hadn’t escaped my notice when I’d looked in the mirror, that Gabe had marked me damn near on my mating gland. And I hadn’t missed the stab of disappointment that had shivered through me, wishing he had sunk his teeth into my mating gland and claimed me as his.

Pushing thoughts of Gabe, and hickeys, and mating gland marks aside, I donned my white lab coat and started my day.

Chapter Twenty-One



Gabe

Juggling the bags that contained our lunch, and the drink holder with melting shakes, I used my elbow to knock on the locked employee entrance to Little Cubs Daycare, where Ryan worked. He opened the door with a big grin, taking the drinks from me without saying a word. Following him into one of the offices, he put the bag of food on a small table in the corner.

“I’m going to go get Charlie and bring her in here,” Ryan told me, “I feel like I haven’t spent any time with her this week and I’m feeling like a shit dad.”

Frowning at him, because that was the most ridiculous thing I had ever heard him say, I started spreading out our lunch. “You’re a great dad.”

“Yeah, well, I’ve had extra shifts this week because everyone seems to have a cold, and I had papers due in all my classes. Mary, bless her, has been picking up the slack when Brendan has had to be at the store.” Mary Sinclair lived for babysitting her grandkids, so I didn’t think she was complaining about any extra time with Charlie. But I could understand Ryan feeling like he was missing out.

He quickly returned, carrying a bouncy chair that Charlie was strapped into securely. He was cooing to the blonde infant, who was blowing milky bubbles at him and giggling.

Goddess was there any sound better than a baby laughing? I could be in the worst mood ever, and a baby's joyful giggling would instantly turn it around.

Ryan sat Charlie down at our feet and she waved her hands, babbling nonsense at us.

"Ryan dear, I'm heading to my meeting," Miss Rose, the daycare's proprietress popped her head into the office. "Are you still able to close tonight? Oh hello, Gabe, it's so good to see you. You've recovered from your ordeal?"

Is that what we were calling my being shot? My ordeal? Smiling at her, I nodded, placing my burger down from where I'd been about to take a huge bite.

"I have, thank you for asking."

"Nasty business, all that. Never thought Sweet Alps would see so much excitement."

Ryan smiled at the older lady warmly, cutting in and answering her earlier question. Probably because he knew I needed to talk. "I am. Brendan is going to pick Charlie up on his way home, and I'll see the last pickup off. No worries."

"You're a good boy, Ryan," she sighed, patting his cheek, "sure I can't change your mind?"

"I'm happy as an assistant," he told her, biting off the end of a fry.

"Okay, can't say this old lady didn't try. You boys have a good lunch and I'll see you tomorrow, Ryan."

Ryan got up and quietly shut the door so we would have some privacy. Giving him a questioning look, I asked, “What was that all about?”

Lowering his voice, despite the closed door, he sat down with a groan. “Miss Rose is selling the daycare.”

“No shit,” I exclaimed, because Little Cubs had been a staple in Sweet Alps for twenty years or more. “Well, I guess Miss Rose is getting up there in years.” That was a polite way of saying the woman was probably knocking on eighty’s door.

“Yeah, she’s ready to retire. Though she’s going to be teaching knitting at the hobby store, along with the crochet classes she already teaches, so retirement is a relative term. She taught Brendan to crochet, did you know that?”

Shaking my head, I swallowed a bite of burger. “I wondered about that.”

“She offered me first choice as a buyer,” Ryan slurped his shake.

“Wow.”

He shook his head, “Bren and I talked about it. He’s willing to pay for it, of course, but I honestly don’t want it. I did think about it for a hot minute, though.”

“But...?”

“I’m happy being the assistant director. I want to still work with the kids, teach them. Yeah, I do schedules and stuff, fill in when she is gone and make decisions in her absence, but I

don't have all the tedious responsibilities. Payroll, etc. No thanks. I just hope the new owner doesn't change too much."

"Being a business owner comes with its own share of headaches," I commiserated, not blaming him at all.

Ryan waved a hand at me, reaching down to start Charlie's bouncy seat again. She grinned at me, drooling all over her chin, and I waved my hands at her. I'd pick her up and get some baby snuggles when I was done eating. "Enough about me. You're the one that needed to talk."

Leaning back in the-too-small-for-me, hard plastic chair, I sighed. "I didn't want to put any of this in our group chat. Not that I don't love Wade and Quinn, but Wade seems super focused on Sebastian right now. And because they don't know I'm a little."

Ryan rolled his green eyes, "I think you mean super focused on his strong dislike of Sebastian. He's completely out of control, even for Wade."

"Yeah, I tried to make sense of the chats I missed but," my wide shoulders nearly touched my ears with my shrug, "I gave up. Sebastian and Matty came over to thank me. Brought a big basket of stuff from Quinn's bakery. They seemed nice enough. Man, there's no denying that kid is a Sinclair."

"Right! He's like a clone of the quads," Ryan agreed. "We had them and Jamie over for dinner. I like Sebastian. Very dry sense of humor. A bit guarded, not that I blame him. But I like him. Matty is a hoot, too. He is wicked smart, and is going to

keep Jamie on his toes. Okay, enough deflecting. Talk to me, Gabey. What's up between you and Daddy Asher?"

Pushing the last bite of my burger away, I fiddled with a corner of the Styrofoam container our food had come in. Ryan waited patiently while I gathered my thoughts and worked up my courage.

While I was trying to decide where to start, my bestie reached down and scooped Charlie up, sitting her on his lap and bouncing her gently. "Asher was so protective of you in the hospital. Daddy Brendan said he had to calm him down on the phone at least three times before we got there. He would not leave your side. He told Brendan the E.R. staff nearly banned him while they were assessing you, he was making such a fuss."

Shaking my head, I whispered, "I don't remember any of that."

"Well, he was acting all protective of you. It was sweet. He's a good Daddy."

Looking across the table, I scowled, "You don't know that."

Ryan played patty cake with Charlie's little hands, but he glared across the table at me. "I do too! I've seen him at the club, you know? And he's been to our house so many times. When I was little, so I can tell. And he likes you. A lot. Bren said Asher has had a crush on you since the first time he saw you. He's always asking him questions about you."

“He’s...we’re...fuck,” groaning, I rubbed at my forehead. I might as well just spit it out and get it over with. “We’re fated mates.”

Ryan clapped Charlie’s hands together, grinning like an absolute madman. “Gabey! That’s amazing news! That explains Asher’s over-the-top protective behavior. I thought maybe he was just in super Daddy mode.”

“Oh, he was that too,” mumbling, I pushed the remainder of my now cold food away from me.

“So, what’s the problem?”

Opening my mouth, I started to speak, then clamped my mouth shut again.

Ryan reached across the table and took my hand, squeezing gently. Charlie grinned and babbled her baby talk, probably telling me all about her day. “You know you can tell me anything, right?”

He was right, I could tell him anything. But this was hard. I’d never told anyone this before. Already I could feel my chest squeeze with anxiety, and the hurt feelings that always rose to the surface whenever I even thought about it. Hurt and embarrassment. I needed to talk about it though. I needed to share it with someone, and Ryan was my person. But I wasn’t sure I could just go from being someone who never talked about anything that matters to spilling out all my deepest, darkest secrets in the blink of an eye. Even to my bestie.

“Remember when I said I’d never been to Jamie’s club?”

Ryan nodded, “Yeah, I remember. Because I’m always trying to get you to go with us. Though we haven’t had time to go since this little miss arrived.” He placed a soft kiss on the top of Charlie’s blonde head.

“I lied,” whispering, I looked down at my hands and not at my best friend. Squeezing my hands together so tightly; my knuckles were nearly white. “I went once. Right after Jamie opened it. I mean, Carmichael Construction did the entire remodel on the building. I knew there was a nursery and Jamie gave me some free day passes. The first time he had a little night, I got up the courage and I went.”

“I’m guessing by your face you didn’t enjoy it,” Ryan’s voice was a quiet murmur.

Shaking my head, I barked out a laugh. “That’s putting it mildly.”

Ugh, I really didn’t want to talk about this. Just thinking about explaining what had happened that night was giving me a tummy ache.

“Gabe?” Ryan’s gentle urging had my eyes meeting his. “We don’t have to talk about this, if you don’t want to. I can tell it’s upsetting you. Maybe one day you’ll tell me? How about we talk about you and Asher instead? Tell me how you feel about finding your fated mate?”

Breathing in a deep, shuddering sigh, I thanked the Goddess for my awesome best friend. “I don’t know how I feel. I mean, I’m feeling a ton of things. But Asher...he’s pretty...”

“That he is,” Ryan agreed, “I mean, he is like a freaking model. If I was into omegas, I would totally be into him.”

Rolling my eyes, I tossed a fry at him, and he and Charlie both laughed. “I was going to say he is pretty confident. Pushy. Bossy.”

“Oh, yeah, he definitely knows how to handle his business,” Ryan waggled his brows suggestively. “The question is, does he know how to handle your business?”

My face flamed with heat as images of Asher down on his knees, tears streaming as he gagged on my cock, his face covered with my cum flooded my head. “Do I ask you about your sex life?”

Ryan chortled, “Ohhhh, so you two have done the deed! Did he have a mini heat? Or a full heat? OMG, are there going to be little Gabes running around soon?” He whispered to the baby in a voice that was not at all a whisper, “You want a little cousin, Charlie?”

Charlie chortled like she had a clue what we were even saying.

Scowling at my bestie, I huffed, “I don’t know why I even talk to you.”

“Because you love me,” Ryan sassed, sticking his tongue out, “and because I give good advice.”

“Your Daddy needs to spank you more.” Ryan could be a bratty little when he set his mind to it.

“Look Gabe,” Ryan turned serious, “you’re obviously struggling with all of this. My question to you is why? You and Asher are fated mates. He’s an omega Daddy who doesn’t have a little, and you are an alpha little who doesn’t have a Daddy. It seems pretty cut and dry to me.” He shrugged. “You’re running scared, for whatever reason, and that’s okay. Just...” his voice gentled, “I would hate for you to lose something that may turn out to be the best thing ever for you, because you’re scared to give Asher a chance. Fate seems to know what she’s doing if the Sinclairs are anything to go by.”

Ryan wasn’t telling me anything I hadn’t already told myself. Why it hit differently coming out of my best friend’s mouth, I don’t know. Maybe I had just needed to hear it from someone besides my own head.

“He’s giving me a month,” I mumbled, “to figure out what I want.”

“Why’s he doing that?” Ryan’s brow wrinkled in confusion.

“Because I asked him to.” Well, that was stretching the truth, but whatever. Close enough.

“Why did you do that?”

“Because I needed a minute.” Covering my face with both palms, I peeked out between my fingers. “I got shot and found my fated mate the same night, and he was just there. All. The. Time. In my space. In my face. Smelling all...omegaey good and...” Ryan was grinning at me like I had lost my mind, making up words like Wade did, and he found my predicament highly amusing. “I needed a minute, okay?”

“Omegaey?” Ryan rolled his eyes at me. “Is that a Wade word? Okay Gabey, you know what I think you need?”

“Hmmm,” I was picking at the white food container again. “To hide in my house and become a hermit? A good therapist to talk to?”

Ryan snorted at my dramatics, which weren’t usually how I handled things. “No, don’t do that. Well, I mean, I think therapy is good for most people, but we’ll revisit that later. We need a playdate,” he declared. “A night of movies, coloring, playing, like we used to do, before this one.” He pointed his eyes downward to indicate Charlie. “How does next Friday night sound? I’ll clear it with Bren, but I don’t think we have anything going on.”

That was exactly what I needed. “Yes, please. I miss you.”

Ryan’s eyes softened, “I miss you too. I was so scared when we heard you had been hurt.”

Reaching across the table, I squeezed his hand. I had felt the same way when Ryan’s stalker had attacked him and Brendan last year.

Something else had been bothering me all day, and our hour for lunch was almost up. “Today is Asher’s birthday.”

“It is? I wonder if Bren knows. We should get him something.”

“Yeah, about that,” I rubbed a hand over the back of my neck, “Um...should I...what should I...I mean I bought him coffee this morning, but should I get him something? I didn’t

know it was his birthday. But...I mean, I should do *something*, right?"

Random hook ups did not a dating guru make me. Having zero dating game, I had no idea what proper birthday etiquette was in this instance. Especially when I didn't even know what to call what was happening between us. We weren't dating. We were so many steps beyond that, but yet, not really.

"Hmmm," Ryan tapped one finger against his bottom lip, "you could send him flowers? To his office. Not roses, though. That says something I don't think you're ready to say yet. But flowers would be nice. I love when Bren sends me flowers."

Flowers. Did Asher even like flowers? What if he was allergic? I literally knew nothing about the man. Besides the fact that he was the most beautiful creature I'd ever seen. He liked to take charge of *everything*, and he tasted like the best thing I had ever put in my mouth. He was my fated mate and that seemed to come with some kind of obligation to acknowledge his birthday in some way.

Or maybe I was just overthinking it.

"Goddess, I can feel you overthinking it from here." Ryan held out a hand. "Give me your phone. I'll order them."

"No," I sulked, "he's my mate. I can order my own damn flowers for him."

"Do it then." Ryan cocked his head, his eyes daring me. He didn't have to say he double-dog dared me, I could see it in his eyes. *Little shit.*

Pulling up Google on my phone, I growled, “I’m doing it!”



Asher

“Someone got flowers,” Seth caught me in the hallway as I was exiting an exam room, his voice hinting at juicy office gossip. Frowning, I handed him the chart, not really interested. “What? That prescription needs to be called in.”

“On it,” he was grinning at me like a lunatic. “You’ve got pretties in your office. And we didn’t read the card, I swear.”

Squinting my eyes, I brushed by him. Jax and Janet’s heads disappeared, where they had been watching from the doorway of Janet’s office. Subtle those two were not.

“Does no one have anything to do?” I demanded good naturedly.

“Yes, to find out who sent you flowers!” Janet called out.

“Who’s Gabe?” Seth demanded.

“Didn’t read the card, my ass,” I muttered, seeing a beautiful bouquet of multicolored tulips in a cut-glass vase sitting in the middle of my desk. My cat preened, purring softly, as we took in the reds, pinks, purples, yellows, and beautiful cobalt blue of my absolute favorite flower. Most people loved roses, and while I did like them, tulips had always been my favorites. My mom had grown tulips before I was born, and my favorite part of spring was always seeing them come up each year growing up.

Sitting down at my desk, I opened the card.

Asher,

Happy birthday. I hope these brighten your day.

Gabe

Smiling broadly, I picked up my phone and started to type out a text. Then deleted it, and dialed his number instead. Glancing at the clock on the wall, I saw it was late afternoon, and figured I would probably get his voicemail.

Surprise gripped me when the sound of his deep baritone answered, and I sat up straighter. Clearing my throat, I told him, “Thank you for the flowers. They’re beautiful.”

Silence followed my words, and I waited for him to say something.

“You’re...welcome. I...ah...it’s your birthday so I...I mean...”

My baby bear was a stammering mess.

“Tulips are my favorite.”

“Oh, that’s good then. I...I felt like...I don’t know what I felt, but something told me tulips.”

Was that feeling he’d had because of our bond? Maybe. Probably. Or maybe he had just decided to not go with the cliché of roses. Especially this early into our relationship.

“I appreciate this, Gabe. Thank you.” When there was another awkward beat of silence, I said, “I’ll let you go. I just wanted to say thank you.”

Not waiting for him to answer this time, I ended the call. I had said I would give him space, and I meant to keep my word. Smiling at the flowers, I ran a finger over one of the soft petals.

Picking up my phone, I sent a quick text to Brendan.

Me: *Can you see if Ryan knows when Gabe’s birthday is?*

Brendan: *Hold please.*

Less than five minutes later, my phone buzzed.

Brendan: *August 1. Apparently, that is top secret information that only a handful of people know. He doesn’t celebrate his birthday.*

Me: *Tell Ry thanks and I promise not to divulge my sources.*

Brendan: *He also said to tell you he is on Team Asher even though he loves Gabe. Why do I feel like I’m in the middle of some angst-ridden teen*

show?

Me: *Beers later? I'll explain then.*

Brendan: *Dinner's at six. You've got some 'splainin to do.*

Me: **laughing emoji**

So, my baby bear didn't celebrate his birthday either. Wondering why, the information didn't deter me from planning to give him an extra special day this year. And I bet I could recruit Ryan and Brendan to help me.

Chapter Twenty-Two



Gabe

A week later I was still regretting all my life choices. Which seemed to be my constant state of mind lately.

Ryan and I were in the middle of our planned playdate, and I knew one thing for sure. I should have canceled.

I felt like shit, and with each passing minute I felt worse.

Waking up that morning I had felt horrible, and as the day had progressed, I had gotten worse. My head throbbed relentlessly, and my throat hurt when I swallowed or tried to talk. I alternated between burning up and shaking with chills. Which I was pretty sure meant I was running a fever. But the worst part of it all was that my left ear was throbbing mercilessly. Towards the afternoon, everything had started sounding like I was underwater, and it was hard to hear.

All day I had fought with myself on what to do. Knowing I should cancel my plans with Ryan, but also knowing that I desperately needed little time with my friend.

It had been so long since we'd been able to play together, and I desperately needed to just forget all my big problems for a few hours. My need had won out over my common sense.

All day I kept hearing Asher in my head all those times he had told me to put my coat on. We'd had a ton of rain in the last week, and I had been wet on job sites more times than I had been dry. I tended to run hot, more so when I was

working, so I had ditched my jacket most days. If I had even had it with me. The mornings were still chilly, as were the evenings. And okay, a small part of me had deliberately not worn my jacket sometimes just so I could defy Asher, and prove he wasn't the boss of me.

Well, that's working out well, my bear grumbled, because being sick is so much fun.

Hush. We'll take some cold medicine when we get home and sleep all weekend. It's fine.

Tonight, Brendan was in charge of baby Charlie while Ryan and I played, and he watched over all three of us. I'd caught him looking at me with concern a few times, especially when I had only half-heartedly picked at the dinner he had made us. My appetite was gone, and nothing tasted good.

Now, I just wanted to curl up on the big, squishy pillows Brendan had gotten us, watch a movie and maybe take a nap. Ryan wanted to color though, and it seemed an easier task than building something with blocks, or racing cars around. I did not have the energy for that. Listlessly, I ran my crayon over a spot in my coloring book, not even paying attention if I was staying in the lines or not.

I wanted my binky, but I'd found out rather quickly that trying to suck on it when my nose was this stuffed up was nearly impossible. Breathing was already hard enough, and trying to do it around my binky had been too much work. Which made me want to cry, because I really wanted the comfort of my binky, feeling as awful as I did.

Ry side-eyed me, as he painstakingly filled in the sky of his coloring page, using three different shades of blue. Glancing at his perfect in the lines coloring, I rolled my eyes. He was so extra when he colored.

“Wha’s wrong, Gabey?” he asked, reaching for yet another shade of blue. How many colors did he need for one sky? Skies were blue. One shade was all that was needed.

Shaking my head, I silently acknowledged I was cranky and might be a tad overreacting to my friends coloring habits. Whenever I didn’t feel well, I was the proverbial bear with a sore paw. Asher wasn’t wrong when he had called me that.

Shrugging, I tossed my crayon into the pile of colors spread across the floor.

“Tired.” Gah, my throat hurt! My voice had come out all hoarse and raspy. I’d been using as few words as possible since I’d arrived, not really having the energy to carry on a conversation.

Sliding over, I laid my throbbing ear on the soft seahorse pillow, and sighed. That was better. Laying down was good. Resting my throbbing ear on the pillow was good too. Maybe it was my imagination, but it did seem to help the pain some.

“Blankie?” Hopefully Ry could decipher my question in the one word I mumbled.

Ry glanced over his shoulder, then stretched for one of the many plush throws that were draped over the furniture in his and Brendan’s living room. Brendan had gone to put Charlie in

her crib after feeding her a bottle. The crochet project he was working on sat on the sofa, waiting for his return.

Ry spread the blanket over me gently, and I snuggled down into it. “Here, Gabey, here’s Chester.”

My yellow cheetah was nudged under the blanket into my arms, and I tried to summon a smile for my bestie’s thoughtfulness. “T’anks. Can I have Doc?”

My Pooh was placed next to Chester, and I held them both tightly to me.

“You want a different movie on?” Ry asked, jumping up and going over to the bookcase that held a vast array of cartoon options. It always cracked me up that they had actual movies in cases, when they subscribed to pretty much every streaming service there was.

It had taken one storm knocking out the internet, and a cranky Ry, for Brendan to place an Amazon order of movies to have available in emergencies. Ry tended to prefer to just pop a DVD in rather than go through all the streaming channels to find something to watch. His little side could be super impatient, and he didn’t want to click anything a bunch of times.

“I know you don’t really like *Cars* that much. You want to watch a princess movie?”

Shrugging, I didn’t respond, not wanting to feel the pain from my throat when I talked. *Cars* was an okay movie, it just

wasn't my favorite, but Ry liked it. Which meant we had seen it way more than I thought was necessary.

Ry pulled out a case and quickly switched the discs out. My eyes drifted closed listening to the sounds of Belle singing about her small town.

I didn't sleep, not completely. Floating in that in-between state where you can still hear things, but can't be bothered to open your eyes. The movie penetrated my brain, relaxing me, as the Beast roared, and Belle sassed him back.

"Daddy," Ry whispered, "I think somet'ing is wrong with Gabey."

The sofa creaked as Brendan's bulk sank into it. "Why's that, Precious?"

"He not acting right."

"Hmmm," Brendan murmured, his deep rumble penetrating my foggy stupor. "He did pick at his dinner, and he has been quiet. Even for Gabe." A cool hand touched my forehead. It felt so good on my hot skin I nearly moaned in relief. Blinking my gummy, watery eyes open, Brendan was kneeling next to me, his blue eyes full of concern.

Not having the energy to speak, I just let my eyes flutter closed. Relishing the coolness of his hand against my skin. Heat was blazing through me, but I didn't want to kick the blanket off, knowing that if I did I would be freezing cold in a minute.

Dozing, I drifted in and out, only catching a few random, quietly spoken words between Brendan and Ryan. Though nothing was making sense in my cotton filled, aching head. Getting up and heading home to my own bed seemed like something I should really think about doing. But I just couldn't muster the energy to make any of it happen.

A pounding on the door roused me. Charlie's piercing baby wail filled the living room via the baby monitor, and I jerked.

"I'll get her," Ryan said, sounding very adult-like. "You grab the door and let Asher in."

Asher?

What was Asher doing here?

Softly spoken words washed over me, but I still couldn't make sense of any of them. A deep rumble, followed by a softer, quieter voice that was steadily moving closer to me, that I instantly recognized as Asher's smooth, honeyed tones.

A cool hand cradled my cheek for just a minute in a gentle caress, before it quickly moved up to my forehead. Blinking, I forced my eyes open and stared up at the blond perfection of the man who had invaded all my thoughts the past two weeks.

Swallowing, I moaned pitifully at the pain the action caused. My throat felt shredded, and pain shot up my jaw and wound around to my ear.

"Hurts," whispering was the best I could do. Sounding all kinds of pitiful, and whiny, and like a big baby, but I didn't care.

Asher was here, and I wanted to throw myself at him and beg him to make me feel better.

Asher nodded, like he knew every single thing I was thinking and feeling without me putting words to any of it. “Daddy’s here, baby bear. I’ll make you feel better.”

It was at that moment I remembered I’d forgotten to answer his text from earlier when he’d sent me his Daddy rules. In all honesty, while I had read them, my fuzzy mind had barely been able to make sense of them and I had closed the text thread. Thinking I would look at them later, when I could make more sense of them, I hadn’t even sent a thumbs up emoji as an acknowledgement.

“Daddy...forgot...text.” The title slipped out without thought. It was how I had been thinking of him in my head since the night he had issued his month ultimatum. In reality, it was how I had been thinking about him since we had played together the one time, and I had slipped and called him Daddy. He hadn’t acknowledged it when I had said it, but I could tell he had heard me.

“We’ll talk about that when you’re feeling better,” he smiled down at me with a look so tender it made my heart ache. “We have time to go over the rules later and talk about you not responding. You still have two more weeks before your month is up, so there won’t be any punishment.”

Was I in trouble? That couldn’t be right. I was a good boy. Usually. Well, I thought I was. But Asher was bringing out a

bratty side to me I had never known existed. What would my punishment be? A spanking? Time out? Toys taken away?

Ugh, it was making my head hurt worse and my thoughts were running all over the place, until I couldn't make sense of any of them. Thinking was too hard, and I didn't want to do it. These were all big people problems, and I wasn't about that life right now.

It wasn't like I had even decided if I wanted Asher to be my Daddy or my mate.

Keep telling yourself that, my bear chided me. You and I both know he's our Daddy and our mate, and we want him.

Not talking to you, I pouted silently, ignoring him.



Asher

Pacing my house, I couldn't seem to settle. Gabe had been walking to his truck when I was pulling into my driveway this evening after work, after a somewhat quick stop to pick up some groceries. Well, as quick as you could be on a Friday evening. Everybody and their brother had been at the damn store. A backpack had been slung over his shoulder, and he had stood at his driver's side door, his eyes tracking me as I had carried my bags into the house. My skin had heated under his gaze, as if he was physically touching me.

It had taken all my willpower to not turn and watch him pulling out of his driveway. Still, I wondered where he was going? Who was he seeing?

Uptight and restless, everything inside me just felt off.

I hadn't been sleeping well the past week. I was irritable. I had a constant barely-there headache that wouldn't go away, no matter how many aspirins I swallowed. Seth was at his wit's end with my snappish surliness, and had told me I'd better take this weekend to adjust my attitude. It was a sentiment echoed by Jax and Janet as they had filed out of the office, ready to start their weekend. And probably recover from the bad attitude I had subjected them all to.

They weren't wrong. I could barely stand to be around myself.

And now my mind was racing with thoughts of where Gabe was and who he was with. And what he might be doing with them. Was he on a date? He seldom went anywhere, especially on a Friday night.

Stop it, my cheetah groused at me, you need to fucking relax! Let the man breathe. He's probably with his friends. Some people have those, you know?

Even my cat was over my attitude.

Pacing around my living room, my gut churned. An overwhelming sense that something was wrong had filled me and I couldn't seem to shake it.

Thoughts kept intruding on me while I tried to work in the past weeks. Things like Gabe didn't plan on ever talking about the fact that we were fated mates. That he didn't want a Daddy. That he didn't want *me* as a Daddy. Or a mate.

I was a mess.

I was trying very hard to be patient and not pushy. It was one of my worst traits, and I knew it. And I had never been the type of person to get fussed or lose sleep over someone not wanting to be with me. Thinking of not having Gabe in my life felt like...well, it felt terrible. Like I couldn't breathe. The possibility left me aching, hurting. Like I was poised to fall into a dark, bottomless pit of doom.

Wow, my cat yawned, flicking his tail, dramatic much? Fucking hell, you need to get off the hot mess express.

Pointedly, I ignored him, not about to admit he was one hundred percent right. I was being super dramatic, something I never was. It had me completely off-kilter.

But we kept running into each other quite randomly. Just like the times I would see Gabe before I actually knew him, I was sure this was Fate's way of pushing us together. First at The Sweet Spot, then earlier this week at the grocery store. I had run out of coffee and made a quick stop after work. He had been standing in the checkout line, his cart full of frozen dinners, sugary cereal, lots of ice cream, bags of chips, and a case of beer. Sooo much ice cream it had made my teeth ache looking at it.

He had blushed when he'd seen me giving his cart the once over, and quirking my brow at him. Silently saying all the things I felt about the contents of his grocery list. It wasn't my place to comment, yet. And while I would usually throw some Daddy wisdom his way, I had bitten my tongue and refrained from saying one word. Following the rules I had given myself where he was concerned. At least for now. There were still two weeks before his month was over.

I knew I shouldn't have pushed Gabe, but I'd sent that damn text anyway, today. Listing some of the rules I would expect him to follow when – *if* – I was his Daddy. Nothing too off the wall. Along with asking him to think about his limits, hard and soft, and send them or write them down so we could go over them, and I would do the same.

I had hesitated before sending it, then my twitchy fingers had hit send anyway.

Radio silence had followed after the read notification, and that's when this weird feeling in my gut had started churning.

Honestly, it was nothing more than I deserved. I was mucking up being his Daddy all over the place. I wouldn't blame him if he decided he didn't want me as his Daddy. Or his mate.

I'd hate to think I'd waited all this time for Fate to put the perfect little for me in my path, and have it all be torn away because I was too impatient to give him the time and space I had promised him I would. That he had clearly asked for.

It was just that I had never wanted anyone as much as I wanted Gabe Carmichael. He was one mega-sexy as sin alpha and the sweetest, most adorable little, rolled into one perfect package. My perfect package.

I loved the contrasting sides to the man. Sweet, shy, soft-spoken alpha and little. Then demanding, in-charge, slightly rough when we got naked, dominant alpha. Just thinking about it made me shiver with want. I loved the two very different sides to Gabe, and had never met anyone that meshed so well with my own differing personality traits.

While I might be a confident, independent omega, and a slightly overbearing Daddy, I was more than happy to submit to an alpha between the sheets. Being manhandled by someone bigger than me had always turned me on, and a little

roughness got my slick flowing. I loved being marked up, seeing the evidence of being fucked, for days after.

The shrill ringing of my phone startled me out of my runaway thoughts, before I could completely spin down a rabbit hole I didn't need to go down. Just thinking of Gabe and I in bed had my ass damp and my dick half hard in my pants.

Hoping it was Gabe, I rushed to grab it off the kitchen counter where I had tossed it earlier so that I could pace.

Disappointment spiked through me when I saw Brendan's name on the screen. Replaced quickly by worry. Brendan and I seldom actually called one another. We were all about texting and chatting on messenger.

"Hey," I answered, "everything okay with the baby?"

"Charlie's fine," Brendan assured me, but his deep baritone held a trace of worry. "I'm calling about a different little."

"Ry?" Bren knew I treated littles on my day off, and occasionally after hours.

"Gabe."

"What?" The air whooshed out of me, and I was already grabbing my wallet and sliding my shoes on before Brendan got another word out. Was that what I had been feeling all night? Had I somehow known, deep down, that something was wrong with Gabe?

That's called your bond, my cat still sounded annoyed with me, all that fucking and knotting you two did started it. Do I have to explain everything to you?

Keys. Where are my fucking keys?

Might want to grab your bag too, my cat helpfully chimed in.

“What’s wrong? Where is he?”

“He’s at our house,” Bren explained, while I grabbed a light jacket just in case it decided to rain again. The week had been more showers than sunshine. A part of me breathed a small sigh of relief in knowing where Gabe had been headed tonight. Not a date, thank the Goddess. My cat had been correct. He was just out with friends.

“He and Ryan were having a playdate. He hasn’t been himself tonight and he’s really warm to the touch. But he’s a bear. I don’t know what his normal temp is supposed to be, but he’s listless and pale. Hardly touched his dino nuggies for dinner and he loves those. He sounds really stuffy and hoarse.”

“I’m on my way.” Already backing down my driveway, I told myself that it was less than a twenty-minute drive to Brendan’s and I didn’t need to make it in ten. Or get pulled over.

All I could picture was my big, sweet little not feeling well, and my heart was aching and full of worry. Needing to get to him, to take care of him, make him feel better, love and cuddle on him, had me pushing down on the accelerator more than I normally would have.

Thankfully, I pulled into Bren’s driveway without getting a ticket, taking note of Gabe’s white pickup parked there. When

my fist forcefully pounded on the door, I told myself to get a grip and calm the fuck down.

“Goddess, you sounded like the swat team pounding,” Brendan joked when he opened the door, then took one look at my face and sobered up. “So, it’s like that, then. He’s in here.”

“I told you it was the other night.” Over beers, I had practically poured my heart out to my best friend.

Rushing past Brendan, I spotted Gabe’s large form curled up on the floor. For someone so big, he looked so small, and my heart squeezed tightly with all kinds of emotions. He was resting with one side of his face plastered against what looked like a soft, seahorse pillow. A fuzzy blanket covered him to his chin, and the tips of Chester’s and Doc’s yellow ears were poking out from the top of the blanket.

Sitting the bag I was gripping tightly in my hand on the floor next to him, I palmed his flushed cheek. Feeling the high heat burning his skin, I moved my hand to his forehead.

Gabe’s eyes fluttered open, the light brown looking dull, red-rimmed, and watery. He swallowed, the motion obviously causing him pain. Before I had time to react, he launched himself at me and I was on my ass on the floor, my lap full of my bear.

Hugging me tightly, he buried his head in my mid-section, sniffing loudly.

“Daddy,” he whimpered, and I could feel tears dampening my shirt, and his overly heated skin. That one word, raggedly

moaned, opened a floodgate inside me. Just like that first night I had touched him, the world seemed to shift beneath me, swirling until the pieces fell into perfect place. Dizzily, I held onto him tightly.

Nuzzling his soft hair, my eyes closed and I breathed his musky scent in, my arms locked tightly around him. Stroking his back with soothing touches, I whispered, “Shh, baby bear, Daddy’s here. Shh, Daddy’s got you.”

“Hurts,” he moaned pitifully, inching impossibly closer to me.

“Daddy’s here, baby bear. I’ll make you feel better.”

“Daddy...forgot...text.”

Daddy.

The one word I had been longing for him to call me again for two damn long weeks. My heart soared, but with how hot I could feel his temperature running, I wasn’t sure if he was even aware of anything he was saying. I needed to move him, take some vitals, and do a quick assessment. Determine if this was a case of calling in a prescription and picking it up, or if I’d need to take him to the clinic for something more.

“We’ll talk about that when you’re feeling better,” giving him a soft smile, I gently nudged him to his side. “We have time to go over the rules later and talk about you not responding. You still have two more weeks before your month is up, so there won’t be any punishment.”

With practiced hands, I looped my stethoscope around my neck, and turned on the ear thermometer.

“Sweetheart, can you tell Daddy what hurts, besides your throat?” Gabe’s eyes fluttered closed, and I tucked Chester back into his arms. His binky was nowhere in sight, but Brendan was right, he did sound stuffed up. As long as he answered me, I was happy to let him lay there with his eyes closed, for the time being.

“Head, body, ear.” His voice was so raw and low, I had to lean close to hear him.

“Which ear, baby bear?” The last thing I wanted to do was poke his ear with the thermometer if it was hurting.

Instead of answering, he pointed to the ear he was laying on.

“Okay, Daddy is going to take your temperature.” Over the years, I had found telling my patients what I was going to do before I did it made them less scared. It worked just as well on children and littles alike.

Gabe blinked at me, looking miserable, then whimpered pitifully as I got his temp which was way too high. “102.5,” I said more to myself than anyone else.

“Baby bear, Daddy needs to look in your ears, nose and throat now.” Quickly, I assessed his condition with my otoscope.

“You’ll take care of him, won’t you?” Ryan asked, sounding worried from where he was leaning into Brendan.

Smiling at him, I nodded. “I promise, I will. He’ll be good as new in a couple of days.” Gabe was blinking up at me miserably, hugging his stuffies tightly to his chest. He looked sick, but incredibly precious at the same time.

“What’s the plan?” Brendan asked, “I assume you want to get him home. I’m not sure he will fit in that cracker box of a car of yours.”

“Hey,” I chided, “don’t talk about my baby that way.”

He was right though. Brendan barely could squeeze his bulk into my two-seater BMW Z4 roadster convertible. Gabe wouldn’t fit comfortably, and he wouldn’t be able to stretch out at all.

“I’ll drive his truck.” Standing, I glanced around for Gabe’s things. He was wearing his little pajamas, the ones with the red-headed princess he loved. I made a mental note to order him more pajamas and to find out the name of his favorite princess, because for the life of me I couldn’t remember what it was. “Can you help me get him out to it? As much as I would love to, I can’t carry him. Does he have a pair of sweats? I don’t want him wearing these shorts.”

“What’s wrong with him?” Ryan’s concerned voice asked, then he added, “He has his jeans in his bag.”

“Is he contagious?” Brendan wanted to know. Not that I blamed him. They did have a baby to be concerned about

Snapping my bag shut, I stood and made my diagnosis, turning to look for Gabe’s bag. “Nothing to be worried about.

He has a sinus infection, and his left ear is infected. He'll be fine once I get some antibiotics and pain meds in him."

"You promise?" Ryan whispered, looking anxious and small.

Giving him a smile, I nodded. "I promise."

Chapter Twenty-Three



Asher

Gabe was snuggled in my arms, snoring softly, and there was no place on earth I would rather be.

Getting him into his truck so I could drive him home had been a struggle. My mate was a grump when he was sick, and turned into a whiny little on top of it. He had pitched a fit when Brendan and I had prodded him upright, swaying between the two of us. Thank the Goddess Brendan was the size he was; I would never have been able to manhandle Gabe on my own.

Finally, we'd gotten him stretched out in the back seat, a soft blanket over him, and his stuffies in his arms. Ryan had gathered his other things in his backpack and handed them to me. Having called in some prescriptions to the pharmacy, I swung by and picked them up. I hadn't really wanted to leave Gabe alone while I ran into the all-night store, but one glance in the back had found him passed out, completely oblivious.

Getting him inside his house had been a whole passel of issues, and I had nearly called Brendan for help. If it wasn't for the fact that I knew Gabe was feeling absolutely miserable, and had slipped fully into his little space where he seemed content to stay, and we hadn't discussed any ground rules yet, I would have paddled his ass.

He had been absolutely uncooperative when I had urged him to get out of his truck. Stubborn, whiny, and pouty. When tears

had fallen from his eyes, my heart had literally melted in my chest. Whispering to him while carding my fingers through his sweat-dampened hair, I promised that I would help him feel better once he was inside. I might have promised him a new toy or three in the mix. Whatever worked to get my bear moving was fine by me, and I wasn't above bribery. It was doubtful Gabe would even remember what I promised.

Now, hours later, he was dosed to the gills with medicine. His ear had a cotton ball stuck in it to keep the drops I had placed in it from leaking out. He had insisted that Chester, Doc, and two other stuffies I didn't know the names of be allowed in the bed with him. Then he had wrapped himself tightly around me, his head resting against my stomach.

He was burning hot against me anywhere he touched, making me sweat, but I wouldn't have moved him to save my life. My arms tightened around him, my chin resting on the top of his head. His earthy musk surrounded me, and the soft breaths from his mouth tickled the bare skin of my chest.

He had mumbled something about me always taking care of him, as I had tucked him into his bed. Shushing him, I had placed a soft kiss on his overly warm forehead. "That's what Daddies do. It's my job to take care of you."

He had rolled over, hugging his cheetah to his chest, mumbling a bunch of nonsense that had sounded something like, "Alpha job to take care of omega."

Yawning, I glanced over and the red numbers on his alarm clock glowed brightly, letting me know it was almost

midnight. The alarm on my phone would go off in a couple of hours, so I could check Gabe's fever, and ply him with more medicine.

He was going to be fine, I knew this, but it didn't stop any of the worry that was bubbling up in my chest. I hated seeing him like this, and I wished I had a magic pill to give him to make him feel instantly better.

"Asher?" Gabe's voice made me wince just hearing it. The sinus drainage was what was causing the soreness of his throat. I'd been fearful at first that he might have strep, but there was nothing to indicate that was the case.

"Hmmm?" My fingers didn't stop their soft movement through his thick hair.

"Thank you."

Peering down at him in the dark, I was thankful for my shifter night vision that allowed me to see him clearly. "For?"

He shuffled closer against me, his eyes glistening in the darkness. "Taking care of me." He sighed loudly, snuffling his nose. "Again."

Kissing his forehead, I hugged him closer to me, even though the heat of his body was making me slick with sweat. "It's what Daddies do."

It was a gentle reminder, but one I felt he needed to hear.

He was quiet, but I could tell by his breathing he hadn't drifted back to sleep.

“I wouldn’t know.”

My lips curved into a small smile, and I whispered against the top of his head, “I know.”

“It’s nice.” He rubbed his head against my chest, making himself more comfortable. He was still wearing his little pajama top, but I had stripped down to my tight boxer briefs.

“Shhh,” whispering, I stroked his back, “go to sleep. I’m going to wake you in a few hours for more medicine.”

“k,” he sighed.

Hours later, my alarm jolted me from the dream I’d been having about a raging forest fire. Gabe was moving restlessly, then I realized he was struggling to sit up.

“What is it?” I blinked my eyes open.

“Hot,” he mumbled, struggling to get his shirt over his head. Moving his hands out of the way, I tugged his shirt off him. His skin didn’t feel any hotter than it had earlier, in fact he felt a bit cooler to the touch. But his little pj’s seemed to be irritating him, and he rolled around until he got his briefs off too. Tossing them to the floor, he sank back on the bed with a contented sigh.

“Better?” Amusement laced my voice, as I turned on the night table lamp, bathing the room in a soft yellow glow. He blinked at me owlishly, looking ruffled and annoyed, and fucking adorable.

Not waiting for a response, I quickly took his temperature, admonishing him softly when he fussed about the probe in his

ear. “Hush. I can always do this a different way, that seems very effective for littles, but I’m not sure how you would feel about it.”

The look on his face when he figured out my meaning had me chuckling, and he clamped his lips together tightly. “Your fever is coming down. Time for more meds though, then you can go back to sleep.”

He watched me with hooded eyes as I moved around getting the proper dosages ready, his teeth scraping that full bottom lip of his. After he had dutifully swallowed the pills I handed him, and I had put more drops in his ear with minimal fussing – the man was actually worse than some of my small patients, I swear – he finally asked the question that I had seen brewing in his eyes.

“Are you going to leave?” he asked hesitantly, the hint of shyness I hadn’t heard in his voice in weeks, back.

After setting the alarm on my phone, I flicked the light off and pulled him back into my arms. He went willingly, wrapping all his glorious, naked limbs around me, settling his head back on my chest.

“Not yet. I want to get a full twenty-four hours of medicine in you, and make sure it’s working. Then...” my breath ruffled the top of his hair, my chin digging in a bit harder than necessary, because I wanted to hold him to me and never let go, “I’ll go home. There are still two weeks left of your month. And I promised you that. I don’t want to start off by breaking my promises to you.”

He was silent, but I could feel him. Could feel what he was thinking. Whether through our bond, or my hopeful imagination, I wasn't sure. But I would swear I could feel every thought he was having. It was the oddest sensation, like warm water sliding over my skin.

Joy. Wariness. Hope. Fear.

Above all, I knew I needed to give him the time I had promised.

Chapter Twenty-Four



Gabe

Rolling over, I wrestled with the sheets that seemed to be wrapped around my legs, determined to trap me. Sunlight streamed in through a small gap in my bedroom curtains. It seemed very bright outside, and I tried to get my muddled brain to make sense of what day it was.

Staring up at my bedroom ceiling, I registered my surroundings. I was alone in my bed, and I knew that Asher had been there. I remembered being wrapped around his slim frame, smelling the sweetness of his skin. His fingers in my hair. His gentle, but firm voice, urging me to swallow pills, drink water, go to sleep. I remembered whispered words in the darkness.

My head wasn't completely clear of the cotton feeling that had plagued it, but my headache was almost completely gone. While I didn't feel one hundred percent better, I felt much better than I had. Taking an experimental breath in through my nose, I found I could actually breathe out of it. Though it was still a bit snotty and I wasn't sure I could smell yet. Reaching over for a Kleenex to clear it, my hand encountered a note propped up against several prescription pill bottles. Next to it all sat my favorite binky, calling my name. After blowing my nose, I popped my binky in my mouth, sucking loudly as I unfolded the sheet of lined paper.

Baby Bear,

Please take all your medicine. Even when you start feeling better.

Rolling my eyes, I slipped my binky out and placed it back on my nightstand. My nose still wasn't clear enough for me to enjoy it yet. And how did Asher know I might be one of those people who stopped taking prescribed antibiotics once I started feeling better? Didn't most people?

I've written down the times for your next dosages, and left the thermometer for you to keep track of your fever.

Please call me if you need anything or start to feel worse, or your fever spikes up.

If I don't hear from you, I expect you for dinner when your month is up.

There was a date and time written at the bottom, and it was simply signed Asher. Flopping back against my pillows, I pulled Chester to me. He and Doc were lined up on the empty pillow next to mine. Rolling over, I could smell Asher on my sheets, and a wave of desire rolled through me.

Desire was followed quickly by sadness at finding Asher gone. Picking up my phone, I realized it was Sunday morning. Had I slept through all of Saturday then? I had vague memories, but all of them were disjointed and fragmented, and I had no idea when any of it had happened. I just remembered wanting to sleep a lot, my ear hurting, crying, and joy and relief that my Daddy had been there to make it all better.

And he had.

My ear, at least, had stopped throbbing and I could hear normally out of it. My phone chimed, and I saw a message in my friend group chat from Wade. Wade had started the chat between Quinn, me and him, and given us all silly nicknames. When Ryan had moved to town, he had joined us.

Bossy Brat: *Teddy Bear, are you alive? Ryan said you are sick. I feel like a shit friend lately.*

Me: *I'm alive. I just woke up.*

Foxy Boy: *Did Asher take good care of you?*

Ryan, you little shit!

Groaning, I hung my head, knowing Wade and Quinn were going to jump all over that question. It took all of two seconds.

Bossy Brat: *Asher? As in Asher Pierce? What is happening right now?*

Baker God: *Damn, Gabe, holding out on us.*

Me: *Been busy. Getting shot and all. And whatever this crud is I have.*

Foxy Boy: *He has a sinus and ear infection. But I bet Asher took good care of him.*

Bossy Brat: *Ryan, why do you suddenly know more than me? I don't like this turn of events. I will not have this.*

Foxy Boy: **sticking tongue out emoji**

Baker God: *Because you've been too busy being pissed off at Sebastian to know what else is happening in the world.*

Me: *Sebastian came by with a gift basket for me. He seemed nice.*

Bossy Brat: *You take that back, Gabe Carmichael! He is not nice! He nearly got you, and all the rest of us, killed.*

Baker God: *Dial it back, drama queen. Jamie has told you to back the fuck up and stay out of it, and that's what you need to do. And no one got killed. *eye roll emoji**

Foxy Boy: *That King Cobra shifter did, but I mean, he was NOT a nice person. And that other bad guy got killed. In the woods.*

Bossy Brat: *Quinn Rafferty-Sinclair, as my oldest friend you are supposed to be on my side!*

Baker God: *As your oldest friend, I will have the balls to tell you when you're wrong and to knock off your shit. Wade, knock off the shit! Jamie and Sebastian, and whatever is between them, is not our business. You do NOT want to piss Jamie off.*

Trying to keep up with my friends' conversation was making my head throb again. And I desperately needed a shower and coffee, not necessarily in that order. Trying to steer the conversation back from wherever it was headed – nowhere good, that was for sure – I quickly typed.

Me: *Guys, I'm fine, I promise. I'm feeling better. Not 100% but better than I was. I'm just going to chill today, take my medicine and sleep it off.*

Bossy Brat: *Okay, well, next Saturday we are taking Quinn out for a spa day for his birthday, so mark your calendar.*

Baker God: *WTF. I did not agree to any of that. You can't just spring shit on me like this.*

Bossy Brat: *Well, you don't like surprises, so we do it this way. Quinn, we're taking you out for your birthday. Lachlan already knows, and so does Josh. The bakery and the twins are covered. Now you have no excuses.*

Looking down at my ragged nails, I wrinkled my nose at the hot mess that were my hands.

Me: *I think maybe I'll get a manicure when we go.*

Baker God: *WTF is actually happening right now?*

Bossy Brat: *If he says he's getting a pedicure we need to call someone. He's clearly been kidnapped and this is his bat signal.*

Me: *Fuck off, both of you. You're always telling me I need a manicure.*

Foxy Boy: *In Wade's defense, you always grumble about not needing one. All you ever get is a massage and then you just watch the rest of us.*

Okay, that was true, I did do that. But my nails were ragged as fuck. It might be nice to have them looking somewhat presentable by the time my *date* with Asher rolled around. Was it a date? I didn't know what to call it. Dinner? A massive life changing step?

Ugh. All I knew was the man had taken care of me more in the last two weeks than anyone had my entire life. And it felt good. I liked it. I *really* liked it. I didn't like the reasons that had facilitated his care, but having someone take care of me was...well, *nice* didn't do justice for how it felt.

And he had been the sweetest Daddy from what I was starting to remember. He had been stern a couple of times, but he hadn't been mean. He hadn't made fun of me, not even when I had started crying because my ear hurt, and everything had hurt, and I had felt terrible.

In fact, I think he had even promised me some new toys. Yes, he had promised me some new toys. Three new toys in fact. Would he pick them out himself, or would I get to go to the store with him and pick them? What did I even want? I had

never gotten to shop for toys with a Daddy. Usually, I would buy a new toy online or when I shopped for one of my friends' pups' birthdays, or Christmas. I would add one or two things to the cart for myself, and no one was the wiser.

What would it feel like to have a present my Daddy picked out just for me?

My phone was buzzing non-stop in my hand, and I really didn't have the mental spoons to deal with my friends right now.

***Me:** I'm getting coffee. I'll talk to you guys later.
I'll see you guys next Saturday.*

A half hour later I was sipping coffee, looking out my front window. I'd had a shower, and was feeling somewhat more human, though I was ready to lay on my couch and watch movies the rest of the day. Being lazy sounded good, since I was still feeling achy.

Movement down the street caught my eye.

Sunlight reflected off Asher's golden hair as his long legs ate up the distance on the road. The man did love to run. He was wearing those ridiculously short shorts again, and a long sleeved tight shirt. His hair was damp with sweat, and as he moved closer into my sight line, I could make out a light sheen of sweat covering his face.

Heat burned through me just watching him run. A full body shiver had all my nerve endings tingling. The way the muscles

of his thighs moved, the gracefulness of his entire body, had me leaning forward towards the window to get a better view. He was beautiful, and I wanted him.

Yes, I had finally admitted that I knew what I wanted.

Asher Pierce.

Wanted him with an intensity I had never felt before for anyone or anything.

Somehow, without really doing anything, the man had made all the fears I'd had about everything vanish in a flash. Or at least they had been pushed so far down that I wasn't really worrying about them anymore.

All I had ever wanted was a mate who would take care of me, and a Daddy who would cherish me. Longed for someone who could be both of those things. Who wouldn't be mean to me, or make fun of me, or belittle me for my needs and desires.

Asher was all of that and more.

He had even given me the space I had asked for. When I was sick, he had rushed to be by my side. He had stayed with me, held me, made sure I had my medicine and my stuffies, and anything else I had needed or wanted.

And then he had backed off, leaving me alone. Still willing to give me the time I had asked for.

Asher must have sensed me watching him, because he turned his head and he stared right at me. His lips turned up in that secret smile of his, and he held up a hand in a small wave.

Stopping in the road, he stared at my front window for what felt like forever, but was probably less than thirty seconds.

For a heartbeat, I thought he was going to run up to my front door and walk in like he had when I had been recovering from my gunshot wound. And part of me wanted him to. Wanted him to march on in, tell me he was spending the day with me, taking care of me, and I could just get over it and deal with it. That it was happening and there wasn't anything I could say to make him leave.

Asher stared up at the sky, hands on his hips. His lips moved silently, muttering to himself. Or Fate. Or the heavens. Maybe all three.

Finally, he started running at a slower pace, into his driveway and up to his front door. He paused with his hand on the knob, turned to give me one brief look over his shoulder, then disappeared inside his house.

It was going to be a long two weeks.

Chapter Twenty-Five



Asher

A bright red apple was plunked down on my desk, startling me.

“Eat that,” Seth ordered, standing over me, hands on his purple scrubs. “You look like shit. And you haven’t eaten all day from what we can tell. What’s wrong with you?”

Blinking at him, I sat back in my office chair. Trying to act like he hadn’t just caught me nearly dozing off. “What time is it?”

“It’s two. Lunch break is over, and your next patient is in room four.”

We had been busy all day. It was the Friday before Easter and any parent who had a child that so much as sneezed was wanting to get them seen. Apparently, the Easter Bunny wouldn’t hide eggs and candy if a kid was sick.

More importantly, today was the day Gabe and I were going to sit down to dinner, and figure out the rest of our lives.

The month was up.

He was going to be at my house at six tonight. I had some thick steaks ready to go on the grill, along with the makings of a salad and baked potatoes. Now if my nerves would settle, then maybe my stomach would stop being wonky.

I had no idea why I was so nervous about what was going to happen tonight. Everything in me told me my baby bear had

finally wrapped his head around the two of us being together.

Wrinkling my nose at the apple, I sipped my tepid tea. “I’m fine. My stomach is off, is all.”

Seth’s eyebrows nearly touched the fringe of his bangs. “Are you drinking actual tea?”

“What of it?”

“You hate tea,” he sounded like he was accusing me of something nefarious. Goddess, couldn’t a man drink a cup of tea around here in peace?

Standing up, I gripped the edge of my desk as a wave of dizziness washed over me.

“Whoa,” I sank quickly back into my chair, closing my eyes against the spinning sensation.

“What’s wrong?” Seth was suddenly beside me, my wrist between his two fingers.

Shaking my head, I mumbled, “Nothing. I’m fine. Just got up too fast.”

“Hmmm,” he released my wrist, looking me over closely, “your pulse is a bit fast.” His hand touched my forehead and I tried to duck away from him but I wasn’t fast enough. “You’re not running a fever.”

“I told you, I’m fine.” Pushing to my feet, I did it slowly, schooling my features when it felt like the floor was undulating beneath my feet. Carefully, I made my way to the

exam room, and somehow managed to get through examining my patient.

My body felt weird. I wasn't sure how to describe it, but I just felt off. Shaky, and dizzy, and my stomach was still a bit queasy. It didn't feel like I was actually going to throw up, but it was enough I hadn't wanted to put anything in it today. After a restless night, I had finally gotten out of bed around five this morning. Feeling exhausted, I had skipped my morning run, wanting to crawl back in bed and sleep the day away. Laying in bed until the absolute last minute before I had to leave for work, wishing I could just call off.

Standing in the hall outside the exam rooms, Seth handed me another chart. "How many more after this?"

"Five," he told me, "unless someone else calls with a dire emergency. Jax is slammed too. I don't know what is happening in the universe today. Mercury must be in retrograde, or some shit."

"I need to be out of here at five," leaning against the wall, I reminded him tiredly. The world around me was spinning again, and I needed to lean against something.

"I know, I know," Seth muttered, shuffling the charts in his hands, "doing the best I can here."

"I know, sorry." Pushing off the wall, I took a step towards the next exam room, and knew I wasn't going to make it.

I had never actually passed out before in my life, and it was the oddest sensation ever. It didn't feel like I imagined it

would. The world around me dimmed, sounds were garbled. My stomach lurched, my breath hitched, and then everything just went gray. My knees wobbled and I felt myself tumbling into darkness.



Gabe

“Guys,” I told my shift crew, “I’m taking off. I have something to do tonight.”

It was early afternoon, and we were working on another kitchen reno. I swore every single person in Sweet Alps had gone stir crazy over winter, and they had all decided they hated their kitchens. Not that I was complaining. I was glad to have the work, but I was sick to death of looking at kitchen cabinets and counters.

“Something or someone?” Stu joked, wiggling his brows at me and I felt my face heat.

“I hope it’s that hot ass doctor that lives across the street from you,” Nathan chimed in from where he was helping Thomas fit the new countertop.

An ungodly surge of jealousy ripped through me at his teasing, and a loud growl emitted from my throat before I could stop it.

The kitchen we were working on fell silent, as my entire crew stared at me with wide eyes.

Rubbing a hand over the back of my hot neck, I muttered, “Sorry. I...don’t know what that was. Just...sorry.”

“No, I’m sorry, boss,” Nathan apologized, “I didn’t realize...” his voice trailed off, not finishing his sentence.

Stu clapped me on the shoulder, “The Doc’s a nice man, Gabe. I’m happy for you.”

The rest of my crew nodded, all seeming to agree with Stu, and I honestly wasn’t sure what to say. I’d never shared much of my personal life with them, because there had never been anything to share. Random, oftentimes nameless, hookups from an app didn’t need to be discussed with my employees. Stu probably knew more about me than any of them, but that wasn’t saying much.

And when the fuck had I started roaring at people? What the fuck had that even been? Nathan hadn’t meant any harm, but a possessive streak had taken hold of me, and I’d felt the need to defend my omega. My mate.

“I’m going to go,” half-heartedly waving to the guys, I figured I would be the talk that filled the rest of their afternoon. “Have a good weekend and Happy Easter.”

A chorus of *‘You too, boss’* followed me out to my truck. Leaning against the door, I took a calming breath. Telling myself, and my bear, that *no*, we did not need to go back and rip Nathan apart limb for limb for talking about our mate. Or calling him hot. Or using hot and ass in the same sentence in reference to our mate.

Tonight. Tonight, I would get to see Asher, be close to him. Tell him what an absolute dumbass I was. That he had been right all along, and that I wanted to give this thing between us a real shot. The thought of feasting on his sweet lips, and

possibly sinking my dick into his tight hole might have crossed my mind once or twice, too.

My wrist was on the verge of developing carpal tunnel from the number of times I had jerked off in the shower the last two weeks. Remembering Asher's mouth wrapped around my cock, looking up at me with those dark eyes of his. Sinking into the tight warm sheath of his hole as my cock stretched him wide. The way his dripping hole had sucked nearly all of my fingers into his body, and he had screamed, begged, for more.

Just thinking about Asher had me hard all the damn time.

My phone rang and I fished it out of my pocket, praying to all the deities out there that it wasn't a client with an emergency of some sort.

It wasn't. It was Asher, which both surprised and worried me. He had been really good about keeping his distance the last two weeks. Too good, honestly. We hadn't even randomly run into each other. He hadn't called or even texted beyond that first Sunday when I had still been sick with my sinus infection. And then it was just a quick text to make sure I had taken my medicine.

Goddess, what if he was canceling? What if my asking for time and space had been a mistake? What if he had changed his mind? What if he thought I was too much to deal with in my little space? Too needy, or bratty, or...or maybe I was over thinking things again, and I should just answer the man's call.

Maybe he was just confirming that I was still coming over for dinner tonight since the month was up.

“Gabe,” his voice sounded resigned, hesitant even, when I answered. It wasn’t the way I was used to hearing Asher sound, and my skin prickled with unease. “Are you busy?”

Something felt off. He didn’t sound like himself, and my anxiety spiked. “I just finished up for the day.”

No need to tell him I was going home to shower, and had planned to stop and get my hair trimmed. Maybe pick up a bottle of wine, or flowers, or whatever people did when they were dating. Or whatever we were about to embark on we navigated this fated mates thing.

“Um, would you do me a favor?”

“Why do you sound so weird,” I demanded. “What’s wrong?”

“Oh, for fuck’s sake, give me the phone,” an exasperated voice ordered. There was the distinct sound of a low argument which I tried to not listen to, and the being banged around sounded loudly in my ear.

“Hey, hiii!” an overly cheerful voice, that reminded me a little of Wade, chirped in my ear. “So, you don’t know me, I’m Seth, Asher’s nurse.”

“Uh, hello?” Yeah, something weird was going on.

“So, your boyfriend –”

“Nope,” Asher clearly said in the background, “not my boyfriend.”

I winced at his sharp correction, even though I had no right to be upset by his words.

“I’m sorry, did he or did he not, put that massive hickey you were showing off, on your neck?”

Oh, I had forgotten about that.

“Okay, hey! I’m back. Sorry about that, Asher is being a pain in the ass.” Seth sounded aggravated and annoyed, and one hundred percent faking cheerful.

“Um, yeah?” I mean, Asher could be a pain in the ass, so I wasn’t sure if I should agree, or just acknowledge that I was still on the line. What was the protocol for whatever was happening?

“So, not boyfriend, Asher passed out and I’m – we’re – not letting him drive home. So can you please come get your pain in the ass fuck buddy, and take him home?”

“You’re so fired,” Asher muttered in the background, because fuck not listening to this entire conversation with my bear ears. And both my bear and I were on high alert now. Asher had passed out?

“Honey, you fire me at least twice a week, but I’m still here.” Seth sassed without even acting offended.

“What?” I shouted, not even trying to keep my voice down. If my crew heard me, so be it.

“It’s true. He fires me all the time. I just ignore him,” Seth assured me, and I pinched the bridge of my nose with two fingers.

“No!” Growling, I started my truck’s ignition. “Asher! Is he okay? He passed out?” Why did I have to keep repeating that part of the conversation? Was no one else concerned by this incident? Were they used to people just randomly losing consciousness so it was no big deal to them? Because it sure as fuck seemed to be a big deal to me, if the weird need to get to my omega that had taken over my body was any indication.

“Ohhh,” Seth turned the word into a five-syllable one. Seriously, I wondered if the man was actually related to Wade. “He says he’s fine, that he just didn’t eat today. He’s being stubborn and won’t let us run any tests. But we’re sending him home and we don’t want him driving himself.”

“Seth, I swear to the Goddess,” Asher gritted out, “if you don’t give me my phone back...”

“Yes, yes, I’m fired. Whatever. Hush, I’m talking to your oily beau hunk.”

His what now? Had I just been insulted? I wasn’t even sure how to respond. Pausing, because I realized I didn’t actually know where the fuck Asher’s office was, and because I needed to take a breath and get myself under control before I drove in traffic, I continued to listen to the two of them so I could cut in and get pertinent details.

“Did you just quote *Sixteen Candles* to me?” Asher sounded incredulous and maybe a little impressed.

“You told me to watch it. I watched it.” Seth defended.

“Hey!” Shouting, because what the actual fuck? My mate needed me, my bear was *this close* to coming to the surface and raising hell through Sweet Alps to get to him, and I was done with the bullshit. They could discuss eighties movies on their own time.

Silence echoed over the phone line. Followed by, “Ohhh, he’s all growly and rumbly. Fuck me, his voice is deep! Sexy.”

“Oh, for fuck’s sake,” Asher cried. From the sounds in my ear, he was taking control of his phone back. “Gabe, I’m so sorry. I’m fine. Can you just give me a ride home? Seriously though, I can call an uber if you’re busy.”

“Daddy,” the word escaped my lips before I could stop it, “you’re okay? You promise?”

“I promise,” Asher’s voice had dropped to an almost whisper.

“Give me the address,” I ordered, putting my phone in the dash holder, and turning the speaker on. “I’m on my way.”

Twenty minutes later I pulled into a parking spot in the back of the building Asher had directed me to. Right next to the fancy car Asher drove, so I knew I was in the right place. He wanted me to come through the employee entrance, because he didn’t want to have to walk out through a waiting room full of patients.

My heart had hammered the whole drive, worry gnawing at me. Asher had assured me, repeatedly, that he was fine. But I

had a feeling he was the type to say that, even if he wasn't. He didn't seem like he was used to letting someone take care of him.

Well, the tables had turned now, and it was my turn to take care of my mate. I would make sure he was fine. He was going to rest, put his feet up and relax. He could watch a movie, while I took care of dinner. And then, if he felt up to it, we would have our talk about our future.

The door led into a long hallway that was presently empty. Not sure which way to head, I closed my eyes and used my shifter hearing to listen for voices. Turning right, I found Asher in what I guessed was an employee break room. There were two four top tables and chairs, a long counter that held a coffee machine, sink and microwave, and a refrigerator hummed in the corner. A TV played softly on the wall, and Asher was stretched out on a comfy looking sofa.

I took a moment to breathe in the sight of him. His eyes were closed, and his lashes rested on purple shadows beneath his eyes. His usual golden tan was pale, but other than that he looked glorious all stretched out like he was.

As if sensing me, his lids fluttered open, his eyes going soft when he saw me standing in the doorway. His lips turned up in a smile, and he held out a hand, beckoning me forward.

Rushing to him, I snatched him up in a fierce hug, letting his honey scent wash over me. It calmed all my ragged nerves, and my bear instantly settled beneath my skin. Our mate was fine. He was okay. He was in our arms, where he belonged.

This had been the longest four weeks of my entire life, and I never wanted to let this man out of my sight – or arms – again.

“I’m fine, baby bear,” Asher whispered, stroking his hands over the back of my hair, my back, anywhere he could touch. Soothing me when I should be making sure he was okay.

Then something else caught my attention. Something new was in his honeyed scent.

Leaning back, I searched his face for a glimpse of what I smelled in his sweet scent.

He doesn't know.

Asher stared at me intently, dark pools of his eyes questioning. “Have you made a decision, then?”

Nodding, I leaned into him, running my nose up his long neck, double checking what I could scent on him. “Yes, Daddy,” my words ghosted over his ear and he shivered in my arms, “I’ve made a decision. I want you. I want us. I want whatever this is between us. I’m sorry for being so stubborn.”

Asher shook his head, his fingers gripping my chin to face him. “Don’t ever apologize for needing time, Gabe. All you need to do is tell me to back off. I know I can be...”

Smirking at him, I helpfully supplied, “Forceful. Pushy. In Daddy mode all the time?”

Before he could respond to my assessment of his personality, there was a shuffling of feet behind me.

“Goddess,” a voice whispered loudly, “he’s fucking huge!”

“I’d climb him like a tree.” That was Seth. His voice I recognized from our phone conversation.

“Awe, they look so cute together.” Another female’s voice joined the first one.

Asher groaned, tossing his head on the armrest of the couch. “Does no one have any work to do around here? Don’t we have like wall-to-wall patients out there?”

“We’re just checking on you?” The first woman shrugged, not even trying to act sorry.

“Gabe,” Asher waved a hand at the trio fighting for space in the doorway, “meet Jax, my partner in the clinic. Seth, our nurse, and Janet, our office manager. Everyone, this is Gabe, my...ah...”

Squeezing his hand, I turned to face them all, giving them a bashful smile. I really didn’t like having so many eyes on me and being the center of attention. It always made me uncomfortable. And the way they were all staring at me made me feel like a fish in a bowl. “His mate.”

“Oh!” Three voices echoed at once.

Asher was staring intently at me, and I stared back, both of us ignoring the rest of the room’s occupants.

“Just get him home and make him rest this weekend,” Jax instructed. “He works too hard.”

“He’s so hot, boss!” Was Seth’s contribution, while Janet added, “Call us if you need anything.” Then we were once again alone.

“I’m fine, Gabe,” Asher assured me, swinging his long legs around me, so he could sit up. “I just didn’t eat today. My nerves about tonight had my stomach off, and then we were super busy today.”

He stood, and I grabbed his hand, looking up at him.

“We can go,” he told me, giving me a small smile. “I have steaks for us, and was going to throw a salad together.” His hand strayed to his stomach when it let out a loud rumble. “I could really eat right now. I’m starving, actually.”

“Asher,” I said softly, tugging his hand to get his attention, when he seemed intent on gathering his things so we could go.

“Hmm? Thanks for coming to drive me, by the way. I hope I didn’t mess up your afternoon.” He took a step towards the door, and I tugged his hand harder, pulling him to a stop. “Asher.”

“What?”

“I know why you passed out,” I told him quietly.

He shook his head, “I told you I didn’t eat.”

“Asher,” taking his other hand, so I held them both, I pulled him to me, until he was standing between my spread knees. He stumbled a step, and I steadied him with a worried look. He held onto my shoulders, looking down at me.

“You’re pregnant.”

The stunned look on his face was priceless, and I wished I had been able to get a picture of it. I had a feeling there were

few things in life that stunned Asher.

His mouth opened, before he snapped it shut. His knees wobbled, and he sank down until he was sitting on my thigh, practically in my lap. Shaking his head, he whispered, “No, I just didn’t eat. I was stressed about what you were going to say. But now we can go...celebrate? That sounds better than fuck like rabbits.”

His voice was slightly high-pitched, and he seemed to be spewing words out without putting much thought to them. Not like Asher at all.

Had my decision to be with him thrown him completely off-kilter? Surely he hadn’t really thought that I wasn’t going to decide to be with him. We were fated mates, after all. I had seen all my close friends find their own fated mates the last several years. It wasn’t like I didn’t believe in the legends surrounding them.

But I had been feeling overwhelmed by all of it and had needed to come to the decision on my own, rather than having it shoved down my throat by someone. Was Asher the one who needed reassurance now?

Or was our surprise pregnancy news what had him so discombobulated?

Did we break him? my bear demanded.

“I can smell it on you.” Tapping the side of my nose, I shrugged. “Bear sniffer, remember? My omega friends hate it. I always know they are pregnant before they do.”

“Pregnant,” he whispered, looking shell-shocked, though I wasn’t sure why. I had knotted him, and we hadn’t used any kind of extra protection beyond his normal birth control. Those mini heats were notorious for making birth control pretty much useless. I had tried to warn him that he had probably gotten pregnant that day. I wasn’t even a little surprised by this turn of events. Honestly, I’d been expecting it.

“I probably would have smelled it on you when I was sick,” I rubbed a hand in circles over his back between his shoulder blades, “but I couldn’t smell anything with my nose all stuffed up.” Even though he would have barely been pregnant then, only two weeks, my nose was good at picking up the very first early traces of a pregnancy.

“Fuck,” he hissed out, running a frantic hand through his hair. “Gabe, I’m sorry. I’m on birth control, I swear. I wasn’t trying to trap you into anything.”

Finally doing what I had wanted to do the last few weeks, I kissed him. To shut him up, but also because I needed to. With everything in me I needed to kiss this man. It had been too fucking long, and I couldn’t wait one more second.

He tasted just as sweet as I remembered, like every dream I had ever dreamed come true. My cock instantly hardened, my breaths coming so quick I felt lightheaded. Within seconds, we were both panting raggedly, until we pulled apart for much needed air.

“I know. We both got carried away and weren’t thinking responsibly that night,” whispering words against his skin, I rested our foreheads together. “But I doubt it would have mattered. It’s Fate. There was nothing either of us could have done to prevent this. And I’m okay with it.”

It was true. I was.

As soon as I had smelled Asher’s pregnancy, warmth and calm, and a peace I’d never known in my life, washed over me. And just like that, every doubt and fear I had ever had slipped away, and the puzzle pieces of my life slid together for a perfect fit.

Happiness. That’s what I was feeling. True, absolute happiness.

I wanted this.

I wanted him.

I wanted our baby. That we had created together from undeniable, raging passion.

I wanted it all with this man.

And for the first time in my life, I thought I might be able to have everything I had ever desired, and it didn’t terrify me. “Are *you* okay with this?”

Because Asher still looked like he might be in shock. His face had drained of color, and the purple bruises under his eyes stood out starkly.

Then a warm smile spread over his face, and he hugged me tightly to him. “I’m very much okay with this.”

Chapter Twenty-Six



Asher

Sitting on the edge of my bed, I stared down at the plastic test in my hand. My heart was pounding so fast and loud, I was sure I could hear it. My palms were sweaty and I wiped them down my thighs.

I was pregnant.

Not that I hadn't believed Gabe's nose, but...I had asked him to stop at the drug store on our drive home. He had refused to wait in his truck, instead accompanying me to the family planning aisle. He had seemed amused as I had stared at the various test boxes for long minutes, but he hadn't questioned me as to what I was deciding on.

He had hovered though. Which was cute, and annoying at the same time.

"I'm fine." Finally deciding on a test that promised easy to read, quick results. "I was just hungry. And nervous. And I hadn't slept well the night before." Or all week, but I kept that to myself.

"Just humor me," he shot back. "You passed out, Asher. That's not fine."

He'd nearly had a heart attack when I had grabbed hold of his arm when another dizzy spell had washed over me standing in the aisle. Proving his point, in his eyes. He had

rushed me to the counter, paid, and had me back in his truck, buckled up before I could catch my breath.

Now he was downstairs, in my kitchen, fixing the steaks I had meant to make for our dinner. While I had peed on a stick, and sat on my bed, chewing on my thumbnail until there was nothing left of it.

It wasn't that I didn't want a baby with Gabe, I did. I had just imagined we would have one far in the future. A few years in the future. We had barely started to get to know each other. And I knew better. Knew better than to not make an alpha put on a condom, even with my birth control. Had heard all the rumors about fated mates, heats, and fertility. Fuck, I had seen it happen with my own eyes. Yet, in that moment with Gabe, even knowing we were taking a massive risk, I hadn't cared. Because I had foolishly thought it wouldn't happen to me. To us.

The proof was staring at me from the palm of my hand.

Gabe's heavy footsteps echoed as he climbed the two flights of stairs to get to the master suite floor. He knelt down in front of me, taking the stick with the glaring word pregnant showing in the clear window from my hands, in big capital letters. Glancing at it, his lips turned up in a smug smile, and he tossed it onto the nightstand.

"I'm pregnant," whispering, my voice sounded small and hollow.

Gabe inched his way in between my thighs, spreading them with the width of his body. Rubbing his hands gently up and

down them, he nodded. “You are.”

At least he hadn't said I told you so, though I was sure he wanted to.

Huffing, I glared at him. “Why aren't you freaking out?”

He shrugged, still rubbing soothing circles on my thighs, “Seems like you're doing enough of that for the both of us. Do you want me to freak out?”

Did I? No, I didn't. He was right; one of us freaking out was enough.

“Why are you upset, Asher?” he quietly questioned.

“I...” gulping, air stuttered between my teeth. “I...this wasn't in my plans for us. Not yet anyway.”

Gabe laughed. Laughed. His head thrown back, he laughed loudly. When he was done cackling, he wiped his eyes, grinning at me. “You don't like being out of control. That's what's got you all off-kilter. It's not that you're upset about being pregnant. It's that it didn't happen on your timetable.”

“That's not...” I protested. He tilted his head at me, the look on his face daring me to prove him wrong. *Damn him.* Crossing my arms over my chest, I huffed. “Fine. I don't like it. I had a plan. I had lists.”

“Lists? Seriously?” He didn't even try to keep the incredulous tone out of his voice. “What were you going to do if I had decided to not choose you? Not choose us?”

Waving my hand in the air, I scoffed at him. “Don’t be silly. That wasn’t going to happen, we both know that. We are perfect for each other. And Fate deemed it so, so it is.”

“You are something else, you know that?” He didn’t seem that upset, though he was doing an awful lot of head shaking. “I would love to see this life plan of yours since it involves me. Feel free to share anytime.”

My retort was cut off as another bout of dizziness slammed into me, and gasping, I reached out for him. Holding onto his bulk until my head cleared and the world righted itself.

Gabe brushed my hair back from my forehead in a tender caress, his face creased with worry. “I’m calling Finn.” He was already fishing for his phone in his pocket.

My brow wrinkled in confusion. “Why? What for?”

“Because you keep having these dizzy spells,” he informed me, his tone telling me not to argue with him. Which I found annoying and sexy as fuck.

The Daddy in me was annoyed he thought he was just going to take charge of everything, while the omega in me went all soft, and preened at my alpha’s caring side. Gah, this better not be what the next seven months would be like. Six months. Whatever. At least shifters only had to deal with these hormonal changes, feeling like our bodies were no longer our own, for seven months. Unlike our fully human counterparts who had nine months of this to put up with.

“I just didn’t –”

Gabe held up a finger, scowling fiercely at me, his dark brows drawn together. Holding the phone away from his ear, he growled, “Do not tell me one more time it’s because you forgot to eat. Which, by the way, we’ll be addressing later. You’ve had crackers, an apple, and juice. And you’re still having dizzy spells. You’re pregnant and I want a doctor to tell me that you and the cub are not in danger.”

Pursing my lips together tightly, I reminded him sharply, “I am a doctor.”

“You are a pediatrician. Finn is an obstetrician. His word trumps yours in this case.”

“Finn isn’t taking any new patients,” I smugly told him.

“He is for family and friends.”

Oh, well, he had me there. And Finn was my doctor anyway, so it wasn’t like I was even a new patient. I wasn’t telling Gabe that either. Gabe taking over the way he was this afternoon just had me all kinds of messed up. It was a complete turnaround of what, so far, had been our roles.

I was the caretaker. I was the Daddy in charge.

Pushing away from him, I slowly made my way into the connecting bathroom, while Gabe talked to someone on the phone. As I was washing my hands, he poked his head into the doorway. “Finn said if you can go to the lab at the hospital tomorrow to get blood drawn, he’ll put a rush on it and he can see us Monday morning at seven. Or Tuesday at three is open.

He would see us as a favor on Sunday, but it's Easter and they've got the whole family thing."

Rubbing my brow where a stress headache was beginning, I stared at him in the mirror. Fuck, I'd forgotten it was Easter, not that I ever did anything. Mostly spent it alone, unless I happened to snag an invite to someone's dinner.

"Um, Monday I guess. I won't have to rearrange any patients on short notice." Between the week I'd taken when Gabe had been shot, and today, I was going to owe Jax so much coverage it wasn't even funny. And now I was going to need paternity leave on top of it.

Gabe had nailed it on the head when he said I didn't like being out of control. I had so many things planned, but I had not factored in this pregnancy. Not now, at least. That was on the list like two to three years down the road.

And the way my alpha – Goddess, I did love thinking of Gabe as mine – was stepping up, and taking charge, in his quiet, gentle yet determined way, was unexpected and exhilarating. It was really doing it for me. If I wasn't feeling so weird, and dizzy, and like my life was spinning out of control, I'd show him just how much it was doing for me.

Was this how Gabe had felt when I had bulldozed into his life and had practically refused to leave? No wonder he had asked for space. I felt like I couldn't breathe. But that probably had more to do with finding out I was pregnant, than Gabe taking charge.

“Hey,” his gentle rumble in my ear, and his strong arms wrapped around my waist, brought me out of my tailspinning thoughts. “Breathe, Asher. I’ve got you. This is all going to be okay.”

Sucking in a harsh breath, my body sank back into the comfort of him. He pulled me against his warmth, his strength, the hardness of his large body, and I let him. I held on like my life depended on it. Our eyes met in the mirror, and he kissed the top of my head, then rested his chin there.

“What’s wrong, sweetheart?” he questioned, and my heart did a little zing at the endearment. He didn’t really call me sweet names, besides the best one of Daddy. “Talk to me.”

Blinking at the heat prickling my eyes, I shook in his arms. “I feel out of control. Like my body isn’t my own. And this is all too fast. Which is crazy. Because I was pushing you from the moment we found out we were fated. Hell, even before that. I rushed headfirst into things, not even asking how you felt about any of it. I pushed me being your Daddy on you. I even pushed us having sex –”

Gabe snorted, then turned me in his arms and held me loosely. “Asher, if I hadn’t wanted you, I wouldn’t have had sex with you. Fated mates or not. I’ve never wanted anyone the way I wanted you. Want you. But if you think you being all in Daddy mode, or pushy or whatever you want to call it, had anything to do with me fucking you, well you’re wrong. This may come as a big shock to you, and possibly anyone who knows me, but I don’t do things I don’t want to do. Ever.

Yes, I'm shy. Yes, I'm quiet. I'm not great at talking about my feelings. But I'm not a doormat. I am an alpha, and I wanted you just as much as you wanted me. I could have stopped you at any time."

"But you didn't stop me, even when you acted grumpy with me."

"No, I didn't," he agreed, "and I was grumpy with you. But I was grumpy with myself because of the things you were making me feel. Even before we knew we were fated. You made me want you, just by being near you. And your confidence terrified me, I'm not ashamed to admit. But I was mostly trying to protect myself from being hurt by you. Because I knew it would destroy me. And you made me want so many things."

"Gabe," Breathing his name, I leaned into the embrace of his arms, I wanted to assure him that I would never hurt him.

"Nope, it's my turn to talk, something I should have done more of before now. But I needed the time and space to see things clearly. We haven't talked much, not really. And we don't know a lot about each other. But Fate put us together for a reason, and I no longer feel like you will hurt me. Not intentionally anyway."

My hand caressed his stubble roughened jaw. "But someone did hurt you?"

Taking my hand in his, he kissed my palm. "They did. They made me feel small and ashamed of who I am. But you don't do that. I've never been able to slip into my little headspace as

easily with anyone, but I do with you. Not even when Ryan and I play.” He shook his head, “It’s not just that. The way you took care of me, I’ve never had anyone take care of me like that. Never had anyone care like you do, Asher. It took me a minute to let myself enjoy it. To let myself believe I deserved it.”

Blinking furiously now, against the tears that were threatening to fall for this man, and his words, and the hurt he seemed to carry deep inside him. Something inside me knew that he didn’t let people see this side of him. Didn’t share these feelings with just anyone, not even his closest friends, and that it meant something special. That he trusted me enough to let me in.

“I would never hurt you,” I repeated, my voice coming out shaky.

“I believe you.” His hands slipped down my torso to caress my flat stomach. “And this is so...wonderful. I don’t care that it’s fast, and that we haven’t talked about so many things. I don’t care about rules and limits and safe words. I want this baby, Asher, and I want you. As my mate and my Daddy.” He looked away from my eyes when he said the last part, his cheeks blushing lightly. “I trust you.”

Those three words meant so much, coming from him. Because I just knew that he didn’t trust easily. He didn’t just let anyone into his private circle, didn’t let them get this close to the real him.

Tilting his chin up, I whispered, “Will you tell me who hurt you?”

“Sometime, yes,” he nodded, then took me by the hand and tugged me out of the bathroom. “But now we are going to get you and this baby fed. The salad is done, and the potatoes should be ready to come out of the oven by the time I get the steaks finished. And you are going to sit with your feet up while I do all of that. Put a movie on, and just relax.”

Before I could protest or agree, I still wasn’t sure which was more likely, he swept an arm behind my knees and picked me up in a bridal carry.

“Gabe!” Clinging to him, I wrapped my arms tightly around his neck, then rested my head against his shoulder as the walls undulated around me. “Maybe warn me next time. That didn’t help the dizziness.”

“Sorry, Daddy,” he kissed my forehead and I hummed at the reverent way he had said that.

“What exactly are you doing?” Keeping my eyes closed, because honestly being held in his arms like this wasn’t a bad thing, I felt him moving us down the stairs.

“You having a dizzy spell on these stairs terrifies the living shit out of me, Asher.”

“Mmmmkay.”

“Promise me you will at least hold onto the railing at all times.”

“As you wish.” Wistfully, I snuggled closer to him, breathing in his earthy musk.

Gabe chuckled, gently deposited me on the sofa. He physically moved my legs until they were resting on the coffee table, and handed me the remote. Pointing a finger, he ordered, “Do not move.”

Saluting him with the remote, I bit back a laugh. Finding *The Princess Bride* streaming, I pulled it up. It was kind of nice to be the one getting fussed over and pampered. I couldn't see myself wanting it to happen all the time, but for the moment, it was rather lovely.

Chapter Twenty-Seven



Gabe

To my delight, Asher had devoured the steak I had grilled for him, potato and salad. Now he was stretched out on his sofa, his head pillowed on my lap, in much the same way we had watched a movie at my house just a few weeks ago, when I had laid with my head in his lap. This time it was my fingers carding through his silky blond hair, as he watched Westley and Princess Buttercup find true love.

Seeing him eat had made me happy. I hadn't known Quinn well when he had been pregnant with his twins. But I had been there from the beginning of both Wade's and Ryan's pregnancies. I felt like I had a pretty good understanding of an omega pregnancy. But neither of my friends had ever passed out, nor experienced the amount of dizzy spells Asher seemed to be having.

It worried me, but I tried to push the worry to the side and not dwell on it. We would be seeing Finn on Monday, and would make sure everything checked out okay. Until then my job was to make sure Asher took things easy, ate, and rested. And that he didn't go up and down the two flights of stairs to his bedroom too often without me.

I know he loved his house, and he'd just spent a shit ton of money on the reno, but it was not conducive for a pregnant omega, or babies for that matter. Snorting at myself, I realized that pregnant omegas had managed pregnancies and raising

babies in this very house for decades probably, and I was being ridiculously overprotective.

“What?” Asher paused the movie, which was nearly over.

Looking down at him, his face lit by only the television screen since we had chosen to leave the lights off, I shook my head. “Just me being over protective.”

The soft smile he gave me warmed my soul, as he tightened the grip he had on my arm that rested across his chest. “I like it.”

“Good,” leaning down, I brushed his lips with mine, careful not to start anything until he was feeling better. “Because I think it’s going to be my natural state for the next few months.” Probably beyond that. I’d have an omega and a cub to look after. A family. An alpha’s job was to protect.

“Can we talk?” Asher asked, no longer looking at me, but his fingers plucked at the dark hairs on my arms.

“We were supposed to tonight anyway, so I think we probably should.”

He nodded, and I felt him smile against my skin. “How about we each get to ask a question, and the other has to answer honestly? A type of quid pro quo. We really haven’t been going about this Daddy/little thing like I normally would. In fact, the way I’ve handled it would probably get me banned from Sinful Playgrounds.”

Asher said it with a joking tone, but I still winced at the mention of the kink club. Thankfully, he still wasn’t looking at

me and he missed the face I made.

“Sure. You want to go first?” It could be fun. We really did need to get to know one another better.

“Why don’t you celebrate your birthday?” he asked quietly, and my breath hissed between my teeth. His fingers stroked my arm lazily, leaving heat in their wake.

“How do you know I don’t celebrate my birthday?” I had my suspicions as to where he had gained this piece of information about me.

“You’re answering a question with a question.” He pointed out.

“I’ll answer you, but I want to know how you know that.”

Asher moved his head up and met my eyes. “I asked Brendan to ask Ryan when your birthday is. He said you don’t celebrate it. I’m sorry if I overstepped. It was after you sent me the flowers on my birthday.”

My chest ached with emotion, or anxiety, I didn’t know which. Both maybe? But it was the same feeling I always got when I thought about my birthday. It was why I didn’t celebrate the day. And I’d be having words with my so-called bestie about spreading my business around. Ryan meant well, deep down I knew that, but this wasn’t something I liked to talk about. Not that I really liked to talk about anything that I considered private and personal. But I had promised Asher honesty, and I should be able to talk to my mate about my

dysfunctional family and my complicated feelings towards them.

Taking a deep breath, I told myself to calm down. It wasn't Ryan I was mad at, not really. He hadn't done anything wrong, and I knew he thought he was helping Asher and I get together as mates. Pushing the palm of my free hand hard against the middle of my chest, I tried to rid myself of the ache there.

Seeing the movement, Asher sat up, his hand covering mine. He could feel my pounding heart, he had to, because I could feel it against my palm. Or maybe he just sensed my anxiety through our bond?

“Baby bear? Look at me,” he ordered, and my eyes flew to him. “Breathe with me.”

It was reminiscent of the same order he had given me in the hospital, and just like that night, I followed his directive until my heartbeat slowed and I felt like I could breathe normally once more. The pain in my chest eased off.

Closing my eyes, I leaned my head back on the couch, jerking when I felt Asher's fingers slide into my hair. “I'm sorry. I didn't realize it was going to trigger you.”

Trigger me? Wasn't that a term used for people with trauma? Did I have trauma where my birthday was concerned?

Yeah, I probably did. Honestly, I was probably a therapist's wet dream. If I ever bothered to go to therapy. We didn't do that in my family. We didn't talk about things that might be triggering. We didn't talk about things, period.

I'd never talked about this with a single person, not even my friends. But if I couldn't talk about things honestly with my mate, then what even was the point of having a mate?

Licking suddenly dry lips, I straightened on the couch. I wanted to push Asher back down, his head in my lap, and go back five minutes in time. Just lay here, stroking him, watching his movie.

"My papa died shortly after I was born," my voice was hoarse, sounding dry and raspy, and strange to my ears. "Two days after I was born. Something went wrong, I guess." I shrugged, like it was no big deal, when in fact it was a very big deal in my life. "I was too big for him to deliver, at least that's what my grandfather said. But...I don't know really if that was what happened. But that's why I don't celebrate my birthday. Even though he didn't die on my birthday, my birth is what caused it. I will never celebrate my birthday. It reminded my dad of losing him, and...it's just too hard. It's why I'm secretly terrified the same thing will happen to you, and I'm going to do everything in my power to keep you safe."

Asher's eyes were wide, and even in the semi-darkness of the room, I could see them glistening. Yeah, I'd just dumped a whole passel of shit on him that he would probably need a minute to sort out. In all honesty, it hadn't hurt as much saying the words out loud as I had thought it might. "I killed my papa. My birthday was just a painful reminder for my dad that Papa was gone and I was the reason, and he didn't want to be reminded. So we didn't celebrate it."

“Gabe,” Asher’s voice was a rasp, as he cupped my jaw, “you have to know you didn’t kill him.”

Brows raised, I shook my head vehemently. “I was born. He was dead two days later. Pretty cut and dry to me. So, I’m going to have a ton of questions for Finn, and I’m going to every single doctor appointment, and I’m going to watch you like a fucking hawk, Asher. And I don’t want any grief from you about it. Because I’m a huge guy, and you might be tall, but you are not big. Your hips are narrow and…” my voice trailed off, and I scrubbed a hand down my anxious face. “I really can’t even think about it. So I’m happy and terrified, all at once. I’m a freaking mess. You should probably know that going in, if you haven’t already figured it out.”

Nodding, he stroked my cheek with his thumb, “Okay, baby bear, okay. Whatever you need to do I’m good with it. I promise not to give you grief if you turn into a super overprotective alpha.”

He was probably placating me, but I didn’t care. Until I had just said the words, I hadn’t known how I was going to be with Asher being pregnant. But then all my feelings just came out of my mouth. All my protective, alpha instincts were sitting just under my surface, swirling around. Not that I didn’t know they were there, I did. I was super protective of my omega friends. But with Asher, the feelings I was having seemed tripled in size. The thought of anything happening to him – I couldn’t even let my mind go there.

“Okay, it’s my turn to ask a question now.” Asher smiled, knowing I was using it as a tactic to change the subject and thankfully, he let me.

“Shoot. I’m an open book.”

“Tell me about your family. You mentioned a brother?”

He winced, and I suddenly had the feeling that neither of us had great family backgrounds.

“My parents were actually pretty wonderful,” he smiled fondly. “My omega mom died of breast cancer when I was ten. She was always smiling, singing, just one of those happy people and you want to be in their orbit, you know? My alpha dad raised me and my younger brother, Shay, after she was gone. Dad stepped up, and tried to keep some of the traditions Mom had started, alive. Like she always baked cookies at Christmas, and we would help decorate them. Dad was the worst baker, ever, but we did it every year. They were the wonkiest looking cookies, I swear. But we had fun doing it, baking them, and trying to decorate them. He died when I was twenty-four. My parents were great and I miss them.”

Nothing about his brother. Interesting.

Asher sighed, sounding annoyed, as if he could read my mind. “My brother, Shay, is three years younger than me. We grew up in a Dallas suburb. Lower middle class. Dad was a mechanic, owned his own garage, and Mom was a homemaker. Shay and I were best friends from the time they brought him home from the hospital. I thought he was a special present they had brought me. Until I left for college,

then everything changed. I haven't seen him since. He met some rich Dallas omega socialite, got mated to them, and..."

"And?"

He shrugged, hugging his knees to his chest. "I don't know. Dad said he stopped coming around, stopped taking his calls. He stopped taking mine. Didn't answer text messages. Then he changed his number. Didn't even come to Dad's funeral. I tried to see him after the burial service, because I was so fucking angry with him. Pulled my beat-up clunker right up to the wrought iron gate his new fancy house hid behind."

"How did that conversation go?"

I couldn't imagine not showing up to my dad's funeral. We didn't exactly see eye-to-eye on anything, and we weren't what I would ever consider close, but I still respected the man. He was my dad.

Asher snorted, "It didn't. The little punk refused to even talk to me on the speaker thingy. His butler fucking did, though. Shay with a butler. It was ridiculous. Told me I had five minutes to take myself off the property or I would be arrested for trespassing. That Shay no longer wished to be associated with our family in any way. Like we were trash or something. Like we'd had some horrible life. We might not have ever been Dallas high society, but we weren't dirt poor either." He swiped at a tear I was sure he didn't want me to see. "I miss him though. We used to joke that he was my big little brother. Because he's bigger than me. But we were so fucking close. And it hurts like hell, and I miss him." He took a shaky breath,

then gave me a trembling smile. “So, do you have any siblings?”

Well, I guess we were just going to tell our truths tonight, so I might as well jump in the deep end.

“Dad remarried about fifteen years ago. A wonderful omega named Ellen. She got pregnant within a few months, and I have identical twin half-sisters. They’re fourteen. Dad was over the moon when they were born. He dotes on them. Complete opposite of how he acts around me. I don’t really know them well. I mean I was in college, and had moved out when they were born. I never really went back home once I left for school. Dad expected me to go to law school, and it wasn’t for me. I’m a huge disappointment to him, so...it’s just better this way. I see them once a year, at Christmas. I send the girls money for their birthdays, but that’s about it.”

“You have little sisters,” he grinned at me, “that’s cool. And twins. Yikes. That’s a scary thought. It makes me sad you’re not close to them.”

I shrugged. “There’s a huge age-gap, so...but I agree, one baby at a time is plenty. Quinn’s twins are awesome, but I can’t even imagine double everything at once. Let’s just do this one baby at a time.” My hand seemed to have a mind of its own as it caressed his stomach, a place it kept wanting to be tonight.

“Is it my turn again?” I asked, hoping it was so I could steer the conversation away from both our family baggage.

“It is.” Asher rested his chin on his knees, but he moved enough so that my hand was able to squeeze in between his folded-up body and rub his tummy. “I like that.”

“Good. I’m going to be doing it often.” Wrinkling my nose, I pretended to think hard about my next question. “When did you know you were a Daddy?”

“When I was nineteen. An alpha I was dating took me to a kink club. Both of us liked exploring things. I saw a group of Daddies and their littles, and it was like some missing piece of myself clicked into place. I went onto some blog sites, then went back to the club and explored it on my own. Played with a few littles,” he shrugged. “I just knew, I guess. I love the caring side of it, and the being in charge of everything side of it.” He smiled sardonically at himself.

I laughed, because both those things were true about him. We stared at each other in the darkness, my hand stroking his belly, before he asked, “Who hurt you?”

My hand stilled, and I tried to yank it from his skin, but he grabbed my wrist, holding onto me tight. “Don’t. We said honesty. If this is going to work, I need to know.”

He was right. He should know. I had already told him about my fucked up family, it really couldn’t get much worse, could it? Just rip the bandage off and be done with it.

“It wasn’t anyone I dated or anything,” I told him, swallowing hard. “I don’t date. I mean, before you. Not really. I tried when I was younger, but it just never worked out. I was too shy to ask anyone out, and half the time if someone was

flirting with me, I had no clue. I have absolutely no dating game. And I was always afraid they would see my stuffies, or my binky, and that would be too embarrassing.”

“You might have zero game, but you are very good with your hands,” he stroked my arm, “and that mouth of yours. That dick. You’re an excellent lover, Gabe.”

“Yeah, I know,” smirking at him, he barked out a laugh at my cockiness. “I’ve been told.” It was the truth. Pretty much every hook up I’d ever had said the same things. “Anyway, I mostly just hook up with people from apps. It’s easier. Not what you asked though. When I started exploring my little side, I looked for places to play or meet a Daddy. Hell, even other littles. This was before I moved to Sweet Alps. I was too scared of what people would think of me at clubs. You don’t see many alpha littles, or littles my size. Never had a lot of luck though on the blogs or chats. People were kind of mean when they found out I was an alpha, so I just played by myself, at home. Then Jamie came back to town, and built his kink club. He bought the building and Carmichael Construction did the remodel.”

“I didn’t know that,” Asher commented.

“Yeah, we did. So, I knew he was building a nursery. And as a thank you he gave me a couple of day passes. I don’t usually accept gifts from clients, but...”

“But you really wanted to check out the nursery?”

Nodding, I sighed, stretching my shoulders and trying to loosen up the tense muscles in them. “I kept browsing the

website and they finally posted an event for Daddies and littles. I worked up my courage to go.” Taking a deep breath, I told him, “I tried to tell Ryan what happened, and I couldn’t. I only managed to tell him that I went to the club and it wasn’t a good experience.”

Asher shook his head, “I’m not going to tell your secrets, baby bear.”

“Anyway, I got changed in the changing room. I was so excited because I had finally found an online store for littles that carried some things in my size and I had my very first onesie. It had Pooh and all his friends on it. I had my binky and a blanket, and I figured even if I didn’t have a Daddy I could at least play with the other littles. I was hoping maybe a nice Daddy would want to watch over me for the night, scene I guess. Maybe make some friends. I’d only been in Sweet Alps about two years at that time. I was building my business and I hadn’t met Quinn, Wade, or Ryan yet. Really, I only hung out with my work crews, and I had no little friends.”

Asher reached out and took my free hand in his, lacing his fingers with mine and squeezing softly.

“I walked into the room, and I was so scared. And a Daddy came up to me and I actually thought he was going to play with me.”

“But he didn’t?”

Shaking my head, I felt all the hurt and insecurities from that night I still carried around come rushing up to the surface. “No. He wanted to know what I thought I was doing there?”

That this event was for littles. And I was an alpha, so what business did I have being there, dressed as a little. I was too big to be a little, and no Daddy there wanted to play with an alpha little. He told me I wasn't welcome there. Well, he said a lot of other really mean things, and when I started to cry, he laughed at me. Then a couple of the littles laughed at me, and I ran out of there."

"Oh sweetheart," Asher cried, pulling me into him and hugging me. "I'm so sorry that happened to you. I thought maybe something like that had happened. You know what that man said was a bunch of bullshit, don't you?"

Sniffling, I pulled back from him. "Well, not really. I mean I can't change who I am. I just figured I would never find a Daddy who would want me. After that, I tried to connect with Daddies and littles on some kink apps, thinking I'd have better luck than the blog chats, but it was pretty much the same thing. They made fun of me, left me some really mean, hurtful messages. No one wanted to get to know me to even play. I just played alone until I met Ryan. He's the first little friend I've ever had. And Daddy Brendan is the first Daddy – besides you – who was ever nice to me."

Asher bit his trembling lip, but I didn't want that from him. Didn't want his pity, didn't want to see that shattered look in his eyes. Didn't want him to see me like that. Pathetic. "Don't look at me like that."

"Sweetheart, I'm sorry that happened to you. You didn't deserve any of that. You are the sweetest, most adorable little

I've ever met. And it pisses me off that anyone calling themselves a Daddy would act that way, especially to a little. Not that I've been on my best Daddy game with you, either."

"What?" I cried, "You've been the best Daddy!"

Asher shook his head, "I really haven't. We haven't talked about the most basic fundamentals of any kink. Honestly, Gabe, I've been the worst Daddy to you. I knew I wanted you from the very first moment I saw you. I knew you were the little for me, and I was determined to have you. I think I may have used the knowledge of knowing we were fated mates as an excuse for not giving you a chance to even tell me what you liked or didn't like. I wanted you and I was so happy to finally be able to touch you, to be close to you, and spend time with you, that I did everything wrong and backwards."

It was the first time I had ever seen Asher as anything but self-assured and confident. Needing to reassure him, I looked down and whispered, "I love it when you call me baby bear."

His mouth quirked into a smile, "Yeah?"

"Yeah. And I love how you have taken care of me when I was shot and when I was sick. No one has ever done that for me before. I know I was super grouchy in the hospital and after, but I just didn't want to get..."

"Hurt?" he caressed my face, and I nodded.

"I can understand that. I think being an omega Daddy was probably easier for me than being an alpha little. I knew I

wasn't going to find my perfect little, but at least the littles were open to letting me scene with them."

"Well, you kinda do have that Daddy swagger," I couldn't help teasing him.

That brow of his arched perfectly over one dark eye. "Daddy swagger?"

Giggling, because getting all of that out had felt really enlightening, like a heaviness inside me had been lifted. "Yeah, you have that Daddy vibe. There's just something about the way you take charge of things."

He snorted, "Otherwise known as being a control freak, and bossy. It's okay, I've been told."

"There are times I like your bossiness," I admitted. My eyes turned heated, the mood in the room shifted, and I nipped at his earlobe, "Like when you are ordering me to come all over your face."

He turned his head, his lips capturing mine in a demanding kiss. My tongue met his, tasting his essence, his warmth, everything that made him mine. His legs unfolded and he managed to wrap them around my waist, pulling me close with his strong muscles. The man was like a damn pretzel when he set his mind to it.

"Gabe," he moaned, as my lips scraped up the side of his neck.

"Hmm?"

"Take me to bed." There was that bossy side again.

“Fuck, yes.” Hoisting him by his thighs, I stood up with my arms holding him under his round ass. He tightened his arms and legs around me, and I growled, “Hold on tight. You had to buy a house with a million fucking stairs, didn’t you?”

“Mmm,” he mumbled, nibbling my lips as I hit the first two, and then wobbled when he bit my bottom lip and desire shot through me like a bolt of lightning.

“Okay, nope. Down.” Sliding him down my body until he was firmly planted on the step in front of me.

“Gabe,” Asher whined in a needy voice.

Shaking my head, I pointed upwards. “I’m not risking falling with you. And I’m walking behind you in case you fall.”

Rolling his eyes, he pouted. “You’re being ridiculous. I’m barely pregnant.”

Swatting him on his ass, I pointed up the stairs. “And we’re going to keep it that way. Go.”

Surprisingly, he went with no further argument. Wiggling that delectable ass of his the entire two flights up. He stopped in the hallway of the third floor, turning when I reached the top. His hand was poised on the knob of the closed door on the other side of the hall. He was nibbling his lip, looking very unsure of himself, which wasn’t like him at all.

“Asher?”

He gave me a sheepish look. “I have a surprise for you. I was going to show you tonight if things went as I hoped they would.”

“You mean if I got my head out of my ass?”

He grinned, “Yeah, that.”

Opening the door, he flipped on the light, stepping to the side. “I hope you like it.”

Peering past him, my jaw went slack, my mouth formed in a silent O.

“It’s for you,” Asher whispered.

Before me was the most perfect nursery I had ever seen. The carpet was wall to wall cobalt blue, made out of the softest plush. All the furniture was white, oversized, and it had to have been custom built. There was a full size bed in the corner, a wide rocker large enough for both of us to sit on, and one wall was dominated by a six drawer dresser. Bookcases lined the opposite wall, filled with children’s books, and cubbies with toys. Coloring books, crayons, race cars, and blocks filled a shelf.

But the best part was the wide wall directly in front of me. Asher had found decals depicting the Hundred Acre Woods, and Pooh and his friends were in various scenes, from one end of the space to the other.

“I didn’t pick the bedspread or the curtains yet,” Asher followed me into the room, sounding unsure of himself. “I wasn’t sure if you would want Pooh or Merida, or some combination of both. And I ordered you some new pajamas and a couple play outfits. They’re in the dresser. I thought

maybe we could bring some of your toys over and keep them here?”

Standing in the middle of the room, I did a slow circle, taking it all in. “You did this for me?”

He nodded. “Well, yeah. The furniture came last weekend and Brendan helped me put it together. Ryan put the decals on the wall, and helped set up the shelves with books and toys. And I still owe you toys from when you were sick. We can go pick them out or order them. Whichever you prefer.”

Ryan and I would be having words when I saw him. That little sneak hadn’t said a word to me about any of this.

“Do you like it?”

Did I like it? Was he serious?

“Asher, I...” rushing to him, I picked him up, spinning him in a circle. Given the dizzy spells he’d been suffering from, it probably wasn’t the best thing to do, but I couldn’t help myself. Slamming my mouth to his, I told him, “I fucking love it! Thank you, Daddy.”

Emotions swarmed through my body, causing words to fail me after that. No one had ever done anything like this for me before. And he’d done it before the month was up. Like he had all the confidence in the world that he knew I would choose him. Choose us.

Tell him you love him, my bear growled.

Ignoring him, I carried Asher across the hall to his massive bedroom.

Chapter Twenty-Eight



Asher

Being carried by Gabe was quickly becoming one of my all-time favorite things in life. My three favorite things were now being carried by Gabe, *The Princess Bride*, and a tie between running and Quinn's better-than-sex brownies.

Gabe's arms were looped under my ass, giving me the perfect seat to rest on. With my hands holding onto the hard muscles of his shoulders, this position put my head taller than him. Bending down to kiss him, I stroked his tongue with mine, sucking gently. That earned me a growl from deep in his throat, as he walked us across the floor to the edge of my king size bed.

He didn't put me down, though. No, he kept exploring my mouth, like I was the best thing he'd ever tasted and he couldn't get enough. Writhing against him, I moaned, my hard cock pushing into his midsection.

My legs wrapped tightly around his waist, giving me good leverage to rut against him, like a cat in heat. That thought made me giggle, breaking our kiss. Maybe that's exactly what I was. At least he always made me feel that way.

"What's so funny?" Burying a hand in my hair, he tugged my head back, exposing my neck to the onslaught of his lips. His teeth scraped down the side, and I shivered like I was in the throes of a fever. He paused long enough to latch onto that

tender spot right above my mating gland, sucking hard. When I side-eyed him, a wicked gleam shone in his amber eyes.

Oh, he knows exactly what he is doing. *He likes marking me.*

And Goddess, how I loved it too. Loved wearing proof of the two of us. Loved smelling the scent of him all over my skin. His natural alpha pheromones, his musky earthy smell, his cum.

“Did Daddy give you permission to mark him?” Breathless, I asked the question. “You could be punished for this. Maybe a spanking?”

It was Gabe’s turn to shudder, and even as his cheeks reddened, he rumbled, “You’re not in charge right now, Daddy.” He shifted his hips, and his hard cock rubbed against my crease, pushing against the damp material of my slacks.

“I’m always in charge,” I reminded him, matter-of-factly. Then, “You like thinking about Daddy spanking your ass red, don’t you?”

“I don’t know,” Gabe moaned against the corner of my lips, where he was placing soft kisses, “I’ve never had a Daddy before, so I’ve never had a spanking. Don’t know if I like it or not.”

“But you don’t dislike the idea,” I stated, our still clothed bodies moving restlessly against one another. “So that goes on the soft limit list.”

“Soft limits?” He searched my face. “I know you’ve mentioned limits a couple of times, but I really don’t know

what mine are. I haven't done anything. Well, except sex. Obviously. But nothing kinky. Except being a little."

Tapping him on his shoulder, I indicated with my head for him to put me on the bed. He did, my knees sinking in as I knelt in front of him. Looking up at him with hooded eyes, I did a quick rundown. "Hard limits are things that are an absolute no go for you. Either you know you don't want to try them, or you've tried them and don't like them. Soft limits can be things you want to explore, but aren't sure if you will enjoy them."

He looked so fucking sexy towering over me, hair mussed and eyes heavy with desire. His cheeks were flushed above his trimmed beard. I loved that he kept it just a hair above a five o'clock shadow. Just perfect to scrape across my skin and leave the right amount of beard burn. His hard cock was pushing insistently against his jeans, the bulge so clearly outlined I imagined I could see every ridge and vein.

"And you can safe word at any time, even in play, Gabe." It was important for him to know that. Our communication had kind of sucked when it came to some things, and then finding out that I – that we – were pregnant today had thrown all my well-laid plans out the window.

His teeth scraped over his bottom lip, and I could tell he wanted to ask something. Already, I knew him so well.

"So, like, if I know I'm not into golden showers," he looked down at his feet, his cheeks blazing brightly, "that would be a hard limit?"

Goddess, he was so fucking adorable. The man was crazy good in bed, assertive and domineering, and forceful. But he didn't seem to have explored his kinky side, or many kinks at that, outside of his little regression. The way he had blushed and whispered those words turned my insides to goo.

Nodding, even though he still wasn't looking at me, I agreed with him. "Yes, that goes on the hard limit column."

"Are you...are you into that?" he whispered.

"Nope, it's a hard limit for me too. Not yucking someone's yum, but it's not my thing."

He nodded, a relieved puff of air escaping his lips. "So... umm..."

Tilting my head, I waited for him to ask whatever it was he wanted to ask. My dick was flagging a little with all the talk, but I knew it was important for us to get some of this out there. And if Gabe wanted to talk now, I was going to let him. He kept things bottled up, and close to his vest, so I wasn't about to try to stifle him.

When he dug the toe of his heavy work boot into my newly restored hardwoods, I reached out and brought his chin up. Forcing him to meet my eyes. "So, um?"

His face turned a brighter shade of red, which until that moment, I would have thought was impossible. Now I was very intrigued waiting to hear what was going to come out of his mouth.

He swallowed hard, and I imagined a gulping sound in my head from the movement. “When I was sick, you um... threatened to take my temperature a certain way if I didn’t stop complaining.”

Holy hell, this was not where I thought this was going! But I was so there for it.

Nodding, I gave him a wicked little smile. “I did. And does that thought turn you on? Do you want Daddy to play doctor with you?”

Gabe’s dick jumped in his jeans, and I imagined him leaking all over himself. My dick jerked in my pants, and my ass grew even wetter.

He nibbled on his lip some more, and huskily replied, “Maybe. I don’t know, but...yes? Just to try it. Sometime. Not tonight,” he clarified quickly.

My body was moving on its own now, my hips undulating as I rocked back on my heels. “Not tonight. But sometime. Soon.”

The naughty promise hung in the air between us, our eyes locked together in a heated stare.

Then Gabe growled, “Get naked, Asher. Now.”

Arching my brow at him sharply, I reminded, “You’re not in charge, baby bear. Daddy is.”

He tossed his shirt over his head. Grabbing a handful of my own shirt, he pulled me towards him across the bed. His eyes

were fierce, desire and fire burning in their depths. “You have two seconds to get this off before I rip it in two. Daddy.”

“Fuckkk,” my fingers quickly scrambled to undo the buttons of one of my favorite dress shirts. Shaking it off my arms, I went to work on my pants. Pushing them past my ass, I was trying to kick them off my legs when Gabe grabbed my thighs, stopping me. My dick was bouncing towards my stomach now that it was freed from the confines of my briefs, leaking a thin trail of sticky precum across my skin.

“Stay.”

Freezing, I stared at him, my eyes drinking in the glorious sight that was Gabe Carmichael naked. He was all bulging biceps, heavy thighs, ripped stomach, and fur. So much wonderful fur covered his chest, his stomach, those long thick legs. And from the patch of his groin his long, thick cock stood proud. The tip leaking and dripping as much as mine was. Maybe more.

Before I could question him, he dropped to his knees in front of me, leaned in and swallowed my cock in his warm, wet mouth.

“Fuck!” I nearly fell backwards at the shock of it, the sheer overwhelming sensation of it, but Gabe’s hands digging into each side of my hips kept me on my knees on the bed. My pants were tangled at my knees, trapping me, and I couldn’t move my legs as Gabe swallowed and sucked me further into his mouth.

He palmed my ass cheeks in both hands, pulling me closer to him and keeping me still at the same time. My hands gripped his hair, looking down the length of my body to see him staring up at me. Eyes hooded, pupils blown, mouth wrapped around my dick, head bobbing. He used his hands on my ass to fuck his mouth with my cock. He never looked away from me, and I couldn't stop staring down at the glorious sight he made.

The sexiest alpha I had ever seen was on his knees on a hard wood floor, fucking his face with my cock. He sucked, and licked, his cheeks hollowing until I was babbling absolute nonsense at the top of my lungs. One long finger of his slid through my crease, through the wetness there, to circle my puckered hole. The sensations were overwhelming, and when his thick finger breached me, my orgasm ripped through me without warning. Shouting, I came, pulsing wave after wave of cum down the dark cavern of his throat.

Gabe never pulled off, never stopped sucking and swallowing. Not until my body was finished shaking, and he had licked the last drop of my cum from the corner of his mouth with a satisfied smirk.

Orgasm drunk, I fell back on the bed like a limp, boneless rag. My legs tangled in my pants, but I couldn't be bothered to care. My alpha had just sucked all my brain cells out of my dick. The way he had held eye contact with me the entire time had been such a turn on. The only times his eyes had closed were in pure bliss as he had licked and sucked on me, like he was enjoying a popsicle on the hottest day of summer.

Stripped of my pants before I could bat an eyelash, Gabe leaned back against the headboard, thick legs spread enticingly. Lolling my head in his direction, he shot me a quirky grin, crooking one finger at me. Beckoning.

His cock jutted straight up, leaking drops of pre-cum sliding down the length. Fascinated, I watched them drip. Watched as Gabe fisted himself, sliding his hand up and down his length.

“Ride me, Daddy.”

Rolling to my hands and knees, I crab walked the length of the bed until I was between his spread thighs. Leaning down over his dripping cock, I closed my eyes and breathed him in. Musk, earth, spice, and tang. Tongue darting out, I licked the drops of precum from his skin.

Gabe grabbed me underneath my armpits, dragging me up his body, until I straddled him. Legs spread over his hips, he looked up at me. Grasping his shoulders, I sank down onto his thick flesh. Hissing when his wide head breached me, loving the burn and stretch. Spreading my legs further apart, I slid down until Gabe’s hands caught my hips, halting my hurried movements.

“Gabe?” Because I needed to have him all the way inside me. Needed him to fill the ache that was already starting again, despite the blowjob he’d just given me.

His eyes looked troubled, and he shook his head, but the tendons of his neck were tight. He was holding himself back. “Slow, Daddy. I don’t want to hurt the baby.”

Wiggling my hips, my hole clenched around him, and Gabe gritted his teeth, fingers digging sharply into my skin. Oh yeah, I was going to have some pretty marks from his fingers. “We won’t hurt the baby. Sex is perfectly safe.”

“Humor me.” He growled, pulling his knees up behind me. Thrusting slowly upwards, so fucking slowly, he filled me completely. My breath left me in a loud moan of pleasure. “Lean back, sweetheart.”

Doing as he asked, I braced myself against his raised knees. It was nice. Not necessary, but lovely all the same. He ran a hand over my flat stomach gently, his eyes filled with awe.

“I just imagined you in a few months,” his voice sounded choked and raw, as he rubbed slow circles in the space just under my belly button. “Round with our baby, sitting on my cock, riding me slow and easy. You’re so beautiful, Asher. So fucking beautiful it hurts to look at you sometimes. Way too pretty for someone like me.”

Grinding my hips against him, I raised up an inch on his cock, then slid back down. “Slow and easy sounds nice,” I told him. “Just not tonight. Tonight, you’re going to fuck me hard and fast.”

It was what I needed, and after a few times of me raising myself and slamming back down on him, he tangled his hand in the hair at my nape and tugged. Yanking my head back, he pushed with his feet, digging them into the mattress. My dick bounced between us, hard and leaking.

“I need more,” I growled, sliding down on him, grinding, but not finding what I needed. “Harder!”

Gabe growled, flipping us so that I was hanging onto him tightly. Staring up into his eyes, they looked fierce, his pupils blown. Lightly slapping my hip, he ordered, “On your stomach.”

Oh how I loved when my baby bear got all alpha growly and demanding. Desire spiked through me in a dizzying rush, and I scrambled to my hands and knees, arching my back and spreading my legs wide. Showing my alpha my wet, dripping hole, still stretched wide from his cock.

He ran a hand over my dripping ass, then up the length of my spine. A flat hand between my shoulder blades pushed my face and shoulders down into the pillow, my ass high in the air. Pushing back towards him, I wantonly moaned into the pillow.

I felt small and open to my alpha’s eyes, needy and ready to be pounded by his thick cock. And Goddess, how I wanted it. Needed it.

“Fuck me!”

Gabe leaned over me, his large, heavy body covering mine, his weight a wonderful welcome pushing me into the mattress. All his glorious hair rubbed my skin in the most delicious way. His breath was a loud echo in my ear, panting and hot. “You’re. Not. In. Charge.”

He slid down, and then his tongue was on my hole, and I forgot how to think. I could only focus on his tongue rasping

against all my nerve endings, spearing into me and opening me up.

“You taste so good, Daddy.” He rasped against my ass, then dove back into slurping up every inch of my slick that he could. My orgasm slammed through me, taking me by surprise. Screaming into the pillow, my cum shot out of me onto the sheet. Gabe’s tongue continued to fuck my hole, while it tightened around him, until I was finally spent.

His cock replaced his tongue before I had a chance to recover, slamming into me. Up on his knees, he used two hands to keep my shoulders down, holding me just how he wanted me. I knew he would let me up if I gave him the slightest indication, but I loved the feeling of being controlled by him. Being held down by this big, hairy, delicious bear, as he fucked me without mercy. My alpha was using me for his pleasure, and I couldn’t get enough.

He was almost savage, his hips pounding at a frantic, feverish pace. All of him surrounded me. I felt him everywhere, over me, inside me. He filled all my senses until there was only him and me. His hips snapped into me, shoving me up the bed with each hard, powerful thrust. Moans escaped my mouth, and I babbled words that made little sense.

My alpha was dominating me, his cock splitting me wide, my face pressed into the pillow. Sweat slid down my hairline, stinging my eyes, but I didn’t care. One of Gabe’s steely arms wrapped around my chest, pulling me up. My back to his

chest, both of us on our knees, his cock growing impossibly bigger inside my well used hole.

His knot stretched me, almost to the point that I didn't think I could take it. Then he was flooding my insides with the heat of his cum. His teeth bit into the tendons of my neck, at the junction that met my shoulder. Screaming, another orgasm shook through me, though my cum just dribbled out. Gabe's hard arms held me tight as we both shook with the force of our orgasms.

When our ragged breathing slowed, he gently lowered us to the bed, on our sides. He kept me close to him, his knot still locking us together. His arms surrounded me tightly, one thigh thrown over my hip. His scent engulfed me, and I sighed dreamily, wiggling my ass back against him.

His hand cradled my belly tenderly. "You're sure we didn't hurt the baby? We got a little rough."

Trailing my fingers over his arm, I sighed contentedly. "Mmmm, it was perfect. The cub is fine."

Shivering when he placed a soft kiss on the back of my neck, my dick gave a half-hearted twitch.

"You're perfect," Gabe whispered. "My perfect Daddy."

Chapter Twenty-Nine



Asher

It was kind of creepy being at my doctor's office before even his staff was in. Finn had met us at his clinic's door this morning. After a quick greeting, he ushered us into an exam room. Since he hadn't pulled out a backless gown and instructed me to change into it, I hadn't bothered. I had hopped up on the exam table though, the white paper crinkling every time I moved. Gabe hovered near my shoulder, chewing on his thumbnail.

Reaching over, I gently extricated his extremity. "Your nails were looking nice, baby bear. Don't ruin them."

Wiping his hand on his jeans, he mumbled, "We took Quinn for a spa day last weekend. I got a manicure." He shrugged, "It was weird."

Holding in a chuckle at the way he scrunched up his nose at the memory, I was about to ask follow up questions about this spa day with his friends, when the exam room door opened.

Finn's blue eyes were intent on my chart, a frown formed between his brows that had the doctor in me instantly on alert.

"What's wrong?"

That came out a bit harsher than I intended, and I immediately felt Gabe go on alert. He put a reassuring hand on my shoulder, squeezing gently, and I grabbed onto his hand like it was a lifeline.

Finn sat down on the rolling stool, looking over the top of the file at me. His face was set in its usual fierce scowl. Reminding myself that Finn always looked like that, and it was probably, more than likely, just his severe case of RBF that had him frowning like that, and not that anything was wrong. Goddess, I needed to calm down. My nerves were on edge.

“Was it a false positive?” I rushed on, my mouth and brain absolutely not working in sync this morning. Gabe squeezed my hand tightly, and his calming alpha pheromones washed over me.

My alpha was doing his best to calm me down. Which was the most wonderful feeling, because he was as nervous as I was. I was trying to keep myself together, for him, because I was the Daddy and it was my job. But my insides felt like a flock of butterflies had taken flight.

Finn blinked, his brows knitted together more, causing a severe vee to form on his forehead. “Doctors make the absolute worst patients.”

Glaring at him, I shot back, “Your face makes for the worst patients.”

“Sweetheart,” Gabe squeezed a bit firmer on my hand.

Flapping my free hand at my friend, I demanded, “What has your face doing whatever it’s doing? Stop it! You’re freaking Gabe out.”

That sounded much better than saying he was freaking me the fuck out. A state I had low-key been in since I had watched the pregnancy test turn positive in my hands.

Dryly, Finn muttered, “It’s just my face, you fucking know this. Asher, you need to calm the fuck down. Especially before I take your blood pressure.”

A hysterical bubble of laughter escaped me, because I knew Finn wouldn’t talk to his other patients this way. But we were friends. And he and Gabe were friends, and he could see that I was on edge, and he was trying to lighten the mood.

Which worked until he asked, “How sure are you about your date of conception?”

Gabe and I looked at each other, and at nearly the same time answered, “Very sure.”

Finn chuckled, his face breaking into a dazzling smile that instantly changed his entire look. Wow, sometimes I forgot how devastatingly good looking the Sinclair quads all were. Which was kind of funny since Brendan was my best friend, and Finn was someone I considered a close friend. They weren’t as handsome as my baby bear was, of course, but damn, they were all pretty hot. “Yeah, I know *that* feeling. So, I got your blood test results this morning and your HGC levels are higher than expected.”

“HCG levels?” Gabe asked. “What does that mean? Is that bad? Is something wrong?”

“Easy,” Finn sat my chart down, and casually leaned back on his stool. “Human chorionic gonadotropin. It means your baby is growing and the pregnancy is viable. That’s a good thing. The numbers go up as your baby grows. It’s why we do a blood test, even when a patient has taken a urine test and gotten a positive result. It’s much more accurate.”

Gabe breathed a small sigh of relief. “But Asher’s is too high?” There was no mistaking the worry in his voice.

Finn shook his head, “Sorry, I didn’t mean to scare you. There can be several reasons the number is higher than expected. One cause is oftentimes the pregnancy is more advanced than we thought. But we’ve ruled that out. So, I’m going to get a blood pressure reading, and then do an ultrasound. Since this is just a quick appointment to verify the pregnancy, we’ll schedule you for a first exam in a couple of weeks.”

Finn gave Gabe a side-eye as he wound the cuff around my arm. “Are you planning to come to that appointment?”

Gabe nodded, still holding tightly to my hand. He hadn’t let go of it yet, and I was thankful for his fingers tangled with mine. My mind was racing, trying to remember back to my med school days, and the one rotation I had done in Labor and Delivery. What did a higher HCG level mean? How high was too high?

Fuck all, I couldn’t remember anything right now. I was beginning to think that pregnancy brain was an actual real thing, and not just a myth my patient’s parents talked about.

Was it too early to use that as an excuse for my brain not functioning properly?

“I’m planning to come to all the appointments,” Gabe replied, and I beamed stupidly at him. This pregnancy might not have been in any near future plans I had for us, but I was happy about it. Doubly happy that Gabe was here with me.

Finn rolled his eyes, unwrapping the cuff. “Great.” That dry tone of his sounded the exact opposite of great. “Okay, I’m going to tell you what I tell my brothers when they are here with their mates. No growling at me. No getting in my way when I’m trying to examine your mate. Ain’t nobody got time for that, and I swear I will start refusing friends and family if y’all can’t control yourselves. I have to touch my patients. My fingers are going to be all up in their business. We won’t even talk about when the actual delivery is happening. Got it?”

Gabe made a face, scrunching his nose and curling his lip. “Ew, I didn’t need that visual, so thanks. Yeah, I got it.”

“Your bedside manner needs work.” Pulling up my shirt for Finn when he indicated it, I unsnapped my dress pants and pushed them open across my abdomen.

“Well, your blood pressure is a little low,” he informed me, setting up the ultrasound machine. “Have you been dizzy?”

Gabe growled, “He passed out Friday and he’s been having dizzy spells all weekend.”

“Tattle tale,” I hissed under my breath, and Finn gave me his frowny face. Gabe just raised a brow at me, his lips pressed

together. Daring me to contradict him.

Shrugging, I muttered, “I passed out because I forgot to eat. I’ve only been dizzy a couple of times since.”

“Fifteen times,” Gabe said matter-of-factly, and my head spun so fast in his direction that the number shot up to sixteen. “What? I counted. Even when you tried to act like you weren’t. You squeeze your eyes shut and go really still until it passes.”

Well. He was spot on; I did do that. I just hadn’t known he had caught on to it. Or that he was paying so much attention to me. It was rather nice having someone look out for me for once. I was so used to making sure everyone I cared about was taken care of, I usually didn’t worry about myself much.

“Asher?” Finn questioned, his voice all serious, “Is that true?”

Rolling my shoulders, I settled more comfortably back on the exam bed. “Yes, okay? I’ve been really dizzy. I’m just getting up too fast.”

“It’s happening when he’s laying down.” Gabe supplied, not at all being helpful.

Pursing my lips, I narrowed my eyes and gave my mate my most evil glare. He stared me down without flinching, squaring his wide shoulders. Even raised a brow at me, upping the ante.

Gabe in full on alpha mode was a sexy sight to behold, even if he was annoying the fuck out of me with his tattling.

Finn smeared warmed gel on my abdomen. “We’ll talk about that in a minute. Let’s get a look at your bean and go from there.”

He moved the hard plastic wand over my stomach, and I did my best to see past his shoulders to the screen. Gabe was leaning over my chest, staring intently at the monitor and I was about to start swatting them both, when Finn made a humming sound. Finally moving out of the way, he smiled at me. “Discovered why your levels are so high.”

He froze the screen, then pointed to two different blobs on the black and white monitor, nearly side by side.

“Congratulations.”

Peering at the screen, I stared in awe. Knowing exactly what I was looking at. “Well...wow.”

“Would someone like to explain to the non-doctor in the room what I’m looking at?” Gabe sounded exasperated, and a little scared. “It looks like two egg blobs.”

“Twins.” Finn and I told him at the same time. I should have thought it was a possibility when he had said he had twin half-sisters. But I also knew it had more to do with the omega than the alphas side. We were the ones with the eggs, after all.

His eyes looked like saucers, and then all the color drained from his face, until he was white as a freshly bleached sheet. His whole body shook, and I grabbed for him at the same time Finn dove over me to try to grasp a handful of Gabe’s shirt. His knees buckled, and he landed on his ass on the floor.

Gasping hard, he whispered, “I’m gonna need a minute.”

Peering down at him over the edge of the exam table, I scrutinized his bent head. “You okay, baby bear?”

Gabe’s head shot up, his teeth digging into his bottom lip so hard I was afraid he was going to draw blood. His eyes were absolutely huge in his white face as he nodded vigorously.

“Uh huh, yep!” His voice was two octaves higher than it usually was. Followed by a loudly whispered, “Twins?”

Turning back to Finn, I relaxed back on the bed. Feeling anything but relaxed, but we both couldn’t lose it, so I needed to keep myself together.

Breathe. It was fine. I was fine. We were fine.

“Let’s just give him a minute. We can talk about other things.”

Finn and I went over do’s and don’ts, what to eat and what to avoid, along with tips for combating the dizziness I was experiencing. “Higher levels can cause more severe morning sickness, so if that happens, I can prescribe something. Not everyone gets morning sickness, and the dizziness might be your own version of it. Take things slow when you get up. Try eating smaller meals more often, which may help. Of course, no shifting after the twelve week mark. You’re good to keep up your daily runs *if* the dizziness stops.” Finn stressed the point, and I nodded.

“What about Asher?” Gabe asked, finally dragging himself back up to join in the conversation. He gripped my hand

tightly in his. The fear he was feeling was pulsing over our bond. “Is he going to be safe carrying two babies? He’s not built for two babies. His hips are narrow. I was too big when I was born. Fifteen pounds! My omega dad died because I was too big.”

He was rambling, babbling, his eyes looking wild and unfocused. For the first time since he had told me that I was pregnant, my big bear looked utterly terrified.

Reaching for him, I grabbed his chin and forced him to focus on me. We’d deal with the fifteen pounds at birth later, because I absolutely could *not* deal with that now. Nope. Not happening.

“Breathe baby bear, remember how we did it? Take a breath,” when he nodded his head that he understood me, I took a slow breath in, making sure he mimicked me. “And let it out.”

After three times of that, he was less wild eyed but no less tense. “Finn, wanna jump in on this one, *please?*”

“Gabe, I can assure you if at any time I think there is any kind of danger to Asher, or your cubs, we’ll talk about next steps and what’s needed.” Finn’s voice had taken on a calm, soothing manner that I knew put his patients at ease. “I’m one of the best omega obstetricians around, you know that. I would never put Asher in danger. And the size of the parents doesn’t always equal the size of the baby. An omega’s size doesn’t mean anything. Look at Wade. He is short and petite, and he manages to grow, and deliver, babies half his size at birth.”

Gabe nodded at that, but he was still looking a bit terrified.

“I am curious about your omega dad though. If you don’t mind, I’d like to get more information on what exactly happened at your delivery,” Finn continued, his voice still calm and soothing.

Gabe opened his mouth, then shrugged. “I was born, and two days later he was dead. Not much more to tell.” Pain radiated across our bond, before I felt Gabe push it down. Away. Not allowing it to take hold. I had a feeling talking about it last night had taken a toll on him, and it wasn’t something he liked to think about.

A look passed between Finn and me, and I gave a subtle nod of my head.

Finn smiled gently at Gabe. “Would it be possible to ask your alpha dad for more details? If your size was the issue, it’s good to note it in Asher’s file. We’ll keep a close eye on the size of the babies regardless, but I like to be thorough and have all the medical facts. Just in case there is something else that we should be aware of in your family history.”

“Like, what, something hereditary?”

Finn nodded, “Exactly that, yes. We already have Asher’s family history on file.”

“I...I guess I can text my dad,” Gabe said softly, “see if he has time to talk to me.”

The way he said it, the tone of his voice, had all my Daddy caretaker instincts front and center. My dad had never not had

time to talk to me or my brother. No matter what he was doing. I couldn't imagine what it would have felt like to think my dad wouldn't have had time for me. There were times I wished I could still call him when something good, or bad, happened to me. He could have lost it when Mom died, or buried himself in work or a bottle. Instead, he had worked twice as hard to make sure Shay and I knew we were loved.

"That would be great," Finn handed me a towel to wipe the gel from my stomach, but Gabe took it from me and gently got the goop off my skin.

Caressing his jaw, running a thumb over his beard, I whispered, "Thank you,"

He brushed my lips in a fast, hard kiss, before helping me readjust my clothing. Finn and I went over a few more things, and I saw Gabe typing a quick text on his phone.

Walking to our vehicles, since we both had to go to work after my appointment and drove separately, Gabe frowned when his phone buzzed. Reading the text, he stopped in his tracks, a stunned look on his face.

"What is it?"

"It's my dad," he sounded leery, "he wants to do a Zoom meeting tonight at six. I told him I had some questions about Papa, and he wants to talk over Zoom."

"Okay, that's good. Six is good." Then a thought dawned on me, "I mean, I don't have to be there. Sorry, that was very

presumptuous of me. I promise, I'm really trying to not just decide every little thing for you. For us."

He rolled his eyes at me. "It wasn't presumptuous at all. You're my mate. I want you there." He snagged my hand in his, "I need you there. My dad and I...we don't...we don't FaceTime or Zoom. This is weird. We barely talk. It's kind of freaking me the fuck out, honestly. We see each other once a year, at Christmas time. The rest of the year is pretty much radio silence. This is just fucking weird."

Encircling his waist, I pulled him into a loose hold, my hands inching down to the top of his well rounded ass. "Well, what did you say to him in your message?"

"Um, that I had met my mate, and I had some questions about what happened to Papa when I was born."

Gently, I asked, "Do you think maybe he is interested in meeting your mate, and this was the quickest, easiest way to do it? Where does he live?"

"Oh, um, maybe? Washington state. He's just not ever been that interested in me before. I don't know why suddenly he would be. He makes me nervous. I get all tense around him, and I just sound stupid. He's a lawyer, from a long line of lawyers. I'm just a contractor and a disappointment. We have nothing in common."

"I'm sure the news of you having a mate was what did it." Hugging him, he held onto me tightly for a long minute. "Let's see what he has to say. And I'll be next to you the entire time,

baby bear. I'm not going to let anyone hurt you, not even your dad."

He squeezed me back, then whispered, "I can be like Merida. I can be brave."

This man had not a clue how brave he was, how special he was, how perfectly wonderful he was. If it took the rest of our lives, it was going to be my mission to make him realize all he was and more.

Chapter Thirty



Gabe

Waiting on Asher's front porch at five-thirty that night, I watched as his sexy little sports car cruised smoothly down our street before pulling into his drive. He needed a garage, which I knew he was getting several estimates for, before he made a decision. That car wasn't built to be outside in the winter.

We had so many decisions to make in the next few months, and I was trying not to feel overwhelmed by them all. I really needed some little time, but with the video call with my dad in a half hour that wasn't going to happen. Even though that was one of my main stressors right now.

Maybe Daddy would play with me after, in my new nursery he had made for me. Bathe me in his huge, clawfoot tub that was in the master suite. Read me a bedtime story while he rocked me. All of those possibilities sounded amazing.

Asher smiled as he walked towards me, the sun glinting off his golden hair. His eyes were hidden behind mirrored sunglasses, and his long legged, loose stride looked more like a strut than a walk.

"I need to get you a key," he unlocked the front door and I followed behind him. "We're going to need to figure out the housing situation."

“We have time.” As much as I had loved the original design of his house, it had been closed off and boxy. Asher had us knock down walls, and it was almost completely open concept on the main floor now. Trailing behind him, I took a seat at the long, granite island that ran half the length of the kitchen.

He had gone completely away from what was popular in kitchens at the moment. There was no white or gray anywhere in sight. Instead, he’d wanted dark, espresso cabinets, stainless steel drawer pulls, with matching stainless steel appliances. One accent wall was painted a brick red, and the other walls that flowed into a large dining room were a milk chocolate color. Pendant lights hung down over the island, casting warm light over the area. None of it should have worked, but what he had created radiated warmth. This was a space I could see a family spending time in.

I could see our family spending time here. The thought filled me with warmth.

“Not that much time,” he poured a glass of water for himself from a pitcher in the fridge, then placed a cold beer in front of me. Shooting him a questioning look as I twisted the top off, I took a deep pull. “You looked like you needed it.”

He wasn’t wrong. Talking to my dad wasn’t one of my favorite things. It always went one of two ways. Stilted, formal, and uncomfortable. Or both of us yelling at each other, each frustrated with the other’s life choices and one word answers. I was just as guilty as my dad was some days, but the man made me feel like complete crap most of the time.

Unwanted and unloved. Small and weak. And like all of my life choices were the stupidest ones a person could make.

If he even looked at Asher the wrong way, I was going to lose it on him. I never stood up to my dad, but for Asher and our cubs, I wouldn't hesitate.

"Twins often come early," Asher sat his glass down. "We need to figure some things out sooner rather than later. Like where are we going to live?"

I knew he was trying to take my mind off the upcoming call. He might not know why I was feeling the way I was, but I knew he could feel it. Our bond had been building and I already felt in tune with him. Plus, the man did like to try to be in control of every little thing. He'd need to let go of some of that once the cubs came. Babies seemed like they took over pretty much everything, and didn't care what you had planned on any given day. They ran the show, and it was best if you just got on board.

"I hate having the money talk," he sat down next to me, looking very serious. "But I think we're going to have to have it. I feel like everything is on super warp speed for us now. This isn't how I imagined or planned things for us."

Quirking my lips, I let that go for the moment. His rambling was taking my mind off the clock ticking down the minutes until my dad called.

"Let's talk mortgages," he said matter-of-factly, jumping right into the fire. "We need to decide what's the best financial

decision for us on where we live. Who owes how much, square feet, what will work best for our needs.”

He was so cute sitting there, his brow furrowed, acting very Daddy like.

“Well, that’s easy,” I took another slow sip of my beer, looking at him over the rim. “I don’t have a mortgage, and you have more square feet and a double lot. And a lot of fucking stairs, which I’m not that happy about, but I love the bones of this house. And someone did a kick ass job on this reno.”

Asher’s brow furrowed as he held up a hand. “Wait. Go back. You don’t have a mortgage? How is that possible? And here I thought I was doing an above average job on saving.”

“I don’t have a mortgage on the business space either.”

“You have business space? How did I not know this?”

Dropping my empty bottle in the trash, I leaned against the counter next to the six-top gas range, arms crossed over my chest. “There’s probably a lot we don’t know about each other. Didn’t you notice the address on any of your contracts? Daddy, I expected better from you.”

“Zip it,” he grumbled, “I was too busy being distracted by my hot contractor to worry about silly details like an address.”

Barking out a laugh at him, I explained, a bit proudly, “The company office is small. Just a couple of offices, a place to have meetings with clients because it’s not always done at their homes. We keep equipment there, etcetera. It’s over off fifth street.”

“And you don’t carry a mortgage on anything?” He sounded baffled and amazed. “How?”

“Easy. When Papa died I received an inheritance from him. It was kept in a trust until I was twenty-one, making very nice interest. Dad paid for my college, so I didn’t have to worry about that or any loans. I used some of my inheritance on a downpayment on my first house. It was a complete gut job, so I got it for next to nothing. I lived there while I remodeled it, and then flipped it for a decent profit. I did that three more times, and used photos of the renovations as advertisements to build my construction business up. My house was another gut job reno, but this one I kept. I had enough saved at that point that I could pay for it outright. When the business grew and we needed actual office space, I did the same thing. Building was run down, I got it for next to nothing and the guys and I did a gut job reno on it.”

“Well...” Asher seemed at a loss as he looked around his brand new, renovated house, but I didn’t miss the sad look in his eyes.

Taking him in my arms, I kissed his nose. “I like your house.”

I wanted to wipe that worried look off his face. He was trying hard to act cool with everything that had happened the last several days, but uneasiness was rolling off him in waves. It wasn’t what I was used to feeling from him, and it had the alpha in me on high alert.

“It’s a lot more space than my house. Way more bedrooms.”

My house had three bedrooms, and two baths. But Asher had four bedrooms on the second floor, with a full bath. And that third-floor main suite, and my nursery was a no brainer for me. Not to mention his yard space was double mine. And his back deck was a chef's kiss. He might have a mortgage, but he also had more space and yard for the kids. The mortgage wasn't going to be a problem.

“But all the stairs concern me, especially when you start to get bigger. So maybe we spend time at my place towards the end of your pregnancy, and when we get home with the twins. To make things easier, and then I'll decide what I want to do with my house. I'm not opposed to renting it, especially being this close. I can keep an eye on any tenants and fix anything that might need repaired.”

Glancing at the clock, I saw it was almost time for my dad's call. “I didn't bring my laptop, can we use yours?”

I hadn't been thinking about the call at all when I had decided to wait for Asher to get home from work. Typically, I started earlier than him and my day was usually finished hours before he got home. I'd been restless, my anxiety spiking in my chest, and I had needed to be near him. Or at least something that smelled like him. That made me think of him and feel closer to him.

Asher nodded, “It's in the living room.”

Logging into my account, I sat with my elbows on my knees, feeling my leg bounce nervously. Glancing around at the open space, I commented, “I think we definitely need to bring my

couch over. I like all the room we have on it, and this area is big enough.”

Before Asher could answer, Dad’s call rang through on the laptop. “My dad’s a lawyer. A very good one with high profile clients. Don’t be surprised if he tries to cross examine you.”

Answering, I was shocked to see my dad’s face crowded on the screen next to my stepmom, Ellen, and my twin sisters, Dani and Josie.

“Gabe!” The twins screeched, and Dad and I winced at the same time. There was nothing on earth that matched the volume teenage girls could manage. “OMG, is that your mate? He’s like a model!”

Asher chuckled, and gave a small wave. “Hi, I’m Asher Pierce, and yes, I’m Gabe’s mate. It’s good to meet you.” He squeezed my bouncing knee, stopping the movement, and I flashed him a lukewarm smile. Glad he had jumped in to introduce himself, because all I could focus on was my dad’s frowning face.

We looked nothing alike, beyond our height and build. Though his age was starting to show, with fine lines appearing around his blue eyes, and threads of gray showing in his dark blond hair. His middle was getting a bit soft, but he still cut an imposing figure.

His eyes bored into me now over the screen. He always did that, stared hard at me without saying a word, making me feel small, weak, and unworthy.

“Hello, Asher,” Ellen’s melodic voice chimed in, while also shushing the girls’ exuberance. “It’s so lovely to meet you. It was such a pleasant surprise when Vincente told us Gabe had found a mate.”

“Hello, Dad.” Finally, I found my voice, though it came out hoarse and rough. “How are you? All of you?”

Dad nodded his head sharply, “Gabriel.”

Air sucked in my nostrils painfully, and my knee shook beneath Asher’s hand. Fuck! I hated this. Hated the way he made me feel. Hated that fucking name that he refused to stop calling me, even after I had told him a million and one times that I preferred Gabe. Because I hated the way he said my name. Always filled with so much fucking disappointment.

Asher reached out and latched onto my hand, squeezing in the way I had grown used to him doing in a short amount of time. Closing my eyes, I swallowed, letting his honey scent wash over me. Breathing a bit easier. Slow and easy, like he had shown me. Imagined his hand on my chest, breathing with me.

My Daddy was here. He was holding my hand. Squeezing his strength into me. Making me brave. I had to be brave, for him. For our cubs. Finn needed to know the answers to these questions. And if it would help keep Asher safe – our babies safe – I could deal with talking to my dad. I could do this.

“He prefers Gabe,” Asher said sweetly, but there was a steel undertone to his voice, and I could tell by my dad’s stony face he had heard it.

Vincente Carmichael was one of the best, high profile divorce lawyers on the entire West coast. He had A-list, superstar clients, and often traveled to Beverly Hills and Palm Springs to handle their ending marriages or matings. He wasn't used to being reprimanded by anyone. Dad sat up a bit straighter, and Ellen's smile turned tight around the corners of her mouth.

"I'm sure you know that though, Mr. Carmichael," Asher carried on, sitting up straighter next to me. "Unless you are reprimanding him for something, please do not refer to him as Gabriel again."

Holy fuck balls! My eyes were huge as I stared at my Daddy, and then my dad on the small screen that he suddenly seemed to dominate. Ellen and the girls were all silent, and Asher and Dad had some kind of stare off, neither one backing down or giving an inch.

It was hot as fuck the way my Daddy called my dad out just because he knew I hated being called Gabriel. And fuck all if my dick wasn't joining the my-Daddy-is-a-bad-ass party. Hopefully it wasn't in the screen shot, or everyone was going to get an eye full. My little sisters did not need that imprinted on their brains.

Dad broke first, surprising the hell out of me, and turned his gaze back to me. "Gabri – Gabe– you said you had some questions about your papa."

"We do," glancing at Asher, he nodded, giving me his little, secretive smile. We had decided over the weekend that if Finn

confirmed his pregnancy, that we wouldn't tell people until Asher was further along. Not because we were superstitious or anything. Just that things had happened really fast for us, and we wanted some time that was just for the two of us.

I was a pretty private person, and I wasn't ready to share Asher, or our baby news, with everyone yet. I wanted time for our bond to grow, and for us to decide our future, without all of our friends putting their two cents in. Because my friends were nosy as fuck. I loved them dearly, thought of them as family, but sometimes they were just...too much.

Asher would tell his office staff, but only because they would need to work out schedules, and they needed to know. Especially if he got hit with morning sickness, more dizzy spells, or anything else that came along with being pregnant. All of my close friend group had babies, so I felt I knew a lot about omega pregnancies, but it was different when it was my mate and our pregnancy. I had stopped on the way home and bought several pregnancy books that I planned to read over the next few months.

“Asher and I are pregnant,” I blurted to the tiny screen holding the faces of my family. Ellen screamed as loud as my sisters with excitement, and they all seemed to be talking at once. Dad just stared at me hard, then turned his steely gaze to Asher, not saying a word. When the noise quieted down, I tried to figure out what question they had thrown out I should answer first.

Asher leaned over and kissed my cheek, and my sisters oohed and awed, and my face heated. “I got this, baby bear,” he whispered. “It’s okay you let our secret out.”

“I’m due at the end of October, but there’s a good possibility I’ll deliver sooner.” Looking between the twins, he grinned, “We found out today we’re having twins. Fraternal though, not identical, like you two.”

That news set them all off again, and I honestly wanted to plug my ears. Dad was wincing at the noise, and I felt a pang of sympathy if he dealt with that on a daily basis. I usually only had to put up with their Christmas excitement, and them fawning over me and wanting all my attention. I kind of liked being the object of my little sisters’ world if only for a couple of days each year.

Finally, Dad gruffly said, “Congratulations, Son.”

Nodding, I mumbled, “Thanks. It was a bit of a surprise, but we’re happy.”

It was the truth. Now came the hard part.

“I need to know what went wrong with my delivery. I know my size is what...” I paused, choking out the next words, “killed Papa, but I need to know if there was some underlying medical condition that might have played a factor in his...” fuck, it still hurt when I thought about causing my papa’s death, “death.”

Dad was frowning at me, his brows knitted together in confusion. “Gabriel?”

“Gabe,” Asher interjected sharply, and my father nodded.

The twins were silent, and Ellen was frowning. “Girls, say good-bye to your brother and Asher. I think we need to discuss this alone.” She shooed them out of the room, and I wondered what she was doing. And why.

“Dad?”

“I...you didn’t...I don’t know what to tell you.” Dad looked away, not meeting my eyes.

Ellen slammed her hand down on the table, causing all three of us to jump. Not one time had I ever seen her be anything but a sweet, charming omega. She was a lovely lady, and she always treated me well and made me feel welcome. Unlike my papa, who had been a petite omega sun bear, Ellen was a sturdy woman. A grizzly shifter, she’d had no problem delivering the twins.

I was very aware that Ellen was the one who always sent me a birthday card, even though I hated getting them. It was just a painful reminder of a day I wanted to forget. But I knew she meant well. Many times, I had wondered what it would have been like if she and Dad would have met when I was younger, still living at home. Would we be closer? It would have been nice to have the loving parent I saw her being to my sisters.

“Tell him the truth, Vincente!” she hissed, in a voice I had never heard her use, especially directed at my dad. “He deserves to know the truth!”

What truth? What in the fuck was even happening right now?

When Dad still didn't say anything, Ellen whispered something to him that I refused to hear. I wasn't going to be rude and use my shifter hearing and eavesdrop on their private conversation.

Apparently Asher had no such qualms, because he demanded, "What do you mean?"

Dad sighed loudly, and his eyes were cloudy and glistening. "Gabe, your papa's death had nothing to do with you. You didn't cause it. My Goddess, I had no idea you thought that. I...I'm so sorry."

In a move similar to Asher and me, Ellen took hold of Dad's hand, giving it a squeeze. They shared a look, and I felt like I was watching something intimate happening between them, and I had to look away. Because I really didn't want to see *that*.

"Tell him, darling. He needs to know. Tell him all of it. Maybe there's still a chance to fix this between you," she urged him quietly.

Dad took a shaky breath, and ran a hand through his hair. "Yes, you were a large baby. We're bears. We run large. But your papa delivered you just fine. My Goddess, he was so strong. He amazed me when he was delivering you. I will tell you, I had never felt so helpless in my life. You'll find out. Your papa died from an aneurysm, Gabe. There was nothing that could have saved him. There was no warning. He was

healthy, there were no issues with his labor and delivery. Everything was fine, for two days, everything was perfect, and then...he was just...gone. I just thank the Goddess that it happened when it did, and he had already delivered you. We could have lost you both.” His words were choked, and I swear I saw a tear fall from his eyes. When he swiped at it, I knew my eyes weren’t playing tricks on me. My dad was crying.

“I’m so thankful he got to spend those days with you. He was able to hold you, see you. Love you.”

Shaking my head, I protested, my mind unable to comprehend what my Dad was saying. “No, no. That’s not what happened. I heard Grandfather. At one of the holiday parties. I was maybe five. I snuck out of my room. I wanted to see what was happening. All the people, the food, the decorations. I was under a table, and I heard him tell someone that having me killed papa and because of that...” my voice was thick, pain threatening to close off my windpipe, “because of that you couldn’t love me. You couldn’t love anyone. But you did love someone. You love Ellen and you love the twins. But you never loved me.”

My dad looked devastated at my admission. Completely wrecked. His face paled, and his eyes were glassy. Ellen hung her head, and when she raised it up, she had tears in her eyes. “Vincente, tell him. He’s a grown man. He’s old enough to understand. It doesn’t make you weak.”

“Dad?”

“I’m so sorry, Gabri – Gabe – I’m so very sorry that I made you feel that way. I know nothing I say will make you forget or make it better, but maybe, someday, you’ll be able to forgive me.”

Forgive him?

“Losing your papa...” his big chest heaved, and his words were shaky, “it devastated me. It nearly destroyed me. I loved your papa more than I can even begin to describe. There aren’t words enough. We were so happy, and so excited to have you. And you were so perfect. So beautiful, and your papa...I remember looking at him when they laid you on his chest. I had never seen anything more beautiful than the two of you together. And then two days later, he was just gone. And I wanted to die along with him.”

Dad was weeping openly now, unashamed of the tears falling down his face, and I didn’t know what to do. Didn’t know what to say. Didn’t know how I was supposed to feel. I had carried so much guilt inside of me, for so long, and I didn’t have a clue how I was supposed to process any of what I was hearing. Instead I clung tightly to Asher’s hand, needing the steady presence of him to ground me.

“And then I was just broken,” Dad whispered raggedly. “It was like a black hole had swallowed me up and I didn’t know how to crawl out of it. The love of my life was gone. And instead of taking him and our new baby home, I was planning his funeral. I didn’t know what to do with you. I had not one clue what I was supposed to do with a newborn. You looked so

much like your papa, I couldn't bear to look at you. Every time I tried to hold you, I saw Raphael. Saw all the plans we had that would never be, and all I felt was a never ending pain that seemed to go on forever. I was empty inside. You look just like him, even now. And Goddess, how he loved you."

Looking down at the floor, I sniffled, trying not to cry right along with my dad. He always hated when I cried.

"And I wasn't a good father to you, and I'm so very sorry for that. I know I wasn't. Pain and grief consumed me, and I buried myself in work. I thought if I hired nannies, sent you to good schools, that would be enough. I didn't want you to feel my grief, to be tainted by it, so I pushed you away. And you reminded me so much of your papa, and it hurt so much, I...I became a cold, unfeeling monster, and then you were grown. Off to college and as far away from me as you could get. Not that I blamed you. Doing what made you happy, even if it wasn't the future I had planned for you."

He was right. I had deliberately gone to school on the East Coast as far from Washington state as I could get. I had absolutely refused to even entertain the idea of law school. I would have been a shit lawyer and I knew it. It wasn't where my heart was, and there would have been no way I could have stood in front of a judge and jury and tried a case.

"It wasn't until I met Ellen that I started to come out of the darkness that had consumed my life. She and I talked about so many things. Your papa. You. And she...well, she had a few choice words for me about my behavior, let me tell you. And

when we got pregnant with the girls, she made us – me – go to therapy. I know you hate me –”

My head whipped up. “I don’t hate you!”

But I didn’t particularly like him either. He was my dad, but we weren’t friends. We didn’t know each other. We were two people who happened to share the same D.N.A.

He smiled wanly at my declaration. “It’s nice of you to say, but I know the truth. I just hope someday we can...I don’t know, move on. And Gabe, I want you to know, your papa would be so proud of the man you’ve become. I’m so proud of the man you’ve become, Son. I love you.”

Suddenly, I couldn’t breathe. Couldn’t think. My chest ached, my ears ringing. My eyes burned. Shaking my head, I stood up quickly, mumbling, “I need a minute.”

“Gabe,” Asher tried to take my hand, and I yanked it away, imploring him with my eyes. Pleading with him to understand.

“I just need a minute.”

And like the coward I was, I fled the room.

Chapter Thirty-One



Asher

Entering my bedroom, I was surprised to find Gabe there. I really thought he would head into his nursery. Instead, he was laying on his side, back to the door, knees curled to his chest. His back was shaking, little tremors running through him.

I set aside the mug of hot cocoa I had made him after I had wrapped up the conversation with his parents. I wasn't sure how he felt about his stepmom, but I was going with parents for the time being. She seemed wonderful, and loving, and we had chatted a few minutes after Gabe had left the room. About my pregnancy, having twins, and that they wanted to visit when the babies were born.

Vincente had looked gutted by Gabe's reaction, and I had promised him that I would make sure Gabe was taken care of. He had asked me to let him know that Gabe was indeed all right, but I would let Gabe decide what he wanted his dad to know. I had a strong suspicion that Gabe hadn't "been all right" for a very long time.

Stretching out my length against Gabe's back, I wrapped my arms around his chest, and pulled him back against me. Sobs wracked his big frame, silent, but his body was shaking with the force of them.

"Let it out, baby bear." Stroking his skin, I whispered into his hair.

He turned in my arms, pulling me impossibly closer, and he unleashed all the pain he had kept bottled inside for far too long. He seemed to do that, this sweet bear of mine. Pushed things down that caused him pain. Brushed them off, acted like they didn't hurt him. Never talking about them.

“I don't know what to feel anymore,” Gabe cried, “everything I thought had happened didn't happen the way I thought. But that doesn't make what my dad did okay?”

Stroking his back, I whispered, “I know.”

“He shoved me off to nannies. And they weren't the Mary Poppins kind, either. They were cold, and were only there for the very nice paycheck. He didn't do anything with me. Ever! He looked at me like I was the scum on the bottom of his shoe! I was fucking touch starved, starved for affection, starved for even a kind word from him! Fuck, any word from him! He made me nervous and scared and afraid of my own shadow, because every word I ever said, everything I ever did, was somehow wrong!”

Clutching him tighter to me, because there was nothing else I could do to take his pain away, I just held him while he unleashed years of pent up pain and anger. Tried to push all my love through our bond onto him.

All this man had ever wanted was to be loved. Wanted. Needed. Accepted.

“He never talked about Papa! I know dick all about him except his name, the ritzy fucking family he came from, and that I look just like him. I mean, I do, I've seen pictures. But

only because I found an album when I was snooping one day. Not because there were any out! It was like he wanted to make him disappear, like he had never existed! I needed to know him. I needed to know about him. He's part of me. I had a right to know!"

"You did," planting a kiss on the top of his head, I pulled him closer.

Even though I was angry with Vincente, I also understood his reaction to things in the past. I couldn't imagine what losing his mate like that had done to him. Couldn't imagine what he had gone through. Honestly, I didn't even like thinking about it.

Losing Gabe, even in such a short time of us being together, would bring me to my knees. It would decimate me. My dad had managed to keep going after we lost Mom, but the light in his eyes that had burned for her had been extinguished. He had existed, he had raised Shay and I, and he had been a great dad, but he had never quite been the same. If he had lost Mom after Shay's birth, would our upbringing have been completely different? Would he have recovered? Would he have been able to raise us? I wasn't sure.

I wasn't excusing Vincente, because I was beyond angry at the man, but I could also understand his pain. However, I was also going to be diligent in making sure he never hurt my baby bear again. Because listening to Gabe sob was killing me. And it was making me a bit ragey at his dad. We were going to have some serious talks, Vincente and I, to get past the pain he

had caused Gabe. Understanding Vincente's pain didn't make how he had treated his son acceptable.

Holding Gabe while he cried his heart out was gut wrenching. Only because he was hurting, and there wasn't a damn thing I could do to make it better, and I felt helpless. A Daddy's job was to take their little's hurt away, and there was nothing I could do to make this pain disappear for him.

Finally, his sobs slowed. He sat up, brushing his tears away with his hand. "I'm sorry." His voice was raw, his nose snotty, his eyes red. He was a mess. A beautiful mess.

"You have nothing to be sorry for." Handing him the lukewarm cocoa, I smiled gently. My shirt was soaked with his tears but I didn't care. "It's still warm. Drink it. It will help."

He took a tentative sip. "Will it?"

"Hot cocoa makes everything better."

He snort laughed, draining the cup. "Spoken like a true Daddy."

Sobering, he looked away. "I'm sorry you had to see me like that."

He was embarrassed. "Don't be."

He shook his head, swiping angrily at a few tears that were still falling. "I'm just a big baby. Always have been, I guess."

Sitting up now, I straddled his lap. Cradling his face with both my hands, I forced him to look at me. "You are the sweetest, kindest, bravest man I know. Crying doesn't make

you weak, Gabe. It makes you human. It makes you strong. And wonderful. I don't want a cold, uncaring alpha. I want you. Full of goodness, and feelings. All the feelings."

"You're always taking care of me. You'll get tired of it."

"Okay, enough of this nonsense. You needed to let all that grief out. That was some pretty heavy stuff, and you needed to process it. And I will never get tired of taking care of you. Because you take care of me too. Look at the last few days. You've barely let me out of your sight. This is a partnership. We take care of each other. Whatever it is we need. You need to not think about adult things sometimes, and just be little and have fun. And I need you to tell me that I need to back off, and give you a minute to think. And to be my strong alpha when I'm scared."

"Nothing scares you, Daddy," he looked at me through his wet, spiky lashes.

"Really?" My voice rose an octave. "Because if I'm being honest, I am freaking the fuck out right now. Twins, Gabe. Twins. Two babies. This was not in my plans for us. This is happening way too fast. I figured two years, three tops, we would think about having a cub. All of this is just out of control."

"Did you?" he quirked that sexy mouth of his in a half smile, his red rimmed eyes dancing in amusement.

"Yes. But no, Fate had to go and fuck with my plans."

He ran his hands down my spine, resting them on the curve of my ass. “I’ve heard She does that.”

“Well, She can stop it.” Pouting, I stuck my bottom lip out. He nipped at it, and electricity spiked through me, almost like the first time we had touched.

“You can’t always be in control of everything, Daddy,” he chided me softly.

Threading my fingers through his hair, I brushed it off his forehead. His face was hot and sweaty from crying. “I love you, Gabe. I know it’s probably too early to say it, but I do. I love you. And I love that we are having these babies, even if I’m *freaking the fuck* out inside. I love all of you. I love everything about you. Big or little, it doesn’t matter. I love you.”

Gabe stared at me with wide eyes, and I waited for him to say something. Not expecting him to say the words back yet, because Gabe didn’t rush into anything I was learning. I honestly wouldn’t have been surprised if he would have told me he needed a minute.

But he needed to hear the words from me, now. He needed to know that he was lovable. He was needed. That I needed him and I loved him. Was it too soon to say it? Maybe. I didn’t care if it was. He needed to know and I would do everything in my power to make him feel loved every single day of the rest of our lives.

“The way you sassed my dad was hot as fuck.” He kissed my neck, in that spot above my mating gland that made me shiver

with want and he couldn't seem to keep his mouth off of it. He was always marking me there.

“Yeah?” The word was no more than a needy, breathless moan.

He nodded, kissing down the long column of my neck, “So hot. I thought everyone was going to see my raging hard on.”

“That would have been...something,” was the best I could get out as he pulled the collar of my shirt away from my throat, and sucked a kiss there.

“No one has ever done that for me before, Daddy.”

My dick jerked at the way he moaned the word ‘Daddy’, leaking almost as much as my ass was.

“I love you, Asher Pierce,” he whispered, stretching out over me, keeping his weight on one elbow. His other hand held me tight by my waist, and my body writhed restlessly beneath his hands. “I think I have from the very first time I walked in this house and saw you. Looking like a smirking angel dropped down from heaven.”

It was cheesy, that line of his, but fuck if it didn't make me go all soft inside. Our clothes melted away beneath softly roaming hands and sweet kisses. This wasn't the frantic need that usually burned like a raging fire between us. It was softer, gentler, but it was so much more than anything we had shared before. Intimate.

And when Gabe slowly eased his cock inside me from behind as we both lay on our sides, we both groaned from the

pleasure. One of his hands held both mine above my head, trapping my wrists. His other hand held my thigh tightly, pulling my leg over his hip. He moved at a languid pace, both of us pushing and pulling, until we found the perfect rhythm.

“Cum on me,” I begged when we were both nearly there. “Cover me with your spunk.”

Gabe pulled out, and I lay on my back panting, watching him with hooded eyes. His thick thighs straddled my hips as his hand pumped his hard cock furiously. Wrapping a fist around my dick, I pumped myself, using my other hand to tweak the hard bud of my nipple. Writhing between his spread legs, my body moved in a sensual dance. Watching my alpha jack himself until he was spraying his cum all over my heated skin, had my orgasm ripping out of me with a shout.

Swirling two fingers in the white mixture, I brought it up to my lips and sucked it clean. Moaning obscenely as the taste of both of us danced on my tongue. Scooping up more, I brought my fingers to Gabe’s lips. He sucked my fingers deeply into his mouth, his tongue swirling over my skin, pulling off with a loud pop.

Bending over me, he lapped at the mess on my stomach, long swipes of his tongue making me squirm beneath his steadying hands. My hands tangled in his thick hair, watching as he traced every hollow and crevice, until there wasn’t a drop left on my skin.

“Want to taste you,” I whined, feeling needy for more of my love. My dick was aching, hard again, and so was his. “Need

you again.”

Whether it was pregnancy hormones, saying I love you, or just this new found intimacy between us, I couldn't say for sure. But I couldn't get enough of him, my need not at all satiated yet.

He bent his head to capture my lips, spreading me wide with his hips and thighs between my legs. “As you wish.”

Chapter Thirty-Two



Gabe

July

Pounding down the stairs, I called, “Are you sure you don’t want to come? You can, you know?”

Asher was stretched out on one side of my U-shaped couch, remote in his hand, a blanket covering him. It was the weekend after the fourth of July holiday, and the air conditioning was pumping through the house. It was cool and comfortable in the house. One thing I had discovered about my mate over the last few months was the fact that he couldn’t sleep, nap, or lay without a blanket on him. Regardless of how hot it might be outside. He loved being warm, and I loved when he snuggled into me at night, and would let out a little purr.

Glancing at the television, I saw he had his favorite movie on. Smiling as I bent down to plant a quick kiss on his lips, I told him, “Our kids are going to come out quoting lines from this movie.”

“I’m okay with that,” he grinned right back, looking comfortable and relaxed, a blanket over his legs.

“I feel weird leaving you home alone.”

He scrunched his nose up at me. “Why? We aren’t joined at the hips. Well,” he wagged his brows, “sometimes we are. Go see your friends. I hate that we missed Finn and Wade’s

surprise wedding because of me. You need to go catch up with them. You haven't really hung out with them in months."

Nudging his hip, he scooted over so I could sit in the little spot he made for me. Brushing his blond locks back from his face, my other hand rubbed over his barely there baby bump. He was hardly showing, and some days it was hard to believe there were two babies growing inside him.

"We didn't miss it because of you. We missed it because that storm that blew through here knocked a tree through the roof. We weren't driving hours from home with a big ass hole still in the roof of the house."

Typically, I gave my crew three weeks off in July. We had Asher's new roof scheduled for the first week in August. A horrendous storm blew through last weekend and lightning had hit one of the trees close to his house. The sound the limb had made crashing through the roof had been terrifying, waking us both out of a sound sleep.

Luckily, Stu and a handful of my other employees had been in town, choosing staycations over traveling. We'd been able to get the hole patched and the new roof taken care of over the holiday weekend. I was super thankful my house was just across the street, and I'd had a safe place to take my omega until the damage had been repaired.

Giving him a sly smile, I reminded him, "And that was the most fun I've ever had putting on a roof for anyone."

Asher blushed, then swatted at me with his hand. "Stop it. I can't believe we did that in the kitchen. With your crew on the

roof! I know they heard me. And you didn't even wipe your mouth off before you climbed back up there. I'm never going to be able to look at any of them ever again."

"They did hear you." Teasing him, I grinned broadly.

He hid his face behind his hands, groaning.

Unfortunately, the timing of the limb coming down hadn't been the best. Wade had called that day and he and Finn had decided to get married on the fourth. The entire Sinclair clan had been a couple of hours away at their family lodge, when they had decided an impromptu wedding was what they wanted. They had been simultaneously celebrating the holiday and the quads birthdays together.

The wedding news had come as a surprise. Wade had been planning his dream wedding since he and Finn had gotten engaged. They had waited to get married because they had found out they were pregnant with Remy, and Wade refused to walk down the aisle pregnant. Remy had turned one in April, and wedding plans had been ongoing heavily since his birth. To get the call that they were having a very small, private wedding at the family lodge was surprising.

But with a hole in the roof hours before we were supposed to start driving hundreds of miles north, there was no way we would make the wedding. We had been planning to tell all our friends about Asher and I and our babies at that time, since pretty much our closest friends were all Sinclairs, or mated to them. Having them all together in one place was convenient.

Asher was past the three-month mark, and just starting to show. We had hidden out enough together and it was time to start sharing our news. I was honestly surprised we'd kept it from our friends this long. The only reason being I hadn't seen any of my friends lately. Everyone had been super busy with work, kids, and family events, including Asher and me. We had made a conscious effort to spend as much time together as we could.

"You should see if Brendan is free, since Ryan will be at this lunch."

Asher yawned loudly, "I just want to be lazy. Maybe take a nap. Go, shoo." He waved his hands at me, telling me to leave. "Go play with your friends. Get all the tea and tell me all the latest when you get back."

"Okay, we'll be at the Main Street Diner. Text me if you want me to bring you back anything. Or you want me to pick up dinner."

"I thought you were grilling?" Asher whined. He got that way when he was sleepy, which he had been a lot the last few months.

Holding up my hands in defeat, I nodded, "Chicken breasts are marinating, and there's corn on the cob. I was just offering in case you decided you wanted something else. Don't get hangry on me."

"I'm not hangry," he huffed cutely, "just sleepy. And craving chicken."

“Your wish is my command, Daddy.”



Walking into the diner, I spotted my three friends in a corner booth. Quinn and Wade were sharing space, and waved when they saw me. Sliding in next to Ryan, I returned his hug.

Man, I had missed these guys. Sure, we chatted almost daily, but it wasn't the same as seeing each other in person. We needed to do better about making time for each other. We used to make a point about trying to meet up at least once a month, but we'd all been slacking about making friend time a priority. Even me. And I was feeling guilty about not telling them about Asher and me. For once, it seemed that Ryan had kept the secret about Asher, me, and us being fated mates.

“Congratulations married man,” I told Wade, and he beamed. Stretching over the table, I hugged him.

He grinned up at me, “I know you can smell it on me, so just say it. They all know anyway.”

“Gonna name this one after an *X-Men* too?” I couldn't help teasing him about his pup's names. He was right, I could smell he was pregnant again.

Wade rubbed his belly, even though he wasn't showing yet, at least not from what I could see from this side of the table. But Wade was short and the table hit him at chest level and hid

most of his lower half. “I did *not* name my kids after superheroes.”

“Just because you keep saying that doesn’t make it true.” Quinn elbowed him good naturedly.

“Okay, so give me the highlights from last weekend.” I told them after we had all placed our order, then held up a finger. “Hold on, I forgot to text Da – Asher.”

One of my rules was I had to text Daddy anytime I got somewhere, to tell him I made it safe. I had to let him know where I was, or if I was running late. Asher really didn’t have that many rules, or it didn’t seem like it to me. Most of them were geared around my safety, and since I was usually a good boy, I hadn’t even earned any punishments yet. Not that I wanted to be punished. But I was curious what a spanking would feel like. Maybe we could just try that for fun when he wasn’t pregnant. There was no way I could lay across his lap right now. I was way too heavy.

Once my text was sent, I looked up to find three pairs of eyes staring at me curiously.

“I don’t think we’re the only ones who have tea to spill,” Wade tapped a finger against his lips. “Spill. You were about to say ‘Daddy’.”

Ryan was practically vibrating in his seat, grinning broadly.

“I will tell you guys my news after I hear about this birthday weekend slash surprise wedding.”

Wade grumbled something unintelligible under his breath, not happy that I was making him wait.

Quinn snorted. “Shit show. It was a shit show.”

Ryan nodded, agreeing. “It was definitely full of surprises.”

Giving Wade a hard look, I asked, “You weren’t mean to Sebastian were you? Because seriously, you need to get over whatever is up your ass about him.”

Wade gave me a wounded look. “Um, what is up my ass? He got you shot, let’s start there. And then move on to him putting my kids,” he waved his arm around the table, nearly knocking Quinn’s water over before Quinn snatched it up out of the way, “*all* of our kids in danger. And he hurt Jamie.”

“There it is,” Quinn commented dryly.

Wade waved a dismissive hand in the air, before practically falling on the plate of fries our waitress placed in front of him. “I’m so hungry! Anyhoo, no, I was not *mean*.”

He stressed that last word, rolling his eyes and giving a little body wiggle for emphasis. Drama, thy name was Wade Monroe. Wade Sinclair now.

Ryan snorted, rolling his green eyes. “We have very different definitions of the word *mean*, but please continue.”

“Sebastian and I are fine.” Wade shrugged, biting into his burger. “We worked our stuff out months ago. Mostly. I mean, he’s not my favorite person on earth, but we tolerate each other.”

Quinn nodded in agreement. “I will say out of everything that happened over those four days – the longest of my life by the way – Wade and Sebastian’s feud, for lack of a better word, was a blip.”

Now I was super curious at what exactly Asher and I had missed. Damn storms, falling limbs, and roofs. Though the rim job in the kitchen might have been worth it all.

Quinn held up a hand when Wade started to continue the story. “Let me tell it. We don’t want to be here all day, and I want to hear Gabe’s news. Gabe never has news. Okay, here’s the 4-1-1. Wade and Sebastian are both pregnant, due in November.”

Swallowing a bite of my sandwich, I gulped, “Both of you are due in November?”

“Yes, but different days. Not even the same week. It’s fine.” Wade assured the table, waving a dismissive hand in the air. “Sebastian wouldn’t dare have his baby the same day as me. I won’t allow it.”

It was Quinn’s turn to roll his green eyes. “Moving on. You know about Wade and Finn’s impromptu wedding, brought on, no doubt, by baby number three. Oh, Jamie and Sebastian are pretty much living together.”

“That I knew,” I interjected, loving the look of horror on Wade’s face that I knew something he didn’t. “What?” I asked him innocently, grinning at him. Wade was fun to wind up.

“How did you know this and why did you not tell me?” He demanded sharply.

Shrugging, I popped a fry in my mouth. “Sebastian is my neighbor, remember? Jamie has a Harley and it’s loud as fuck. Plus, I know his car and it’s there some mornings when I leave for work. And it’s not your business who Jamie Sinclair is spending his nights with. Or mine.”

Wade shook his dark head at me, the bright purple spikes on top bobbing. “I’m so disappointed in you right now.”

Agreeing with a shake of my head, I ate another fry, not upset. “You’ll get over it.”

Turning my gaze back to Quinn, I commented, “Nothing sounds like what I would describe as a shit show.”

“Just wait,” Ryan muttered. “He hasn’t even gotten to the wild part of the weekend.”

“So apparently...” Quinn ran a hand over his face, shaking his head, “nope, I still can’t say it out loud. It’s too fucking weird. I think I’m fucking damaged for life. My parents have finally put me in therapy.”

“Oh good grief, don’t be a drama queen,” Wade snarked, “it’s not *that* bad.”

Quinn scrunched his face, and gave Wade a *whatever* look. Wade wrinkled his nose back at him, looking like he was thinking hard about whatever it was that had happened, then agreed, “Okay, it kind of is.”

“I think it’s great for Mary,” Ryan finally decided to chime in. He’d waited until he had plowed through his burger first though.

Mary Sinclair was a wonderful lady, who I happened to like and respect. She had always been kind to me, very warm and welcoming. I’d even been a little envious of all the Sinclair kids, because Mary seemed like such an awesome mom.

“Someone just tell me already.” Groaning at the suspense, I took a bite of my burger.

“Well, Mary has a fated mate. And she found them,” Quinn muttered.

It wasn’t a secret that Mary and her deceased husband, William, hadn’t been fated. But Mary had never remarried after his death when the quads were ten, and it was long speculated it was because he had been the love of her life. Quinn and Wade disagreed with that rumor, though, often saying Mary’s true love was still out there.

Squinting, I sat my burger down. “Did you say *them*?”

“Yep, them.” Wade nodded, sucking half his milkshake down, then slamming his hand against his forehead in pain. “Fuck! Brain freeze! Why do none of you stop me from doing that?”

“As if anyone could stop you from doing anything,” Quinn took a deep breath, exhaling sharply. “Your Finn’s problem now. And Mary’s fated mates are my parents, so that’s some... something.”

Blinking, I dropped the fry I had been about to shove in my mouth. “Say what now?”

Quinn nodded, looking disturbed. “Yep, my parents. My parents who have been married thirty fucking years. Who are fated mates to each other, and are now in a triad with their other fated mate, my mother-in-law.” He shuddered visibly, tossing a fry down on his plate like he had lost his appetite.

“Holy shit!” I hadn’t seen any of that coming. “How did your mates take this news?” I would need to ask Daddy if he had talked to Daddy Brendan last week. I would bet not, because he hadn’t said anything about any of this. And Asher loved a good bit of gossip. Surely if he had known about this, he would have shared the news.

“I think Lachlan may possibly still be drunk,” Quinn stated.

Wade shook his head, “Finn is...not great. Kind of walks around with a weird look on his face most days. But then, it’s Finn, so it’s hard to tell. Might just be his face. I mean, it’s a gorgeous face, but you all know how he looks if he doesn’t smile.”

Ryan shrugged, seeming not as affected as the others by this frankly, unexpected turn of events. “Bren is okayish. He just wants his mom to be happy, and she seems really happy, so I think he’s focusing on that. And he adores Maeve and Allan, so that’s a plus. Because it would suck if he didn’t like them. He’s been doing a lot of crocheting. A *lot*. Like I think Christmas and all the new babies are covered. For the next few years.”

That didn't sound like any of them were doing great to me.

“How did they figure it out?” I asked, taking a sip of water. “I mean, did they, ah...I mean... Maeve and Allan have been together a long time.” How did you politely ask if your friend's parents had boinked like bunnies? Ew. There were just some things that were fundamentally known as off limit topics.

Quinn bit his lip, “Mary and Mom figured it out first. They said the first time they hugged they knew. And they swear nothing happened,” he lowered his voice, shuddering, “sexually, until after they had talked about things and what it meant, and talked to my dad. That's when they realized he was also Mary's fated mate.”

Wade turned to him, his mouth turned down in a frown, “Wait, you asked them if they did the nasty before telling your dad?”

“Fuck yes, I asked them!” Quinn lowered his voice when a few heads turned our way at his shout. “I needed to know! If my mom had been unfaithful to my dad, I had a right to know.”

Ryan tilted his head, “Did you?”

Wade pointed a finger at him, “Look Pollyanna, we don't need that here right now. Get on board with being skeeved out like the rest of us. I know I said it wasn't that bad, but it's just because my brain can't process all the ick.”

Ryan stuck his tongue out at Wade, tossing a fry across the table at him. “I like them all and I’m glad Mary has found her mate. Mates. She has been alone a long time, and she and William were not fated, so I’m happy for them. There, I said it.”

Quinn stared at him hard before rolling his eyes, “I can’t with you sometimes, kid.”

“Anyway,” Wade picked up telling the story, “Maevie and Allan are selling their house and moving into Mary’s McMansion.”

“Wow.” That was the only word that seemed to do this all justice.

“That’s one word to describe it.” Quinn tossed his napkin on his plate. “Okay, enough Sinclair family drama. Tell us what you’ve been up to.” He wiggled his eyebrows at me, tossing a chestnut curl off his shoulder. “Because you’ve been avoiding us, Teddy Bear.”

“Yeah, what’s with you and the hunka hunka Doctor Pierce?” Wade teased. “He was super ultra-protective of you after you were shot. It was kinda hot the way he was being all fierce about letting people see you. Bossy and all in charge.”

“Asher and I are fated mates.” I blurted it out, like ripping off a band-aid. Whew, it felt good to finally tell my friends.

Cheers, hugs, and good wishes were dispersed by all my friends.

“I’m so glad you got it all worked out,” Ryan told me, resting his head on my shoulder. Nudging my head into his, I head hugged him back.

“What worked out?” Wade demanded, waving a finger at Ryan. “What do you know? Did you know about this, Ryan Foster? And how dare you not tell us! We are the Musketeers. We don’t keep secrets from each other.”

“You kept your pregnancy a secret,” Ryan pointed out. “Besides, Teddy Bear made me promise to not tell.”

Wade turned his sharp gray eyes to me, his pointy chin going up a notch. He looked hurt, and I felt terrible. Wade and I had been friends before I was friends with any of the others.

“It’s true, I did,” I told them, “but only because I wasn’t sure what was going to happen between Asher and me. I was taking a minute. I needed a minute. Asher gave me a month to figure things out.”

Wade sat back, staring at me in contemplation, before he nodded. “You do like to chew on things sometimes.”

“I know I can be stubborn; I just don’t like to jump into things. And he was coming on super strong. It was disconcerting.”

Wade grinned. “Yeah, I could see that. Asher has big dick vibes. I bet he’s a top. Is he a top? You can tell us. There’s no judgment here.”

Rolling my eyes, I felt my face heat up. “He’s not a top.”

Quinn shrugged nonchalantly. “Lach loves it when I top him. It’s fine if Asher is a top, is all we’re saying.”

“He’s not a top,” I growled. “He’s just confident. Self-assured. Bossy. Definitely not a top.” I wasn’t about to tell them that when Asher got naked, he loved to be submissive as fuck. Even if he did try to give me orders. It was cute the way he tried to top from the bottom, and I kind of loved reminding him he wasn’t in charge during sexy times.

“Does he have a big dick to go with all that big dick energy?” Wade wanted to know.

“I’m not telling you that.”

“Fine,” he huffed, “but I’m super disappointed in you.”

“You’ll live.” Taking another drink of water, I added, “I have more news.”

Wade tapped the table, “Spill the tea!”

“There’s something very wrong with you, you know that, right?” Quinn asked him.

Wade scrunched his nose in annoyance. “You’ve been with me since we were six. You only have yourself to blame for your poor life decisions. At this point, you’re here because you want to be.”

Ryan giggled at their snarking, then urged me, “What’s the other news?”

“Asher and I are pregnant. With twins.”

The table erupted, and I couldn't hold in my grin. After more hugs, and more well wishes, and Wade saying we had to plan a baby shower and me saying we did not want one, we finally paid our bills. Asher hadn't texted that he wanted anything, but I grabbed us both chocolate milkshakes to go. I'd drink his if he didn't end up wanting it, because ice cream.

Waving to Quinn and Wade as they drove away, I walked Ryan to his vehicle. Pulling me down, he hugged me tight, whispering, "I'm so happy for you, Teddy Bear. I can't wait to be an uncle again. And you've found your Daddy. I knew he was out there."

"I did. And he's perfect."

Walking into the house ten minutes later, I found Asher sleeping on the couch, one hand resting protectively on his baby bump. Setting the shakes on the coffee table, I picked up the remote, turning off the movie still playing. He had to have started it over, because it had been near the end when I'd left and was now in the middle.

"I was watching that," Asher sighed, blinking sleepy eyes at me.

"Right." Grinning at him, I handed him the shake. He took a sip, sighing happily. "Good?"

He nodded, looking adorably sleep mussed, his cheeks rosy and his hair ruffled. "Did you have fun?"

Sitting behind him, I pulled him against me, so he was leaning on me. "Yeah, we missed a whole bunch of drama by

not showing up to the wedding. Honestly, I'm kind of glad that limb came through the roof."

He turned to look at me quizzically, "Really? I can't wait to hear this. Oh, before I forget, Jamie sent me a text."

"Did he?" Reaching around him I sucked on his straw, stealing some of his ice cream, getting lightly swatted on my arm for it. Mine was empty since I'd drank it on the drive home. Grinning, I asked, "What did he want?"

"He wanted to let me know there is going to be a Daddy/Mommy/little night at his club." When he felt me tense, he turned his head catching my gaze with his own. "We don't have to go, if you don't want to. And I understand if you don't. But it sounds like there's going to be a ton of fun little activities. I was going to see if Ryan and Brendan wanted to go too. And I will be with you the entire time."

Scraping my teeth over my bottom lip, I stared into his eyes. "You won't leave me alone?"

Shaking his head, he laid it back on me, sipping his shake. "Not for one second. And we can leave at any time if you are uncomfortable or not having fun. You say red and we are done. We come home. No questions asked."

He offered me his shake this time, and ducking my head, I took a sip, letting the cold, chocolate ice cream melt on my tongue.

It might be fun to go with my own Daddy. To wear my Pooh onesie and if Ryan was there, that could be a lot of fun. But it

was also really scary and there might be mean people there like last time. But Daddy was going to be with me. He would protect me, and with my Daddy by my side I could be brave.

“Okay, Daddy, we can go.”

Chapter Thirty-Three



Gabe

My hand unconsciously tightened in Daddy's, as we stepped over the threshold of the doorway marked Nursery at Sinful Playgrounds. The room was filled with a handful of people, and I felt my heart speed up, my breathing coming just a bit too fast.

Memories of the last time I had been in this room swarmed me, threatening to ruin the night.

"Breathe baby bear," Asher's hand gave mine a reassuring squeeze, his words whispered in my ear. "Daddy is right here. I won't let anything happen to you."

It was Little's Night at Sinful Playgrounds, and I wasn't feeling brave standing in this room, even with Daddy by my side. And now Ryan and Daddy Brendan were late. There were about six littles, Daddies and even a Mommy, filling up the space.

A club DM leaned against one of the side walls, muscled arms crossed over the black t-shirt stretched across his wide chest. His bald head shone brightly under the lights of the room, making his dark goatee stand out. He nodded his head towards us, smiling warmly.

"Asher," he greeted in a deep voice that had me clinging to Daddy's side tighter, "haven't seen you in a while. I can see

why.” His gaze traveled over Daddy’s baby bump, which had grown quickly in the last few weeks.

Daddy nodded back, one hand rubbing over his belly. His other hand went to the small of my back urging me forward, when all I really wanted to do was dig my feet in and not move. Or hide behind him. “Zane, this is my mate and little, Gabey.”

It was strange hearing Daddy call me Gabey. I much preferred it when he called me baby bear. That was his name for me, and it made me feel extra special.

“Welcome,” Zane said to me, taking in my white Pooh onesie, white socked feet, and Chester tucked under my arm, without batting an eye. My binky was clipped to my onesie, so I wouldn’t lose it and it was conveniently close for when I needed it.

“We have a bunch of different activities tonight. Over there,” Zane pointed to a corner of the room where two littles had their heads bent together over a table, “we have a finger-painting table. Don’t worry, we have smocks for everyone,” he assured Daddy. Good, because I didn’t want to get paint on my onesie.

Asher put my backpack down on one of the sofas, glancing at the activity table. My duffle with my big clothes was safely tucked inside a locker in the changing room. But my Merida backpack held a change of little clothes, my favorite blanket, and Doc. Ryan had told me he was bringing both Wolfy and Felix the Fox, and I should bring two stuffies with me. Who

knew why? Sometimes he got crazy notions in his head, but I just went with it.

“And over along that wall, we’ve got a Play-Doh and a coloring table. Blocks and LEGOs are over there. And we just put in this cool electric train over by the cars. Snacks are in their usual spot, and feel free to help yourself.” He must have seen my eyes widen at the word “snacks”, because Zane amended, “Daddies can help themselves for their littles.”

Asher chuckled at the crestfallen look on my face, handing me Doc, who I quickly shuffled in my arms next to Chester.

“Changing room is through that door, if your little needs a diaper change, and a private restroom is the door next to it.” Zane finished his verbal tour, while I was still taking in the room with wide, hesitant eyes.

It looked a bit different than the last time I had been there, right after the club’s opening. There was now a soft rug with some kind of town scene on it. Wide roads were painted on it, where you could run toy cars across it. Bean bag chairs had been added to a corner, along with at least two more sofas for the caretaker’s comfort. It was a lot more kid friendly than last time, and there was even a play kitchen area that must have been custom made, as it was sized for littles.

I wondered if Jamie had picked some of the littles brains – or Ryan’s – about things to add to make it more fun and little friendly.

To my surprise, this time no one seemed to pay any attention to my arrival. The one Mommy and the Daddies had looked

over at us, a couple even nodded to Asher in greeting, but that was it. They didn't seem to find anything odd about my appearance. The littles hadn't even bothered to notice me at all yet, they were so intent on their activities.

“What do you want to do first, baby bear?” Asher asked, glancing around the room.

Scraping my bottom lip with my teeth, I stared wide-eyed around me, gripping my stuffies tight. I really wished Ryan was here.

“Ummm...”

“We can just sit and wait for Ry and Daddy Brendan, if you want.”

“When will they be here?” Shuffling from one foot to the other, I fidgeted. I was having a hard time getting into my headspace, and my stomach was all swoopy with nerves. Rocking back and forth, I chewed on my lip, scared and wishing my bestie was here. Not really wanting to leave Daddy's side without Ry.

A little dressed in a cute pajama set with kittens on it, and her blonde hair in pigtails, glanced over her shoulder. Seeing me, a bright smile lit up her face.

“You want to paint with us?” Her exuberant voice carried loudly over the room, reminding me of Ry. He could be hella loud when he was in little space. The woman who was sitting on one of the sofas said in a very Mommy voice, “CC, inside voice.”

“Sorry Mommy,” CC didn’t really sound sorry, and she held up her paint covered hands and waved them in my direction. “It’s great fun!”

“Ummm,” my voice wavered, and I looked to Daddy for help.

“It’s up to you, baby bear,” he told me. “If you want to wait for Ry you can.”

Leaning into him, I whispered, “Will you walk me over there? I want to paint, but I don’t know them. What if they won’t like me? I’m scared, Daddy.”

Asher kissed the side of my head, his arms wrapped around me tightly and squeezed. His baby bump nudged me, and I felt a little kick from one of the twins. Being squeezed by Asher was one of my favorite things on earth – whether I was big or little – and it instantly made me feel safe and secure. That and the baby kick nudged me in encouragement.

Swallowing hard, I whispered, “I want to be brave, Daddy.”

“I told you, you’re the bravest person I know, baby bear.” He took Chester and Doc from me, and put them on the floor resting against my pack. “You don’t want to get paint on them. I’ll keep them safe for you.” Holding out his hand to me, I took it, smiling shakily. Taking a deep breath, I nodded, finally allowing myself to slip into that warm place I craved.

“k, I ready.”

Asher walked me over, and CC introduced the little boy next to her as Mikey. He smiled shyly at me, and whispered a soft,

“Hi.” Daddy got a smock over my onesie to protect my clothes from the paint, and CC slid a glossy white paper in front of me.

“It has to be this type of paper for the fingerpaints,” she informed me in a very knowing tone. By the way she spoke, I guessed she was older when she regressed. Possibly seven or eight. “Here’s the blue and red. If you mix them on your paper, they make purple. But don’t mix them in the jars or you will mess the colors up.”

“Everyone knows that, CC,” Mikey cut in with an annoyed tone. “You don’t have to tell him that.”

Hands on her hips, she huffed, “Not everybody does know, Mikey, or they wouldn’t get yucky sometimes, now would they? And he’s littler than we are, so he prob’ly don’t know.”

“CC,” her Mommy’s voice warned softly. “Remember our talk about being a little miss bossy britches and attitude? Do you need a time out?”

Snorting, I dipped my finger into the blue and smeared it over my paper. *Oh, this was fun!* I’d need to ask Daddy if we could get some of these for home.

“I t’ink you’ll like my friend Ry when he gets here,” I told CC, who was now vigorously smearing her paint back and forth across her paper. Mikey looked to be using his finger to delicately make an actual picture. There was a sun, grass, and some trees. “He can be loud and bossy too, but he’s nice.”

“We know Ry!” CC exclaimed happily, “Are you Gabey?”

“Uh, yeah,” scrunching up my nose at her, I whispered, “who told you?”

“Ry talks about you all the time,” Mikey joined in.

Smiling down at my paper, I told them, “Me and him is besties.”

“Me and Mikey is besties too.” CC declared, and Mikey made a face of dislike.

“No, we aren’t. Zander is my bestie. You’re my second bestie.”

“Still counts,” she insisted.

Mikey shook his sandy blond head. “Doesn’t.”

CC didn’t seem fazed by Mikey, and quickly changed the subject. “Is that your Daddy?”

Glancing over my shoulder, I saw Asher resting on one of the side sofas, talking quietly to CC’s mommy. Catching my eye, he smiled at me and I smiled back, holding up my paint covered hands with a giggle. “Yeah, that’s my Daddy Asher.”

“He’s cute! That’s my Mommy Libby. Your Daddy has a big belly.”

Mikey rolled his eyes with a huff. “That’s ‘cus he’s having a baby, silly.”

Holding up two blue fingers, I proudly told them, “Two babies.”

“Two!” CC clapped her hands, “Yay!”

“I think Ry’s Daddy is cute,” Mikey said softly, “but I love my Daddy Liam the best.”

Using the popsicle stick dipper that was in the red jar of paint, I plopped a glob on my paper then swished my finger through it. Definitely asking Daddy for some of these. Maybe Santa could bring some for Christmas.

“How come you’ve never come to play here before?” CC asked. She sure was nosy, and Mikey gave me a look that said he agreed with my opinion, along with an eye roll.

“I came once, but...there were mean people, so I didn’t come back.” Not looking up from my paper, I didn’t meet her eyes.

“I don’t like mean people,” Mikey said emphatically.

“Me either,” CC chimed in. “You don’t need to worry, Gabey, everyone here is really nice. And we won’t let anyone be mean to you, will we Mikey?”

Mikey nodded his blond head, “Nope. No meanies allowed.”

The sound of pounding feet echoed from the hallway, followed by a sharp but love filled, “Walk, Precious Boy.” *Ry was here!* He skidded to a stop in between me and CC, his stocking feet catching on the carpet. He had Wolfy and Felix under each arm, smiling broadly.

“Whatcha doin’? Did you meet Gabey? Gabey is my bestie. Can I paint too?” He didn’t take a breath between any of his sentences, talking a mile a minute.

Turning to him, I put a finger to my lips, smearing paint on my chin and face, “Inside voice.”

Ryan rolled his green eyes at me, grinning broadly.

“Ry, let’s put your stuffies away first, please,” Daddy Brendan ordered from behind Ry, “and then you can paint.”

Ry got a smock on, and situated himself between me and CC. Throwing his arms around me in a hug, he whispered, “Sorry we were late.”

“’s okay. How come you were?”

He reached over me for the red paint. “Had stuff to do.”

“What stuff?” Narrowing my eyes at him, I looked him over. Because I knew when Ryan Foster was acting squirrely, and he was definitely up to something.

“Stuff,” he smeared paint on his paper in a half-circle. “It’s a secret.”

Giggling, I chuffed, “You are terr’ble at secrets.”

“I love secrets,” CC declared, “can you tell us what it is?”

Mikey shook his head, “Then it’s not a sec’et.”

“Can’t tell,” Ryan mimicked zipping his lips, but he grinned at me the whole time he was doing it.

Yeah, he was up to something.

The next few hours flew by in a blur of finger painting, coloring, playing kitchen, and then cars. CC, Ry, Mikey, and I became a little group, and we all tried something the other wanted to play. Daddy Brendan seemed to know CC’s

Mommy. She, Daddy, and Brendan were all in deep conversation on the sofa. At some point, Mikey's Daddy, Liam, joined them.

Anytime I would look over, Daddy's eyes would immediately meet my gaze, smiling warmly, but also checking in that I was doing okay. Snacks appeared in front of me like magic, and Daddy made sure to check in that I was getting enough to drink and staying hydrated. He even took me to the potty and helped me wash my hands, and snap up my onesie.

When I saw Daddy glance at his watch and stifle a yawn behind his hand, I looked up at the large digital clock on the wall, realizing we had been here for almost five hours. Goddess, Daddy was probably exhausted, and he was starting to rub at his lower back from sitting on the sofa for so long.

Ry yawned too, inching towards his Daddy with a sleepy smile. Lifting his arms up in a silent invitation, Brendan easily swept his boy onto his lap. Crawling over to Daddy, I laid my head on his thighs. Popping my binky in my mouth, I sucked softly, while one hand rested on his belly. The twins were quiet beneath my hands, no doubt sleeping too. Asher's fingers carded softly through my hair, as he spoke quietly to Libby. "I think it's about time to get my boy home."

Libby nodded, "It is getting late. I'll still have a hard time getting my girl to bed. She's had way too much sugar tonight."

Brendan grinned, "And whose fault is that?"

"I regret nothing." Libby snarked, then called CC over to her. Mikey and Liam were huddled together on a rocker in the

corner, and Liam was quietly reading to his sleepy boy.

“See you Monday, boss,” Libby called to Brendan, as they headed out. Brendan held a hand up in a little wave, as he still had a lapful of a sleepy Ry.

“Ready to head home, baby bear?” Daddy whispered, still stroking my hair. Nodding, I looked up at him, my eyes imploring. “What is it, sweetheart?”

“Can...” licking dry lips, I hesitated asking for what I wanted. “Will you cuddle me for a little bit? It doesn’t have to be for long, I know I’m too heavy, and I can’t be on your lap right now, but...maybe a side cuddle?”

Before I could get out all the reasons why I needed to have him cuddle me, Daddy patted the spot next to him, opening his arms. “Come here, baby bear.”

Climbing up, I hesitated until Daddy pulled me to him. My butt was nestled in the spot next to his hips, and I was glued to his side. Pulling me closer, he wrapped his arms around me tight and tugged my head down to the crook of his neck.

Brendan had stood up from the opposite sofa, cradling a now sleeping Ry in his strong arms. Mouthing, “See you guys later,” he headed for the exit. Most of the other littles were also packing up and heading home.

Leaning my head into the crook of my Daddy’s neck, I breathed in his sweet, honey scent and let myself float in my little space for a few more minutes. Daddy’s arms wrapped around me, stroking my back and my hair. His scent was now

mixed with a deeper, warm spice that I couldn't quite place, and my hard dick pushed against the soft fabric of the pull up I wore underneath my onesie.

A soft kiss landed on top of my head, and he whispered, "You will never be too heavy for me to cuddle. All you have to do is ask, baby bear."

"I love you, Daddy."

"And I love you, baby bear."

We stayed like that about ten more minutes, before Daddy roused me. "We need to get home, sweetheart. It's getting late, and Daddy is sleepy."

Rubbing my eyes, I nodded my agreement. I was sleepy, and Daddy needed all the rest he could get now. The twins zapped his energy.

When we walked into the house, I started the process of locking up and turning off the downstairs lights we had left on. Asher came out of the kitchen with two bottles of water. "What time is it?"

Glancing at my watch, I told him, "Almost midnight. Way past our bedtime."

"It's that late? Hmm, we need to hurry then."

He started up the stairs, and I followed closely behind him. Still terrified that even though his dizziness was mostly gone now, he was still going to get dizzy on all these stairs and lose his balance.

“What are we hurrying for?” I questioned, “Because I’m kind of tired, Daddy.” Not that I wouldn’t rally for a good cause. And making love to Asher was always a good cause.

“For this.” When we reached the third floor, Asher paused outside the nursery door. “I have a surprise for you.” He seemed unsure of himself, which was so unlike him. “I just hope you’ll like it.”

Throwing the door open, he flipped on the light. The room was filled with balloons in every color of the rainbow. There were a few mylar ones thrown in with the latex, Pooh and Merida. Disney princesses, cars and dinosaurs. Stepping into my room, I spun in a slow circle.

“Daddy, what?” A few balloons floated by me, and I had to bat them out of the way to view the room.

There was a decorated cake on my activity table, with Pooh and his friends on the top. In bright blue icing, the words Happy birthday, Gabey were written. A stack of brightly wrapped presents waited neatly on the bed, where a brand new Merida and Angus bedspread was on it. In the corner of the room stood a cardboard cutout of Merida and Angus that was nearly as tall as I was.

“Daddy! Pooh and his friends!” Rushing to the bed, I sank down onto the floor, touching the stuffies with trembling fingers. Turning to look at him over my shoulder, I exclaimed, “This is all of them! Pooh, Eeyore, Tigger, Piglet, Kanga and Roo, even Owl and Rabbit! Daddy, where did you find them

all? I've looked for years, and can only ever find the popular four.”

“Do you like them?” Asher sat down in the big rocker, gently pushing it with his feet. “It pays to have a best friend who owns an entire department store. He put his buyers on a mission.”

“What is all this?” Waving a hand around the room, I asked in confusion. “It's not my birthday.” My actual birthday was in another week.

“It can be, if you want.” Asher told me gently. “I know why you don't celebrate your birthday. Because it hurts too much to think of your papa, and your dad and his bullshit. But you deserve a special day, baby bear. You deserve a day to be celebrated. So, we can make today your birthday, or any other day, if you want. But I want you to have this. I want to celebrate you. I will always celebrate you.”

Crawling over to him on my knees, I laid my head on his thighs. He carded his fingers through my hair, rocking back and forth.

“This is why Ryan and Bren were late tonight,” he whispered. “They wanted to help. They wanted to give you this. There's a swing out back for you, too. It's a big saucer one, and Bren hooked it up with heavy chains on a tree. It should hold your bear in shifted form too, at least according to the website. And a video Ryan saw on Tik Tok of a bear swinging on it. It was his idea.”

Blinking back my tears, I was overcome with joy, excitement, and love for this man. Raising my head, I looked up at him through my lashes, feeling the first tear fall. “Thank you, Daddy.”

“You don’t hate it? I was afraid you would be upset, but Ryan thought you would love it.”

Shaking my head, I whispered, “I’m not upset. No one has ever done anything like this for me before. I do love it. I love you.”

Daddy caressed my jaw, smiling. Leaning down, he kissed me softly. “Happy birthday, baby bear.”

Chapter Thirty-Four



Gabe

October

Looking over at Asher as I drove through the dark, early morning streets of Sweet Alps, I asked, “You warm enough?”

He was huddled in the passenger seat of the newer model SUV we had purchased. Glancing over at me, his eyes looked huge in his too-pale face. He was wearing one of my hoodies, the material stretched tightly across his extended belly, and loose everywhere else. The mornings were cool now, and the air smelled like Fall.

“I’m scared,” he admitted, staring out the window into the darkness.

Reaching over, I took his hand in mine, feeling his fingers trembling. Noticing we were close to Quinn’s bakery, I slowly pulled into the empty parking lot of The Sweet Spot. It was barely four-thirty in the morning, but I could see lights on inside, so Quinn, or Josh, was probably already working.

Turning in my seat, I faced Asher. Bringing his hand up to my lips, I kissed his trembling knuckles.

It was the second week of October, and we were on our way to the hospital for a scheduled c-section. We’d been preparing for this day for six weeks, ever since Asher had experienced some severe back pain. When he had mentioned it during a workday, Seth had gone into Mother Hen mode, having

already noticed some slight swelling in Asher's ankles. Since his blood pressure had been elevated, Finn had made him get checked out at the hospital.

And that was when the decision had been made for Asher to start his leave earlier than he had planned. He hadn't been placed on bedrest, thank the Goddess, but he had needed to get off his feet, rest, and relax. Within the first week, the swelling had receded, and his blood pressure had gone back down to a normal range.

It was during that scare that Finn had informed us that our twins were breech, and he didn't feel they had enough room to be able to get themselves into the proper birthing position. One of the twins was bigger than the other, by what looked like a lot on the ultrasound machine, but what did I know? With two babies fighting for elbow room, there just wasn't enough space for them both.

When I had casually asked if Finn could just turn the babies, Asher had looked at me horrified, then had a few choice words not worth repeating. Finn frowned at me, shook his head, and said he was scheduling us for a c-section.

We'd kept this day from all our friends and family, wanting the delivery to be just the two of us. We had ended up telling Brendan and Ryan, but swore them to secrecy. Once the babies were delivered safely and Asher was up for visitors, we would start notifying everyone. Right now, we just wanted this time together. Before we had not one, but two, babies that needed all our attention.

“All you need to concentrate on is knowing that in a couple of hours our babies will be here.” My larger hand covered his own on the rounded mound of his stomach. The babies were quiet, as if they sensed something monumental was about to happen in their world. “I’ll handle everything else. You just relax and don’t worry about anything. I’m in charge today, Daddy.”

Asher didn’t argue, just snuggled into my side as much as the console and his pregnant belly would allow, and I wrapped an arm around his shoulders pulling him closer. He was warm and smelled like all the wonderful things in my world. The past six plus months had been a whirlwind, yet I knew I wouldn’t have changed one second of them.

“I’ve got you, sweetheart,” I murmured into his sweet-smelling hair. “Remember what you told me that day? Fifty-fifty. You don’t always have to be the strong one. I’ll be the brave one today. Just lean on me.”

“You’re brave every day, baby bear.”

A sharp tap on Asher’s side window had us both nearly jumping out of our skin.

“Sorry!” Quinn bent down, peering into the darkened interior at us. “Everything all right?”

Asher rolled his window down and gave him a shaky smile. “Just me having a quiet freak out.”

“And you giving me a fucking heart attack.” Growling, I scowled at my friend.

Quinn shook a large coffee and a bag of something at us. Leaning in, he pushed the coffee towards me. “That’s for you. It will help with that heart attack.”

Placing the bag on top of Asher’s baby bump, he grinned. “And that’s for you. For later, when you can have something to eat. Up to you if you want to share it with that guy.” He pointed a thumb in my direction. “You’re doing all the hard stuff today, so I say keep them to yourself and enjoy. You deserve them.”

Setting the cup in the holder, I squinted at him with narrowed eyes. “Ryan told you, didn’t he?”

Quinn laughed, resting his folded arms on the window trim and bending down so he could see in. “Of course he told us! Did you really think he wasn’t going to? Do you know how hard it’s been for all of us to not let you know that we know? Wade’s absolutely been dying!”

“Is that what all his unsent messages have been about? I thought he was secretly planning a baby shower or something.”

Quinn laughed, “He about gave us away more than once. A spy he would not make.”

Asher opened the bag and peered inside, inhaling deeply. “Oh, my Goddess, thank you! I want to eat one of these right now.” Chocolate wafted up from the bag, and I’d bet my life it contained brownies. Chocolate raspberry ones. But my poor mate wouldn’t be eating anything until after delivery.

“Well, I know you’ve been craving them, so now you have something to look forward to,” Quinn eyed his baby bump, “besides those two, I mean.”

“Thanks, Quinn,” I told him sincerely.

“I saw you guys sitting out here, and wanted to make sure everything was okay.”

Asher nodded, taking a shaky breath. “Just nervous. And excited. Terrified. Over-the-moon. I’m a freaking mess.”

“Naw,” Quinn shrugged, backing out of the window and standing to his full height, “you’re about to become parents. It’s all those things and about a hundred more. But Finn’s one of the best, Asher, so you don’t need to worry. And don’t forget, I’ve got a set of twins, and I’ve had a c-section. Call us anytime you need something or just have a question.”

Feeling all the same things Asher was feeling, along with some anxiety for my mate, I squeezed a hand to the back of Asher’s neck. Wanting to reassure him, soothe him, give him some of my strength. I knew some of what I was feeling was coming from Asher through our bond.

“Thank you, Quinn, for the brownies and the pep talk.” Asher gave me the warm little smile he saved just for me. The one that always made me all tingly inside and melted my heart. “We’d better get going.”

Nodding, I agreed. “We do have someplace important to be.”

Check-in was quick and simple, since we had pre-registered. Hospital policy had Asher sitting in a wheelchair, grumbling

about it, while we waited for a hospital volunteer to wheel us up to Labor and Delivery.

A small, dark haired omega strode towards us, a huge smile on his cute face. Asher put his head in his hands and groaned. “Seth sent you, didn’t he?”

The omega laughed, halting in front of the chair. “Of course he did. V.I.P. treatment for you all the way.”

Asher waved a hand to introduce us. “Gabe, this is Bennett Maxwell, Seth’s best friend. He works here at the hospital. Bennett, my mate Gabe.”

Bennett held out a small hand. He had a surprisingly strong and firm handshake for someone his size. “Nice to put a face to the name. I feel like I know you from the way Seth carries on.”

Bennett went around and grasped the wheelchair handles, and my bear angrily roared to life. Knocking his hands away, I growled low in my throat. My bear did not want anyone that close to our mate.

Heat flooded my face, and I lowered my eyes, grasping the hard handles of the chair. “I am so sorry! I don’t know –”

Bennett waved it off. “No worries. I’m used to territorial alphas. I’ll just ride up with you and make sure everything is in order. Maybe chill with you before you can go back into the surgery.”

We entered the elevator car, and my hand rested on Asher’s shoulder. His fingers entangled with mine, and my bear was

appeared for a few seconds. I needed to get myself under control or this would not end well. And we didn't need that. Finn would toss me out of the operating room and wouldn't think twice about it.

To distract myself, I politely asked, "What do you do here, Bennett?"

Asher snorted, "Everything. He does everything. What's your title now?"

Bennett waved a dismissive hand in the air. "Oh, something ridiculously long. Honestly, I'd have to look at my latest business cards. I think my official title is Executive Director of Administrative Services."

"I have no idea what that means." The elevator doors opened on the maternity floor, and I pushed Asher out, while Bennett held the door open.

Bennett grinned, "Most people don't. Quick rundown, I find services for patients in need. Help with medical bills, physical therapy, in-home care, that kind of thing. Whatever might be needed. I also do a lot of work with abused omegas and children. Anyway, since Asher told Seth, Jax, and that crew about today, Seth wanted to make sure everything ran smoothly. Since he can't be here, you get the next best thing. Me."

We'd agreed that we had to tell the employees in Asher's practice about his scheduled c-section. He was going to have a longer recovery time than had been in his birth plan originally, and they needed to make sure his patients would be covered.

“That’s Bennett’s nice way of saying Seth sent him to spy, and report back when the babies are here,” Asher muttered, as we were shown to what would be his room for our stay here, until he and the twins were released.

Even though it was two weeks until his original due date, Finn wasn’t anticipating any issues with the twins. Most twins came early, and even when he had scheduled the delivery, he had made sure to tell us that Asher could go into labor on his own before today. And if that happened, we were to go straight to the hospital.

“That is absolutely what I’m saying,” Bennett nodded, and I found I liked the man. He seemed really easy-going, but his eyes were sharp, and he was aware of everything that was going on around him. He put off good energy and it was easy to relax in his presence.

“I’ll wait out here until they take you down,” Bennett said at the doorway. The labor nurse was getting a gown out for Asher, and I didn’t know what all else they were going to need to do. “I can wait with you Gabe, if you want, when they take Asher to administer the block.”

“I’m going with him.”

Bennett smiled warmly, “They won’t let you into the room until they see if the spinal block takes. It’s usually only ten or fifteen minutes, and then you’ll get to be in the room with him for the delivery. There are some patients who end up needing to be put all the way under anesthesia, and if that happens, you won’t be allowed in the room.”

What? My bear was pacing, agitated at the thought that we might be separated from Asher and the babies.

“Gabe, Finn told us all this,” Asher reminded me quietly, as a nurse swiftly set up an IV in his arm. “It’s going to be fine.”

Okay, he had told us this, I remembered, but it didn’t make it any better.

Twenty minutes later, I was pacing the hallway outside the double doors that led back into the surgical delivery rooms. Bennett had been waiting, as he had said, and he had calmly helped me into the ugly green scrubs a nurse had handed me. Then tied the mask around the back of my head when I had ducked down to within his height.

“How long has it been?” Pacing, my legs ate up the distance of the short hallway.

Bennett smirked, looking at the clock on the wall. “About two minutes since you last asked. Relax, Gabe. They’ll come get you when they’re ready.”

The thought of them having to put Asher completely under, of him not being awake to see our babies born, or me not being there either, had my anxiety at an all-time high. Shaking out my hands, I took a slow deep breath and then another. Falling apart wasn’t an option. Asher needed me to be brave for the both of us. To be strong and calm.

Why had we thought not telling anyone, and making everyone wait until after the babies were born to be here with us, was a good idea? My friends – my found family – could be

here right now, calming me down. Not some virtual stranger I'd just met.

On impulse, I pulled out my phone and wrote a quick text to my dad. We had been slowly trying to work on building a relationship. We couldn't go back and change the past. All we could do was try to move forward. He seemed genuinely excited about the twins, and he, Ellen, and my sisters were planning to come out and stay for a couple of weeks when the babies were born. We'd even offered them the use of the Victorian, instead of a hotel. We'd made sure to install a lock on the nursery door, and only we had the key.

The rest of our family, the people that mattered, already knew we were here, thanks to Ryan. They were giving us the space we needed, but I knew as soon as I let them know they could come visit, they would swarm the hospital. My heart warmed at the thought of it, grateful that my bestie had ignored my wishes for once.

A scrub covered nurse poked her head out of the door. "We're ready for you, Daddy."

Daddy.

We were about to be real life daddies. Asher would always be my Daddy. I was the only one who could call him that. To our twins, our boys, I would be Daddy and Asher would be Papa.

The nurse led me to a small rolling stool placed next to Asher's head. Thankfully, his belly area was shielded from my view by surgical drapes. Everyone else wore scrubs, and I only

recognized Finn by his ice blue eyes above his mask. The anesthesiologist sat on the other side of Asher, monitoring him. The man beta told me his name, but I couldn't have told anyone what it was if my life depended on it.

My gaze was fixated only on my mate. He'd been staring up at the ceiling, looking small and scared. Though he was doing his best to not show it. His head turned towards me and I smiled behind my mask. Taking his hand, I squeezed it lightly. His other arm was strapped to a board, lines of IV's hooked into him.

Leaning over him, I pulled the surgical mask down and kissed him quickly on the lips. He gave me a wan, shaky smile. "You doing okay?"

He nodded, taking a shaky breath. "Just ready to meet them."

"Not much longer," Finn told us, from where he was standing over Asher's blue draped stomach. It felt like there were a lot of people crowded in the room. Another doctor with Finn, and a couple of nurses hovered between the doctors and Asher. More nurses were waiting across the room to weigh, measure, and assess the twins. Finn had told us he had neonatal on standby in the event the babies might need them.

"Okay, Asher, you're going to feel some pressure," Finn instructed. My focus had been on Asher, and neither of us had been paying attention to what Finn was doing. Asher's eyes had been locked on me, as I threaded my fingers through his and whispered encouraging words.

Inside, I was terrified. Anything could go wrong. I did my best to keep those thoughts at bay, and to push the strength of my alpha pheromones towards my omega. But I couldn't stop thinking about my papa today. The thought of losing Asher made my heart beat twice as fast.

“Baby bear, breathe,” Asher whispered, squeezing my hand tightly and grimacing. Forcing myself to concentrate on my mate, I squeezed back.

A loud wail filled the air, and the room came alive with movement.

“Baby A is out,” Finn told us, “you doing okay, Asher?”

“I'm good,” he said in a thick voice. Leaning to the side, I could see the back of the nurse as she rubbed our son free of birthing goo.

“What does he look like?” Asher wanted to know.

Swallowing around the emotion clogging my throat, I shook my head. My eyes felt suspiciously wet. “He has dark hair, but that's all I can see.” The nurse moved and I got a glimpse of chunky arms and legs moving rapidly, as our son told the world his woes. “He looks chunky. Big like me, maybe.”

“A bear,” Asher smiled serenely. His hand gripped mine tightly, and the same grimace from a few minutes ago washed over his face.

The room was pierced by another set of angry wails, and Finn laughed. “Baby B is pissed off and not afraid to let us all know it.”

Trying to see our second son as another nurse worked on him, Finn told me, “You can go see them, Gabe. I’m just going to finish things up with Asher, and then they’ll bring them over to him to scent.”

“Go,” Asher ordered, “go see our babies. Count fingers and toes for me.”

Standing back from the nurses, not wanting to get in their way, I stared in awe at the two beautiful creatures Asher and I had created. They were different as night and day. Light and dark. One mostly bald, with some wisps of blond hair, and screaming the house down in anger. The other with a thick head of dark hair, now quiet and peering at the world around him. Curious, even though he couldn’t focus yet. Both long, one with chunky thighs and belly, the other lean and much smaller.

“Come meet your sons, Alpha,” one of the nurses turned to me. She moved to the side, and I crowded in. Staring down at them both in wonder and awe.

Miniatures of Asher and me. How had we made these two splendid beings?

Tentatively touching each of their small hands, they both wrapped strong fingers around one of my thick digits.

“Hello,” I whispered thickly, and they both seemed to focus on me. The little one, who had been wailing, even quieted down. It might have been wishful thinking that they recognized the sound of my voice. “Your papa can’t wait to meet you. You’ll get to see him in a little bit.”

“They’re ready to move your mate to recovery,” a nurse told me. “You can go with him, and we’ll bring the babies in when they’ve been cleaned up and assessed.”

“They’re okay though?” Two weeks early was nothing, I knew this. Especially for twins, who we had thought would be here before now. Technically, they were full-term, but I couldn’t help the worry that already flooded me for them. Was that feeling going to go away as they got older? Somehow, I doubted it.

I didn’t want to let them out of my sight, but I needed to be with my mate. I could feel him through our bond, his anxiousness, his fear, his excitement.

“I’ll see you in a little bit.” Leaning down I kissed each of them, then rubbed my face lightly on their cheeks. Scenting them, marking them as mine. Asher would scent them when they brought them to us.

A few minutes later, Asher was settled in recovery and I leaned over and kissed his cheek. He looked pale, exhausted, yet he somehow glowed at the same time. His eyes fluttered open, and he gave me a warm smile. “Tell me.”

“They’re gorgeous, like you.”

He laughed weakly, then winced. “Laughing. Ouch. The good drugs are wearing off.”

“Sorry, Daddy.” Brushing the hair from his forehead, I described the boys to him. “One brunet, one blond. And I would bet money that we have a bear and a cheetah.”

Asher yawned, nodding, his eyes drifting closed.

“Rest, sweetheart.”

He gingerly scooted over, patting the vacant spot next to him. “Hold me.”

“I don’t want to hurt you.” But I was already gently sliding onto the bed, and pulling him against me. He grimaced at the movement, but snuggled closer.

“Hold me, baby bear,” he ordered, his voice sleepy, but still managing that Daddy tone of his.

Dropping a kiss on the top of his head, I whispered, “As you wish.”

He rested until nurses wheeled in two matching, plastic bassinets. They each handed a baby to Asher and he held one in each arm, staring down at them in wonder. When he looked at me, tears glimmered in his dark eyes.

“We made these,” I whispered, still in awe of these tiny creatures that we had created.

Asher leaned his head into mine. “We did. They’re pretty great, aren’t they?”

“Yeah,” I agreed, wrapping my arms around him and pulling him back into my body. Taking the bigger twin from him, I held the baby gently. He still looked incredibly tiny in my hands. “Think we’ll still feel the same when they are screaming like banshees at two in the morning?”

Settling the sleeping baby more comfortably in the crook of my arm, I asked, “So, which name goes with who?”

We had finally settled on names, after a ton of back and forth. Asher had wanted Westley, and I had put the kibosh on that. With Wade naming both his pups after X-Men characters – even though he vehemently denied it – I had wanted something not movie related. We had finally settled on names that meant something special to both of us.

“This,” Asher ran a gentle finger down the blond twin’s soft cheek, “is Raphael.”

I still got a bit choked with emotion naming one of our twins after my papa. We were going to call him Rafe, we had already decided. It might be too hard for my dad to call him Raphael, but we had still wanted to honor my papa.

“Well,” adjusting the weight of the twin I was holding in my arms, “that makes you Tristan.” He was named after Asher’s dad.

“Hello, little bear,” placing a kiss on his head, I whispered, “You are so loved.”

Chapter Thirty-Five



Gabe

Epilogue

Hours later, our hospital room was filled to the brim with smiling, laughing people. All of the Sinclair quads were there with their mates.

Wade and Sebastian had quickly been shuffled into the only two chairs in the room, since they were both just weeks away from their own due dates. Wade rubbed his huge belly, moaning. “Ugh, I’m so over being pregnant. Seeing these two makes me want to get this baby out. Like now.”

“Maybe if you didn’t pop one out every year, you wouldn’t be complaining so much,” Sebastian snarked. “Pace yourself. Have you two not figured out what causes this? Your husband is an OB/GYN after all. He should have some clue.”

“Fun stuff, that’s what causes this,” Wade snarked right back.

“This is the last one for us,” Finn chimed in, shaking his head, “someone else will need to carry on the Sinclair gene pool. We’re tapping out.”

“And we’ve picked out a name that works for either a boy or a girl, at least a version of it.” Wade told the room, “And no, it’s not a superhero name.”

“That’s disappointing,” Quinn snarked. “But I’m not paying up on any bets until you actually have that kid and name

them.”

Ryan was holding Rafe in his arms, gently swaying on his feet, a dreamy look on his face. Giving my friend a small smile, I snuggled Asher into my side. It was lovely how the hospitals had extra-large beds to allow for an alpha to be close to his omega. Tristan was snuggled in the crook of Asher’s arms, and neither one of us could take our eyes off him for very long.

The door swished open, and I heard my dad’s startled voice. “Oh, full house in here.”

The big bulk of my dad filled the doorway, and I sat up quickly, eyes wide. “Dad? What are you doing here?”

My dad stepped fully into the room, his eyes scanning over all our friends and family. Ellen was right behind him, shoving a little at his shoulder to move him out of the way. She carried a huge brightly colored gift bag. Considering all the gifts they had been sending the last few months, I was honestly surprised there was anything for them left to purchase.

My sisters bounced in right behind Ellen, each holding bunches of blue mylar balloons, claiming “It’s a boy!” and squealing in the way only teenage girls can manage. Surprisingly, the twins managed to sleep through the high-pitched sounds.

“What are their names?”

“They’re so cute!”

“There’s one for each of us!”

“I wished we lived closer so we could babysit!”

My dad snorted loudly, an inelegant sound I was sure I had never heard him make my entire life. “Neither of you has babysit a day in your life. You couldn’t even keep your goldfish alive.”

“We were five!” They said in unison.

“Who are these loud people?” Quinn leaned into Lachlan, away from the noise that was my sisters.

Asher giggled, “These are Gabe’s sisters. And his dad and stepmom.”

Dani waved, “Hi, I’m Dani, the pretty one.”

Josie waved the opposite hand, “I’m Josie, the smart one.”

Rolling my eyes at them, because they were identical, I cut in, repeating my earlier question. “Dad, what are you doing here?”

My dad frowned, peering down at the baby in Asher’s arms. Not taking his eyes off his new grandson, he grumbled. “You texted that the babies were going to be here today. Why wouldn’t we come? We told you we were going to come when they were here.”

Did my dad sound put out with me, and a bit sad? Possibly?

Straightening to his full height, he gave me a soft look, his eyes a bit misty. Surely, it was a trick of the light. “He looks like you, Gabe. Just like you when you were born.” And did he sound a bit choked up?

“But how did you get here so fast?” While it was late afternoon now, there was no way my Dad had driven here that quickly. They were two states away after all.

“Papa rented a private plane!” Dani exclaimed. At least I thought it was Dani. I hadn’t spent enough time with the twins to be able to properly tell them apart, and I felt like a horrible brother because of it.

“It was amazeballs!” Josie chimed in. “We had it all to ourselves, and there was champagne, though we couldn’t even have one sip.” She rolled her eyes dramatically, though I was going to side with Dad and Ellen on that decision.

“Dad?” Questioning him with my eyes, I couldn’t quite believe what my sisters were telling me. But the proof of them all standing in front of me didn’t offer up any other explanation.

Dad stuck his chest out defensively, ducking his head. Shrugging, hands deeply buried in his pockets, he muttered, “What’s the point of having a bunch of money if I can’t spend it on the important things?” Looking me dead in the eye, he said strongly, “And this was important. We wouldn’t have missed it for the world.”

My throat was too choked for me to respond. My chest ached a bit with it, and I didn’t know what to do or think or feel. Asher reached out his free hand and tangled his fingers with mine. Giving them a squeeze, like he always did when I needed to lean on him. Because I was feeling very unsteady just then.

“Can we hold them?” One of my sisters asked, breaking the spell I had fallen into of too many emotions flooding me at once. Because I was staring at my dad, I didn’t know which one had asked, since they sounded exactly alike. My dad was looking at me with such a look of wonder, awe, and something else I couldn’t decipher, and it made my gut clench. Those *were* tears in his eyes shining brightly. I was sure of it.

“Let’s let the grandparents have a turn first,” Asher was already handing the baby off to my dad, who looked startled, but then took the sleeping newborn like he’d handled a million babies. Gently cradling his head in the crook of his arm, our thirteen pound baby looked tiny being held by him.

Ryan turned to Ellen, handing her Rafe. She took the infant carefully, a loving smile on her face as she gazed down at him. “Are you sure?”

Ryan nodded, waving a hand. “Absolutely. I get baby cuddles on the daily. All of ours are with their grandparents right now, or this room would be absolute chaos. Enjoy all the cuddles while you’re visiting.”

“What are their names?” Dani asked, because I was seventy percent sure she was wearing purple, and Josie was wearing yellow. She was peering at the baby over Dad’s arm, while Josie was doing the same at Ellen’s elbow.

“This brute,” Asher fussed with the baby’s blanket in dad’s arms, “is Tristan.”

“Tristan,” Dad whispered, nodding his approval. “That’s a good strong name.”

“It’s cool!” The twins said in unison. Honestly, I wished they would stop doing that. It was a little freaky.

“He’s named after Asher’s alpha dad.” Asher and I shared a smile.

“And,” Asher said softly, his gaze on Ellen, while mine was glued to my dad, “that guy is Raphael.”

Dad sucked in a sharp breath, and then the tears he had been holding at bay started to fall. He visibly swallowed, and his voice was rough and thick. “That’s...lovely.”

“A lovely name for a little angel.” Ellen ran a hand down Rafe’s soft cheek.

“I know your papa will be watching over them.” Dad wiped at his cheeks, looking embarrassed by his show of emotion. As Asher kept telling me, baby steps when it came to Dad.

“We’re going to call him Rafe,” Asher supplied.

Dad was staring down at Tristan, who was blinking his eyes open after his nap. “What do you think Tristan? You and Rafe want to come hang out with us when you get a bit older? Let Grammy and Papaw spoil you a bit?”

Papaw? Who was this man and what had they done with my dad?

Easing myself back on the bed next to Asher, who was looking a bit pinched around his eyes, a sure sign he was due more pain meds soon, I whispered, “Who is he? He sounds like my dad, but I’m not convinced we aren’t going to find a pod in his basement somewhere.”

Asher buried his face into my neck, a tired sigh escaping him. “Hush. He’s trying, and I imagine it’s different being a grandparent. He looks happy.”

Watching my dad, I saw that my mate was correct, as he was about most things. There was a gentleness to Dad’s features as he and Ellen switched babies, and he whispered to Rafe. I wasn’t sure how he was going to handle us naming one of the twins after my papa, but he hadn’t seemed upset. Quite the opposite, in fact.

Having been in surgery with Asher, waiting for the twins to be born, feeling absolutely terrified something was going to go wrong, I had a better understanding of what my dad had been through when he had lost Papa. I couldn’t imagine losing Asher, and just thinking about it made sadness well up inside me so much, I had to push it away.

I didn’t want to think about losing him. It was amazing that in such a short amount of time, he had become my whole world. And now, these two tiny creatures we had made were a part of that world.

Hours later, everyone had finally left us alone, and Asher had fallen asleep. I was rocking Rafe, while Tristan snoozed in the plastic bassinet next to the hospital bed. The twins were as opposite from each other as they could be. Staring down at Rafe, he had so much of Asher in him, I knew he was going to be just as beautiful as his papa was. We wouldn’t have their blood tests back until tomorrow, telling us their designations, but I strongly suspected we had an alpha and an omega.

Rafe stretched his long, little body in my arms, his eyes fluttering open. While most babies had blue eyes when they were born, his were already hinting at a rich, chocolate brown. Without preamble he let out a shriek that would put a rock star to shame. This boy was not afraid to bring down the house when he was feeling put out.

Shushing him, I carried him to the changing table to see if he needed a fresh diaper.

“Goddess, he has some lungs on him,” Asher commented, above Rafe’s wails.

“And a temper and zero patience.” Zipping his sleeper, I reached for a bottle our nurse had brought a little while before Rafe had woken in a fit. He latched onto the nipple like a thirsty man in the desert, and blessed silence filled the room.

Asher snorted, “And Tristan sleeps right through it all.”

“How’s your pain?” I questioned, rocking Rafe as he gobbled down his formula a bit too fast. He was going to need burping in a minute, and I was sure that was going to piss him off all over again. Not even a day old, and he already wanted things his way. Just like my Daddy.

Asher gingerly scooted up on the bed, watching me with sleepy eyes. “Not bad. I’m fine, baby bear.”

A nurse came in, quietly taking Asher’s vitals, checking his incision and pain level, and making sure we had everything needed for the babies. After both babies had been fed and burped, they were wheeled down to the nursery for the night.

We had the option of keeping them with us all night, and Asher had wanted to keep them. But I had put my foot down, saying one night while he rested uninterrupted wasn't going to hurt anything. He needed his rest, and he'd had surgery just that morning.

For once, he hadn't argued with me, and had quietly agreed with my decision. Which told me he was hurting and more worn out than he wanted anyone to know. Seth, Jax, and Janet had come by around dinnertime, and stayed for over an hour, until Asher couldn't keep his eyes open any longer. It had been wonderful that all of our friends and family had shown up today, but it had taken a toll on my mate.

Now it was close to ten p.m., and I was exhausted. We had been up since a little before four this morning, though neither one of us had slept well the night before, excitement and fear keeping us both awake.

Sliding into the bed next to Asher, I did my best not to jostle him too much. Putting my arm around him, he cuddled into my side as much as he could. He was limited yet on how and which way he could turn and move.

Kissing the top of his head, I whispered, "Thank you."

His hair was ruffled from the day and my hands. He looked soft, sexy, and so beautiful. My heart swelled with how much I loved this amazing, perfect man.

He was the best mate I could have ever hoped for, more perfect than anything I had ever conjured in a daydream. He was the perfect Daddy for me, making sure I indulged my little

side, and he did it flawlessly, and almost effortlessly some days. Always taking care of me and making sure I got in some type of little time each day.

He would be the most perfect papa to our children. He had glowed while he had carried them, hardly ever voicing any kind of complaint, beyond having to start his leave early. Even then he hadn't protested too much, putting our cubs needs before his wants. Even from his hospital bed, with limited movement from his incision, he was managing them so easily. One baby was hard, two babies were a challenge, and he did it all with a smile on his face. My Daddy loved nothing more than a challenge.

He was content, the feelings coming across our bond, and that made me content. He settled my soul, and he made me feel loved, and wanted, and needed.

He made me feel worthy in so many ways, each and every single day. He had since the first day I had met him. Even when he had been bossing me to put my coat on. Even then he had been in Daddy mode.

Fate had absolutely gotten it right when she had paired us together. He was my perfect Daddy, while still being my perfect omega.

Asher raised up a bit, a puzzled look on his face at my words. "For what?"

"Our babies. Being the best Daddy I could ever hope for. Not giving up on me when I was being stubborn. Taking care of

me. Giving me the time I needed to figure my shit out. Everything.”

“Oh, that.” Smiling, he laid his head back on my chest, his muscles relaxing against me. “It was nothing.”

Chuckling, I whispered, “I love you, Daddy.”

“I love you, baby bear. I think I have from the first moment I saw you.”

And I think I had from the very first moment I had seen him too. I had tried to fight it, scared to death of what I was feeling. Afraid I wasn't good enough for the beautiful creature that had winked at me. But Asher was right. We complimented each other, in the best ways possible.

He made me feel brave, even though he always said I was, he made me *feel* it. A feeling I had always lacked inside myself. He made me feel secure enough to express every side of myself safely. He never made me feel like I was lacking in some way. And I gave him a place to lean on when he needed it. To take charge of things when my mate, my omega, needed his alpha.

He had cared for me like no one in my life ever had. And when he had needed me to be the strong one, to take care of him through this pregnancy and delivery, he had let me.

He had given me so many things my life had been lacking, and he made me feel whole. Complete. Loved.

He would do the same for our boys. Tears filled my eyes as I looked down at him, knowing there would never be one day

our boys wouldn't know how much they were loved. They would never feel unworthy, or unwanted.

And neither would I.

“Marry me.”

Asher's head spun, and he turned to stare at me, eyes wide. “What?”

The question had caught me by surprise, even as I had said the words.

We had never talked about marriage. We were well and truly mated, had claimed each other months ago, but marriage just hadn't come up in any talk of our future together. But I wanted it. Wanted that little extra claim we would have on each other.

Asher was my Daddy, and I was still his alpha.

Asher was my everything. My present, my future. My world.

He had made all my dreams and wishes come true. Dreams I had thought were impossible for me to have.

“Marry me.” I repeated.

Asher gulped, and it was almost funny to see my self-assured, confident omega looking completely flustered and out of sorts.

“You know I don't need a piece of paper,” he was sitting up now, as much as he could. That brow of his arched, as he searched my face. Pulling him down with a hand on the back of his neck, I fisted the hair there tightly, like I knew he loved.

My lips captured the moan that escaped his mouth at the tug on his hair.

Tearing my lips from his before we started something that we absolutely should not, I whispered, “I know you don’t need it.”

“What’s brought this on?”

Rolling my eyes at his skeptical tone, I snickered. “You’re so suspicious, Daddy. You’re the best Daddy, the best mate, the best father to our twins, and I want to be the best husband to you. I want that last, final commitment to make us one.”

He stared at me for so long I fought the urge to squirm under his dark gaze. “You know I’m not good at explaining my feelings. That’s the best I can come up with. Take it or leave it.”

His lips turned up into a sweet smile, and he leaned up, demanding another kiss without saying a word. This kiss was gentle, sweet, passionate, and made me ache in all the best ways. I pushed all the love and devotion I felt for him through our bond with that kiss. Telling him everything without saying the words.

When the kiss ended, he looked dazed, his dark eyes glassy.

Asher had a dreamy look on his face, which might have been from the kiss, exhaustion, or the pain medication he was on. He settled back against me, his head in the crook of my neck. In that spot he loved, where he could breathe me in and set my soul on fire at the same time. My arms tightened around him,

keeping him safe and secure. A silent promise I would always keep.

A purr rumbled from him, vibrating against my skin.

“As you wish, baby bear.”

The End

Want to read about what happened in the kitchen when Asher’s roof needed to be fixed? Grab an exclusive bonus scene here.

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Raiven Matthews lives in Northern Indiana where she is surrounded by corn fields, RV's and Notre Dame football. An avid reader from a young age, she discovered MM romance while reading fan fiction, and never looked back. She loves cats, her grandkids, and coffee and wine, equally. She often plots her books on her commute to her RL job, which is full of boring numbers and spreadsheets. She believes in writing happily-ever-after's with a twist, and her books are full of heat, heart and lots of humor. She can often be found enjoying brunch on a Sunday morning, reading, and being harassed by her very spoiled, diva cat, Declan.