

MATCHED TO HIS WOLVES

AN M/M/M MPREG SHIFTER DATING APP ROMANCE

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MATCHED TO HIS WOLVES

THE DATES OF OUR LIVES

BOOK 14

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Matched to His Wolves

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CONTENTS

1. [Troy](#)
 2. [Channon](#)
 3. [Zeeve](#)
 4. [Troy](#)
 5. [Channon](#)
 6. [Zeeve](#)
 7. [Troy](#)
 8. [Channon](#)
 9. [Zeeve](#)
 10. [Troy](#)
 11. [Channon](#)
 12. [Zeeve](#)
 13. [Troy](#)
 14. [Channon](#)
 15. [Zeeve](#)
 16. [Troy](#)
 17. [Channon](#)
 18. [Zeeve](#)
 19. [Troy](#)
 20. [Channon](#)
 21. [Zeeve](#)
 22. [Troy](#)
 23. [Channon](#)
 24. [Zeeve](#)
- [Keep In Touch](#)

ONE

TROY

Glancing up as the coffee shop door opened, I gazed at yet another loved-up couple, walking arm in arm. They'd probably discuss their orders or not bother, as they were already familiar with their mate's coffee preference. One person would snag a table while the other stood in line.

Families came in with babies, toddlers, or school-age children, and while the kids were rarely quiet and annoyed some patrons, I embraced their noise, the mess they made of the table, floor, and their clothes, and they amused me as they smeared cream, frosting, or chocolate on their faces.

If the families were sitting near me and dropped a toy on the floor, I'd pick it up but made sure not to stare. Nobody wanted a creepy alpha grinning at their kids. My workmate had regaled me with stories of guys who'd sit on a park bench and pretend to read a newspaper while leering at the children playing. Or worse, the ones with a dog who invited kids to pet the animal and engaged them in conversation. He had to be super vigilant as a parent.

I wasn't embarrassed to admit I was lonely, and yet strangers observing me might scoff at that and say I had a full life. Sure, I loved my job, and it kept me occupied long after quitting time. I had a large circle of friends and socialized every weekend.

But there was a gaping hole, a place which I'd expected to be filled by a husband and family. The years passed, and I'd dated and been set up by friends and colleagues. I'd even participated in one of those speed-dating challenges.

I giggled as I recalled the latter, and those stupid alarms telling us to move on to the next person where we tried to impress them in a few minutes, resulting in me babbling superficialities and racing out the door as soon as the event was over.

“Sorry I’m late.” My cousin Ray bounded over to my table. “I’m starving, and those brownies look yummy. Want one?”

I nodded as he got in line. Ray was a powerhouse. He’d started his own company from his living room with something like a hundred bucks and grown it into a multi-million dollar business. Plus, he recently married, and I was expecting him to get pregnant any day because, according to him, he and his husband were “fucking like bunnies.”

“We should do this more often.” He plonked himself on the chair beside me and took a huge bite of a brownie while pushing the second toward me.

“Says the man who works 24/7.” I nibbled at my brownie and welcomed the sweetness flooding my mouth, a contrast to the bitter coffee.

He shrugged, his lips coated in crumbs while sipping his iced coffee through a straw.

I’d been wary about accepting his invite for a coffee, expecting him to announce his pregnancy. Not that I wouldn’t be happy for him, but I’d put on my “congratulations” face and think of the baby gift I’d buy when the little one arrived, while wishing it was me who was expecting.

I sighed, because since I’d arrived, I’d been thinking of nothing but babies and finding the one, and I had to get out of my funk. Even if I met my one and only, my mood might turn him off.

“I wanted to tell you in person—”

I cut him off. “You’re pregnant.” Plastering a smile on my face, I prepared to hug and kiss him.

“Nope.” He popped the P so hard, a kid at the next table mimicked him until his dad told him to stop.

“What?” The heads of everyone at the next table swiveled in my direction. Oops. Might have said that a little too loudly. I lowered my voice. “Then why am I here?”

That earned me a glowering look from my cousin. “Can’t we just meet up because I love and miss you?”

Way to make me feel guilty, cuz. Damn, now I was blaming Ray for my negative reaction. I really had to take up a new hobby or go on vacation, because my mood was ruining my relationship with people I cared about.

“Of course.” I kissed his cheek and offered to get him another brownie.

“I might forgive you if you buy two.”

“Deal.”

“I have a confession.” Ray attacked one of the brownies I’d put in front of him.

“Oh yeah. What’s that?”

“I did invite you here for a reason.”

“I knew it. You saying you wanted to tell me in person kinda gave it away.” More glances. Damn, I needed a volume switch. “Spill.”

“Evan and I are hosting a cocktail party to celebrate our marriage.”

Ray and his now husband had skipped off and gotten married on the beach, telling no one, including our family. A furor had erupted when they returned and showed off their wedding rings on social media.

“Hmmm. Let me guess. You need me to act as a buffer to calm everyone down and, if that’s not possible, ply them with canapés and drinks.”

“You know me too well.” He licked a dollop of icing from the corner of his mouth. “Will you do it?”

“Of course.” I picked up his hand and kissed it. “Besides, if nothing else, the food will be excellent and the gossip even better.”

“I wish you could find someone to share your life with.”

Wishing he hadn't brought up the subject, I allowed my eyes to wander around the room. A mother was struggling to set up the double stroller while her toddler twins howled in their high chairs. I raced over to help her with the stroller, and her smile of thanks warmed my heart. There was so much in this world to appreciate. If I never met my mate, I would be okay.

That was how I felt at that minute. By tonight, when I walked into my empty apartment, I'd probably have changed my mind, and I'd fall asleep watching some sappy movie, imagining myself in the hero's place.

“You're not listening to me, little cousin.”

Him calling me by my childhood name got my attention, and I guffawed. “I'm a year older than you, and four inches taller.”

He pinched my cheek. “But you were always so cute.”

Just how a guy who was edging toward thirty wanted to hear himself described. Cute, I was not.

“Maybe you should try a dating app. It worked for me.”

I've never heard the story of how Ray and his husband got together. It was a whirlwind romance, with a month between them meeting and getting married. I was curious how my cousin had found the time and energy to date with his busy lifestyle.

“That's how you met Evan?” I had no idea.

Ray whipped out his phone and showed me the app. *Love and Hate*. Weird name for a dating app. He explained the concept, and it was as simple as listing one hate and one love, and the algorithm would match you with people with similar responses. Seemed a little funky and amateurish, but Ray snatched my phone and downloaded the app.

“There you go. Sign up and think of what you love and hate.”

I suspected the app wouldn't help me but promised Ray I'd try it.

“There’s my ride share. Save the date for our cocktail party.” He hesitated. “Evan is a little different from me and you.” He chewed his bottom lip. “I hope you like him.”

“Different how?”

“You’ll see.” We hugged while standing on the sidewalk and then he was gone, waving madly from the back of the car.

The coffee shop was a few blocks from where I lived, and I sauntered home, full of coffee and cake, pleased to have caught up with Ray and curious about *Love and Hate*. Closing the door of my apartment, I slumped on the couch and puzzled over what to write for my one love and one hate.

I hated being lonely, but no one wanted to hear my poor-me routine. As I studied the room, hoping it would give me inspiration, a cool breeze swept in through an open window, and I grabbed the throw from the back of the sofa and huddled underneath.

I hate being cold, but refuse to get up and shut any open windows or grab an extra blanket.

It was really specific, but that habit had threaded its way throughout my life. I’d lie in bed as a kid, shivering, hands tucked between my knees, knowing there was an extra blanket in the closet at the foot of the bed.

And now for the love. Ray and my many cousins were my extended family. Our grandparents had insisted their children live nearby after marriage, and everyone gathered at their house for Sunday lunch. We’d been in and out of one another’s houses while growing up and knowing they would always be there should life kick me in the butt, gave me the confidence to go to college, and start a career in banking.

I love my big extended family.

That might scare people off, but I was fine with that; I didn’t want to get involved with anyone who wouldn’t accept my family.

But I hesitated about hitting save and put the phone down while I had a shower and caught up on work. I ignored the app all evening, through a TV dinner, streaming a movie, and

finally falling into bed. I vowed that if I was still happy with my love and hate when I woke up, I'd complete that final step.

The next morning I slept through the alarm, something I never did, and had to cut my jog around the park short if I didn't want to be late for a meeting. And I was never late. By the time I got home, it was dark, and I crashed on the sofa and slept for a couple of hours.

It was only after I'd showered and ordered food that I recalled *Love and Hate*.

"Maybe I should delete the app," I said to absolutely no one. But I wasn't a quitter, and I'd promised Ray. I refused to lie and say I'd matched with a few guys and it didn't work out.

"Fine." I spoke to the walls again. People always said the walls had ears, so if mine did, I hoped they agreed with me.

Opening the app, I reread my responses and tapped the big red button. I sort of expected something to happen and shrugged when nothing did. I put the phone on mute and fell into bed.

I dreamed of walking down the aisle, my husband waiting at the other end. But I couldn't see his face, and when I reached him and outstretched my hand, he vanished. When I woke up, I was more exhausted than when I went to bed.

Perhaps signing up for that damned app had been a mistake. If there'd been no matches by this evening, I was deleting it.

TWO

CHANNON

“You need to get your proposal in for your final project,” Professor T said.

He wasn't my professor, not for that class, anyway. Freshman year, they made me pick an advisor in my department, and he had been my favorite teacher, so I chose him. Three majors later and here I was, still coming to him for educational advice. I liked the professor... a lot. And he really looked out for me, but I wouldn't have consulted him if I had my ducks in a row. This assignment was make-or-break, and currently it looked as if it was going to be break.

“I know this, but I can't come up with a topic that hasn't been taken.” I grabbed my laptop and pulled up the spreadsheet of already-used topics and showed him. “These are the ones already approved.”

“That's... wow.” He leaned in and read them.

“You don't want any of those anyway,” he finally said after scrolling to the end. “They all have the been-done-before vibe.”

“I know. And I wanted them to be done by me too,” I teased. Although there was so much truth to that it hurt. “I was hoping you had a suggestion. That's why I'm here.”

“You're here because you're having a mini panic attack and you want me to tell you what to do. I'm not doing that.” Gods, I hated that he was right. “This is not my field. Anything I pick will most likely have issues that I can't see. What kind of help would that be?”

“I know.” I closed the laptop. “Can you at least do the thing where you make me feel as though I have this under control and all will be right with the world?”

“Sure.” He leaned back in his chair, a soft smile on his face. “But the reason I’m nonchalant is that I know you’ve got this. Did you know you are the only advisee I kept that changed their major?”

“I didn’t.”

“I helped everyone else find another professor from their department to take over because I knew just enough to be dangerous and nowhere near enough to be helpful.” He grabbed his travel mug.

“And you thought you knew enough to help me?” I was missing something. His explanation made little sense.

“No. Or yes. Both, I guess. I knew you picked me as an advisor for one reason: to cross some T’s and dot a few I’s. You didn’t need me, per se. Or anyone, really. Not with the paperwork and when planning which courses to take when. You needed someone in your corner, someone who would stay there. That I could give you.”

“And you did. I just wished you could give me a decent topic.”

He rolled his eyes.

“Fine,” I stood up, “I guess I’ll figure it out on my own... like an adult... one who is responsible and all that.”

“That’s what I’m talking about. And if you truly get stuck, my door is always open.”

“Thanks—” His phone cut me off, saying the name of his husband. It was adorable how in love those two were. I’d only seen him on campus a few times, but one of those times they were holding hands and smiling as though they’d just won the jackpot.

I wanted that... one day... after I graduated.

He mouthed, “Sorry,” as he answered the phone, and I gave him a half-wave and headed out to give him privacy. I was wasting his time by this point, anyway.

My stomach let out a growl that could wake the dead as I strolled down the hallway. I'd planned to go straight home, but opted to hit up the cafeteria instead. Technically, I had food at home, but it was all ingredients, and who needed that? Not me when I was hungry now. Besides, I had some swipes left on my account. Might as well use them.

The cafeteria was more crowded than I expected this early in the evening, or was it late in the afternoon? But it most definitely wasn't a typical meal time. I grabbed some pizza and took a seat at the least full table.

It didn't stay that way long, filling up with a bunch of students, bears by the scent of them, that I didn't recognize. I ate my pizza, trying not to eavesdrop and failing miserably. The guys were going on about a hot new dating app, *Love and Hate*. They were positive that it was going to bring them true love or maybe just orgasms. It was difficult to tell their goal by the conversation.

"Remember when everyone was on *Date Me, Maybe?*" A guy wearing a green hoodie said, "I downloaded the app and fifty-three questions in, I gave up. Fifty-three... who knows how many there were?"

"Don't ask me," the guy across from him replied. "I gave up at one hundred three."

"But that's how they get good data to match you with someone who's a good fit," a person at the end of the table added. "Totally worth it."

"And how many guys from that site have you had two dates with?" green-hoodie guy asked. He got the finger and a roar of laughter from the table.

"I'm sticking with *Love and Hate*. Two questions and freaking done. That's the kind of effort I'm willing to put in." Green-hoodie guy downed his soda and, as he set his cup down, caught me watching him.

Awkward.

I popped the last of my pizza in my mouth and got up, giving them a nod and a smile before leaving. And as I walked away,

I thought about their conversation. Not about which dating apps would get me a hottie, but using the lens of a student, one needing a thesis.

If some of those dating and hook-up apps had hundreds of questions and another only two, did that make a difference in the kinds of matches you got? In theory, shouldn't the one with the most data be able to find you the best fit? Probably. But did the stats show that?

And just like that, a thesis proposal formed, and I couldn't wait to begin. In theory, I needed to get everything approved before going ahead. Only, if I didn't at least explore first, how would I know if the topic was doable with the resources I had? I couldn't. Or at least that was the justification I gave as I picked up a throwaway phone at the grocery store and downloaded all the top apps according to the app store.

The one that didn't pop up was the app I was most interested in, the one with only two questions. The contrast between it and the others was going to be a major selling point of my idea. At least that was the plan.

The guys had talked about it like it was huge, but if that were the case, why wasn't it in the top 10 or even 20? And when I searched the name outright on the app store, I got zero hits. Frustrated and not sure what else to do next, I threw the title in the internet search engine, and lo and behold, I found two websites. Both had the same name, one with a wolf on the homepage and the other with a slightly off address, like it was a spoof or something. And really, the wolf made sense given the people chatting it up were shifters.

"Wolf, it is," I said to myself and clicked the website, which took me directly to a link in the app store.

Deciding to save it for last, I started with *Date Me, Maybe*. It asked me the normal things you would expect when creating any login. I decided not to count those as questions, but I made note of them in a doc on my computer. I wasn't sure if any of the apps would allow complete anonymity or not. I'd find out soon enough.

Or not soon enough, if most of these had the gauntlet of questions this one did. They wanted to know my favorite everything, from color to food to parts of my body. From there it asked about education, including grades and what kinds of courses you took. And that was just the beginning.

By the time I got to question two hundred and twelve, they knew what books I read, which movies I disliked, how tall I liked my socks to be, and whether I liked ice in my soda. None of it made sense to me. Like, why would anyone care about any of it? When I hit enter, I expected to get fifty-two million hits. Instead, I got a pop-up asking for money, because of course I did.

I set up a handful more profiles before calling uncle for the night. They each had their own personality but were basically the same. Maybe this wasn't as good of an idea as I'd originally thought. If that were the case, it sucked. At least it wasn't approved yet. Once that happened, I was stuck.

"Why is this so hard?" I grabbed a handful of hair and groaned. I truly thought this was a solid idea. "I'll do one more." Maybe that would make all the difference.

I opened up *Love and Hate* and whoa... it was different. I wasn't asked to upload a selfie or give them three different ways for them to contact me. All I had to do was answer two simple questions: What was something I loved? What was something I hated? That was it.

Except with only two questions, it added pressure. So much pressure. What would the answers say about me? If I said I hated clowns, would that make me cliché or trying too hard? If I said I loved soy milk, would that automatically make people assume I was a vegan?

And that was the crux of it, wasn't it? These two questions weren't just questions. They were more, and that made them extremely difficult to answer. Had I been in this to find my always and forever love, I ventured a guess that it would've been forty thousand times better. But for research? I went with my actual answers, no filtering.

Love: Cinnamon sugar toast

Hate: Horror Movies

And now all there was left to do was fill out the last few apps in the morning and wait for them to do their thing.

THREE

ZEEVE

The phone dinged, getting my hopes up.

It was the *Love and Hate* app, and while I'd had no luck with it so far, I kept thinking, "The next one will be my mate." But the next one and the next one were never my one and only.

Do I look at it?

My wolf's reply was always the same when I asked that question. *Yes*. And if I didn't because I was at work or out to dinner with friends, he'd repeat, *Check it out. Check it out*, until he gave me a pounding headache.

Fine.

It looked promising, which was a step up from a possible serial killer, creepy guys who wanted to take pics of me naked, and one omega who wanted a pic of my feet before he agreed to meet with me.

While I'd had no intention of going on a date with him—him being into feet was fine, but it was a turnoff for me—I made a bet with myself that I could send him packing with a quick glimpse of my tootsies. They looked like ordinary feet to me, but perhaps he was into bunions—gag—or calluses, because within five seconds of my sending a photo, he'd blocked me.

I might need a pedicure, as I imagined going on a date, sleeping with the guy, and him gagging when he woke up in the morning as he caught sight of my janky feet.

Guess I can cross off foot model on my possible career list.

Meh! My wolf didn't understand humans liking or disliking their feet. Those things at the end of their legs were for walking, stalking, hunting prey, and running from danger.

But an alarm going off on the stove informing me dinner was ready brought me back to the present as I studied the latest match on *Love and Hate*. His one love and one hate were pretty generic. He loved eating out and hated the rain. I briefly wondered if the eating he referred to was food or asses. If it was the latter, I'd be all in.

As an alpha, I was the one doing the plowing and thrusting during sex. There were some alpha wolves who kept to the old-fashioned and outdated system of the alpha being in command and the omega doing his bidding in and out of bed. That wasn't me. I was looking not only to fall in love but also to find an equal partner, one who'd walk by my side and perhaps stroll in front, not cower at my heels.

Why not respond? There was no mention of feet, so I sent him a message and we agreed to meet for drinks after work. That was better than a meal because it was excruciating to sit through dinner when you had nothing in common with the guy and preferred to be at home eating pizza.

The next night I finished work late, so there was no time for a shower or change of clothes, and I raced to the bar straight from the office. I made it on time, but paused at the entrance, surveying the clientele. I found my date, wearing a blue tie as he leaned on the bar and chatted to the bartender.

He glimpsed me as I wove between the tables to the bar. "Zeeve?"

"Henry." We shook hands, and he asked what I was drinking. He was a fox, and his strong scent irritated my beast, though he didn't pester me to leave.

"What sort of name is Zeeve? I assume you were born elsewhere and migrated here. Or your parents did." He sniffed, and his lip curled in what I took to be distaste. "An immigrant." He spat out the last word.

Oh, Henry, there was no coming back from that. Why the fuck did he agree to meet if a so-called “foreigner” was such a turnoff?

I tamped down my anger as I replied, “Nope. I was born here, as were my folks.” I resisted the urge to ask about his birthplace, as that would lower me to his level. “We love this country.”

Tossing the glass of white wine down my throat, I shoved a handful of bills under the empty glass, making sure the bartender saw it, stood up, and told Henry, “A word of advice. Next time you go on a date, don’t ruin it as soon as you open your mouth.” I paused. “On second thought, do exactly that, but do it on the app before you meet, so the other guy can block you and not waste time on your sorry, pathetic ass!”

I said the last four words at Screech Level 10, and everyone in the bar clapped, and there were a few whistles. I bowed and stalked outside, flustered and sweaty, but not in a just-had-sex kinda way. Bellowing at the top of my voice in a public place wasn’t me. Some might describe me as repressed, as I pushed my emotions down, keeping them hidden.

But I opened up to those near and dear to me and didn’t consider it a failing that I kept my feelings locked away.

That was a cheap date and the fastest one so far. I had a spreadsheet where I listed how long each one lasted. That probably made me a little weird, so perhaps I should have given the foot guy a chance, though not Henry. Any redeeming features he had were canceled by being an asshole.

Pizza for one it is.

Two.

My wolf had his own delightful quirks in that he loved pizza. He didn’t eat it when he took his fur but enjoyed the sensation of me munching on slice after slice and inhaling the aroma of pepperoni and melted cheese.

I ate my feelings and finished the pizza but had to lie on the couch and moan as I was so full.

Mate?

While my wolf didn't understand the intricacies of dating apps, he knew I was searching for a mate when I grimaced and tapped furiously on the phone. I was ready to give up, but he insisted I continue my search.

Releasing a pent-up breath, I studied the app and scrolled through possible matches. I wondered if finding someone on *Love and Hate* had been easier when the developer created the app. It had gone through many changes and updates since then, and one of the most significant for shifters was making sure we used the version with the S.

Perhaps I needed to look further afield. *Love and Hate* offered nothing in my town, though the foot guy was still there, desperately searching out people's feet. Good luck. After meeting Henry, that other omega had gone up in my estimation.

My city had nothing to offer, as I'd matched and dated, rejected, and been rejected by everyone here, so the solution was to look further afield. Not across the country, but within a two-hour drive.

I reset the parameters on the app and fell asleep on the sofa. Waking up with the sun and with my morning breath worse than usual—I hadn't brushed my teeth last night, it was so gross—I ignored my phone and jumped in the shower. When I was squeaky clean with fresh breath and my skin was pink and glowing, I put on a robe and sauntered into the living room.

My phone had fallen behind the cushions, and as I was desperate for coffee, I made a pot before tossing the cushions aside and grabbing the device. Damn, I'd forgotten to charge it. It was only at twenty percent when I unplugged it and dashed out the door, and even though there were messages from *Love and Hate*, I muted the phone, thinking it would be more of the same.

Maybe the surrounding towns had omegas with ass fetishes instead of guys who were turned on by feet, and they'd want to fuck me. I got hard sitting at my desk and was thankful none of my colleagues were aware of my arousal.

When I walked in my front door, my phone was vibrating in my pocket. Someone was eager to contact me. My beast was frustrated I hadn't checked the messages during the day, and he'd been inwardly pacing, giving me a sensation of butterflies in my belly.

All right, all right. I'm looking.

Wow! Despite where I lived not being a huge city, the smaller towns an hour or two away had plenty of omegas eager to meet me. I scrolled through the responses, ignored some, and went back and read others more than once. There were a handful that sounded promising, but I'd learned the hard way not to get my hopes up.

Let me drink a glass of wine while I cook, eat a yummy meal, and I'll sit down with a pot of tea and study each of the remaining ones. I only had to choose one.

How hard could it be?

FOUR

TROY

Maybe Ray wasn't wrong.

I got out of the app and flipped the window so it disappeared, but curiosity got the better of me and I dove straight back in, checking I hadn't been mistaken. Nope, I'd matched with two people. There were two oddballs out there who shivered in the cold instead of closing a window or getting another blanket or quilt. I shoulder shimmied, thinking maybe, if I fell in love with one, the other could be the best man at our wedding.

The phone fell from my hand. "What the fuck, Troy?" I was racing ahead, ignoring speed limits and running through relationship red lights, setting myself up for disappointment. I had to stop. I imagined Ray's face as he wagged his finger and said I used to do the same thing as a kid.

I wasn't a child anymore, and I had to keep my emotions in check. Nah, that wasn't happening, but I could tamp them down a little.

According to Ray, the app had changed a lot since its inception, and the number of updates was visible. There was also a visible S which didn't appear to refer to anything. Techie language for something probably.

Ray told me in the past the app's algorithm didn't match two people, rather everyone had to scroll through the loves and hates and decide for themselves if that person would be a good match. Now the app did the hard work, but everyone had a choice to swipe left or right, or whatever it was, and reject them. In the first iteration, people didn't even know the other

person's name. That was kinda odd, but I was glad that both Channon and Zeeve's names were visible.

Which one did I meet first? It would save a lot of time if I could have coffee with one before racing next door and eating breakfast with the other. But that would be disrespectful to both. It reminded me of old movies my family used to watch on TV where one alpha was dating two omegas, with disastrous results.

How did I choose which one to meet first, assuming they hadn't changed their minds? Channon had matched first, so I went with him. I messaged and sat clutching the phone, expecting him to be as needy as me and holding his breath until I got back to him.

Nothing. I checked the time. He was probably still in bed. What was I thinking contacting the guy so early? To distract myself, I put on my jogging gear and went to the park at the end of the street. I wasn't a runner, but I'd plod around the jogging track, knowing if I wanted to stay healthy, I had to exercise.

The phone was in my pocket but it stayed silent, and I imagined it was defying me, saying, "Get a life and stop thinking about finding the one."

"That's what I'm doing," I said out loud, earning me glances from other joggers. Wow! If I didn't stop talking to myself, people would point me out to their friends and whisper behind their hands.

Well, fuck them. I worked out a lot of problems by talking to myself in the bathroom mirror. No way was I changing for passersby, and if I matched with either Channon or Zeeve, they'd have to accept my quirks too.

When I pushed open my front door, my muscles were screaming. I was covered in sweat, and I raced into the shower and turned on the water, still fully clothed. I needed that drenched with stinky perspiration sensation to be gone. But as I put both hands on the tiles and the cool water pounded on my head, a feeble beep alerted me to my phone, still in my pocket.

“What the ever-loving fuck have I done?”

Grabbing a towel and then another, I pulled out the device and babied it, wiping water from the screen, snuggling it in the terrycloth before hugging it to my chest. Not that, damn it. I was soaking wet.

It would be lousy luck if Channon was the guy, the one person in the world for me, and I messed it up by ruining the phone. But as my phone lay nestled in a bed of towels, it beeped again, and I snuck a look. It recognised my face which was an excellent sign it was okay, and I tapped on the *Love and Hate* app.

I gave the phone a thumbs-up and sat on the floor, water dripping off my wet jogging clothes, and read Channon’s message. Not once or twice, but five times. He was so sweet, telling me how as a kid, he’d call out to his folks in the middle of the night and ask them to take him to their bed as he was cold. Awww, that was so cute.

We went back and forth, talking about our families and where we’d grown up. He didn’t have a large extended family as I did, and I regaled him with stories of what me and my cousins had gotten up to, including tying one of my younger cousins up in a rope and lowering her out the second-floor window. If he was horrified, he didn’t say, but laughed along with me as I explained our punishment.

After a long chat, I asked if he wanted to meet, and he agreed straight away. The local diner might not be the fanciest place around, but it had the best chili. If a date could handle the heat, that was a huge check in the yes column. Not that I had a physical list—it was all in my head.

Channon loved chili, though he said he’d had bad experiences in the past and had burned his mouth, but I assured him he could order the level of heat he wanted. Not very hot, pretty hot, and burn-the-fuck-out-of-your-mouth hot were the only options, but I didn’t point that out. He could order something else, like... a salad.

We agreed to meet Saturday for lunch, and the next few days were agony. I checked the phone constantly at work, hoping

the day was drawing to a close, only to discover it wasn't even lunchtime. Work, which I loved, couldn't hold my attention, and I doodled on the notepad I had beside the computer. I daydreamed while staring out the window, imagining my life as if Channon was the one.

It wasn't healthy, pinning my hopes on this first date, hoping Channon and I would meet and refuse to leave one another's side.

Saturday dawned, and it was a beautiful day. Much as I wanted to park outside the diner until it was time to go in, I didn't. Sitting in the car for seven hours would be boring, I might sweat and my clothes would be crushed and maybe stinky.

Nope, I jogged, but instead of in the park, I did it up and down the main street, making sure I ran past the diner. It was open early for breakfast, and I stuck my head in to make sure they had my booking. They did, and having no reason to stay, I reluctantly jogged down the sidewalk, regretting my decision to pound over concrete.

I soaked my aching feet when I returned home, after leaving the phone on the sofa. The poor thing had almost drowned, and I needed it to be far away from water.

Getting dressed took up plenty of time. I'd chosen two outfits, but neither was the look I was going for. My bed was littered with clothes, now rumped as I pulled every shirt, tee, pair of jeans, and pants from the closet. When I was finally satisfied, though not exactly happy, I left home far too early and parked down the street from the diner.

I counted the minutes until I could go in. Was fifteen too eager? Ten was okay. Five would cut it short in case Channon was there already. I compromised on seven minutes and sat in the booth, sipping water and shredding napkins. The waiter gave me a look as he cleared away the paper fragments, and I apologized.

I sniffed under both arms, worried I'd forgotten to put on deodorant. There was some in the car, but it was too late. It had just passed one o'clock and Channon could walk through the door any second.

My stomach was in knots, twisting and turning. I'd never be able to chat to the guy, let alone eat anything if I didn't calm down. Taking a deep breath, I closed my eyes and pictured a beach, with the waves rolling in, crashing on the shore. Palm trees were swaying in the breeze and someone placed a cool drink at my side. The scent of tropical flowers washed over me, and I moaned.

"Troy?"

"Mmmm." There was someone else in my fantasy.

"I'm Channon."

My eyes snapped open. "Channon!"

FIVE

CHANNON

It was getting close to date time. I wanted to be there already, to meet my match. Troy and I had connected so easily. Finally meeting him in person where I could reach out and touch him, see his smile, take in his scent... my body was tingling just thinking about it.

Either that or I was about to have a medical emergency. I had a feeling it wasn't the latter. As a wolf, my body wasn't as weak as humans, and the odds of it being a heart attack or a stroke were pretty much nada.

I watched as the clock ticked on, not wanting to be too early, look too eager, or worse, to present as a walking red flag and have him leave before we even got a chance to talk. Fair to say I was once again overthinking things.

And I shouldn't even be on this date. I joined for one reason and one reason only; to write my thesis and graduate. This going-on-a-date thing—it hadn't been part of the plan. It wasn't even that it was a first-come, first-served situation, either. I'd had plenty of hits on all the sites. But this one—it had been different. I had felt a connection even before I sent the first message.

"If I wait five more minutes, that should time things perfectly," I mumbled to myself. Five minutes didn't sound like a lot of time, but it sure felt long.

I took out my phone to message Troy and let him know I was on my way. Or more likely, type the message five or six times, second-guess myself on each, and then delete away. Only,

when I turned my phone over, I saw a message indicator from the *Love and Hate* app.

Giddy was the only way to describe the way I felt, my body bouncing a little in my seat. Only, when I opened the app, it wasn't from Troy; it was from another guy, a guy named Zeeve.

A hot guy named Zeeve.

Maybe this two-question thing had some merit.

I sent him a quick message letting him know I was about to head out and that I hoped to talk to him soon. And before I could second- or third-guess the situation, I apologized and went to meet my date.

It was the ideal time to meet at the diner. The breakfast people were long gone and the lunch crowd had yet to arrive. I parked the car. Troy hadn't said he was driving or not driving, for that matter, so I watched through the car window for him. I contemplated waiting outside by the door, but the more I thought, or in this case, overthought about it, the more that sounded like a quick way to turn things awkward.

As our meeting time came and went, I worried. And then I got the oh so obvious idea of going into the diner to see if he came early. And when I got there, I spotted him instantly. And even if I hadn't been able to see him, I scented him. I wasn't sure how I knew the scent belonged to Troy. I closed the distance between us.

"Troy?" I asked, already having to push my wolf back. He wanted to roll around in the human's scent. This man wasn't like me, not even close. I wasn't even sure how he got on the app. Wasn't it for shifters, not humans?

Human. Of course he was. The first time I ran into someone I was attracted to—using a shifter dating app at that—and he was a freaking human. A delicious-smelling, drool-worthy human. For a split second, I even thought he might be mine, his scent calling to me so deeply. But it didn't quite fit—quite mesh with mine. Oh well. It was going to make things easier,

especially with the whole “he might freak out when he discovers I turn into a wild animal” thing.

“Mmmm,” was all he said, not even looking at me.

“I’m Channon.”

His eyes snapped open. “Channon!” The sexy human looked like he just won the lottery on Christmas Day after his entire wish list had been fulfilled.

Or I was projecting because I really wanted this guy to like me. Which was not the best choice, given he wasn’t my fated.

I’d told myself long ago that was what I wanted—longed for—my fated. Why settle down with someone who wasn’t meant to be? Sure, lots of shifters did, but that didn’t make the heartbreak any less horrible when one of the couple found their fated, leaving the other alone. Yeah, no. I was going to stick it out and wait for the one.

Probably.

Maybe.

My fated mate was out there, and sadly, this snack wasn’t him. If only he was. I bet the two of us could make hella music. He looked so happy to see me; I wasn’t sure I could bring myself to turn him down, not when he left such a sweet message. The entire thing was a mess.

Troy gave me a quick hug and asked me to join him. I did, sliding into the booth beside him. It wasn’t a seating plan that would be great for chatting, but my wolf was pushing to be near him, and on this my beast and I agreed.

I didn’t understand why he scented of our mate, but not. And the scent was 100% all Troy. This wasn’t me scenting his partner on him and thinking “mine.”

“I was waiting outside, not wanting to appear too eager,” I admitted. “I apologize. You must’ve been worried I wasn’t going to come.”

“A little bit, maybe. Or I would have. Honestly, I’m having a difficult time thinking around you.” He didn’t mean it as such, but that was the best compliment I’d ever received.

“I still feel bad.” I grabbed a menu and handed it to him.
“Have you ever been here before? What should I order?”

“Order the chili. Because chili... Yes, please. You’re welcome.” He put the menu I’d just given him back in the holder. He didn’t need it, and I wouldn’t either.

Our server came by and took our order, both of us getting the same thing. She told us all about the pies, too, citing that if we wanted to save room, it was a good idea and then took our order.

Troy and I made small talk about his job and my school path while we waited for the chili and continued as we ate first dinner and then dessert. Eventually, the time came for us to leave. Had he not been human and not scenting so deliciously, I’d probably have broken down, asked him to my place, and made him cry out my name a few dozen times.

But with his scent so confusing, I didn’t feel right, and eventually we had to part ways.

“I’ll walk you to your car.” I took his hand and intertwined our fingers.

“There. That’s better.” He looked at me, not meeting my eyes, his focus on my lips instead.

I shouldn’t do it, shouldn’t indulge, not when he wasn’t mine, but he was so adorable and sexy and sweet that I couldn’t think of any other way to respond.

Leaning in, I brushed my lips against his. My intention was to give him a sweet little peck. If only it were that easy. My one peck led to us both wanting more and giving us something to carry me through.

“I should go.” His voice cracked at the end. He didn’t want to leave any more than I wanted him to leave.

“Want to do this again some night?” I braved asking.

“More than anything.” He kissed me and unlocked his car.
“Maybe next time we could try some of that peanut butter pie. I’ve never had it before.”

He said more, but all I could focus on was “next time.” Why couldn’t he be our mate?

SIX

ZEEVE

The drive to town was nice, much better than I thought it would be. All the small country roads the GPS told me were the “shortest” route had me nervous. I half expected them to be pothole central. They weren’t, although a couple were dirt roads, so there was that. I didn’t mind, though. It was an adventure.

This entire thing was. Finding a mate via an app and driving over an hour to see if there was any potential. And really, if it didn’t work out, what was the harm? I’d spend a nice weekend in a small town, drinking tea with the older man who ran the B&B where I had a reservation.

I hadn’t been planning to spend the night originally. I thought that if I ever had a match worth meeting, we’d stay in the middle, or I’d drive there and then turn around and come home when it was over. A ton of people commuted longer than that each day. Surely I could handle it for a couple of dates.

And if things worked out, if a person I came here to meet was my mate—then we would figure something out. I’d move or they would or we’d go from place to place. I didn’t know what, but it would work out.

I drove into the adorable town and down Main Street. There was one place listed I wanted to check out. From a glance, it looked more like an old-fashioned boarding house than a B&B. It was less fancy and more practical, which made sense. This wasn’t exactly a tourist attraction. The chances were good the occupants either had family who came to visit and wanted

their own space or they were here for work. Neither needed fancy, and both required practicality.

There was a vacancy sign, and after I finally found a space to park that wasn't listed as no parking, I got checked into my room.

The rooms were a thousand times better than I feared they would be, and the price was decent enough. This was not the way I could date on the regular, but this weekend was special. I was going to accept the spoiling that was in store for me.

It was weird, though, going on a mini vacation to use a dating app in a new town. Had it been a plot in a movie, I'd have rolled my eyes so hard. And it wasn't like I lived in New York with a bazillion and a half people where I could walk around the block and get new hits. I'd exhausted my town, so here I was.

I had dinner tonight with Troy and lunch tomorrow with Channon. Rushing either date was unfair to everyone, and spreading them out was the best option. It also felt like cheating, which was dumb. How could I cheat on someone I hadn't even met yet, not really?

Had I told either of them I was seeing another person this weekend? No. But I also didn't imply I wasn't. It was sort of the expectation of an app that you try multiple people. Wasn't it?

The owner of the B&B, Gio, called up the stairs to me, not bothering to use my phone. I felt like an errant child, but also, it was sweet. I went down to see what he wanted.

"Would you like some tea?" he asked with a warm smile.

The man was nearly eighty if he were a day and was difficult to turn down. I still had an hour before I had to get ready and accepted the offer.

"How long have you owned the place?" I asked, thinking it was a slow-pitched question and not an interrogation.

"About a year." His answer floored me. He went all in on a new venture long after hitting the age of retirement. Good on him.

“That’s cool. Has business been good?” When I asked, it was out of politeness. He took it as a request for a full-on report.

It was fascinating listening to him, not because of numbers, but because it told me so much about this town. It was small, sure, but it had its share of drama and history.

I learned about Mrs. Haggard, who ran the local preschool and had to stay at the B&B for a month when her house was hit by lightning. I heard the tales of construction crews losing members when they moved on to the next site because at least a couple of them fell in love with a local during their stay, and about the multiple “naughty spouses” who were staying there at the daily rate, crossing all things that they would be back home and into their own beds before getting caught. I also learned that a decent chunk of the town were lifers, born here and would never leave.

“Do you need help with the dishes or anything?” I was sincere. It was nice that he made me tea, but he didn’t need to deal with all of the cleaning.

“Don’t you have something to get ready for?” He drank the last of his tea.

“Yes,” I conceded. “But I was having so much fun talking to you.”

There was still a half an hour until I had to shower and get dressed, and I took the opportunity to go for a short walk. The air was different here. I felt so completely at home, living in the modern version of every single Hallmark movie ever. If Gio had told me that Hallmark stalked this place for movie-set ideas, I’d have believed it based on the books I bought.

Can we shift now? My wolf rarely spoke to me in full sentences, and it startled me. At first I looked around, thinking maybe it was someone else talking, someone that sounded like my wolf. But nope, it was my actual wolf.

After our date. I’ll take us somewhere fun. I googled dog-friendly spots. Not that I was a dog, but it felt like a good way to keep my beast safe. They didn’t allow dogs where people

hunted, at least not in my experience. And honestly, if hunters were close by, I'd much rather be home.

My wolf wasn't pleased at being told he had to wait, but he fell back.

I was excited to meet Troy in person. Our chatting had been fun, and we had a lot in common. I wasn't sure what his beast was, neither of us bringing it up, but based on the look of him, I would guess it was something small and cute, possibly a bunny.

Once back in my room, I went into the super small bathroom, one that needed a pocket door because there was no room for a real door to swing open and still have a bed in there. At least the bathroom was nice enough. The water pressure was good, the water hot, and I got to stand in the clawfoot tub while using it.

I spent too long in the shower, and when I came out, my hair was a mess, I suddenly realized I was a walking meme; hair sticking up, collared shirt misbuttoned, and a too small towel wrapped around my waist. I had to get dressed and get out the door in five minutes.

One quick turnaround in front of the mirror and I deemed it good enough. Jeans that cupped my ass perfectly? Check. Shirt that worked for both a nice place and a stroll in the park? Also, check.

"Please let me look the kind of 'good' Troy likes," I said to myself as I grabbed my keys.

This was go time. Maybe I should've been upfront about the multiple-guys thing. I sucked at dating culture. I knew that lots of people hooked up with multiple people from apps at the same time and were fine with it. But it wasn't how I was built. And I wasn't here to hook up with someone.

I wanted more. I wanted a mate, a best friend, a lover, someone to grow a family with. Basically, I wanted the dream.

"There's only one way to find out if this is Mr. Right," I said, then walked out the door to see if fate was looking down on me tonight.

Fingers crossed it was.

SEVEN

TROY

“Why, universe? Why?”

Meeting Channon was everything I imagined it would be. He was funny and kind and said he wanted to meet my very large, chaotic extended family. I was impressed because some guys would have been, “Nope, I enjoy being with you, but I didn’t sign up for a huge family scene.”

Even though Channon and I had been on one date and were in no way exclusive, or even formally “dating,” I was overcome with guilt at arranging a date with another guy, an alpha this time. But just as I’d clicked with Channon, Zeeve also seemed such a good fit for me.

I’d been yearning for a partner, a husband, a companion for life, and now I was drawn to an alpha and an omega. And I might have to choose. What sort of fucked-up situation was that? What if Zeeve was the one? Two alphas in a relationship. It was possible, but unusual.

“Don’t answer that, universe,” I yelled at the ceiling. “You’re showing me the error of my ways.” My moping and moaning about being alone and not enjoying life had come back and bitten me on the ass. Served me right for not getting myself out of that funk before I started dating.

Canceling on Zeeve was the right decision. That would end my “woe is me” pity party, and Channon and I could get to know one another without me looking over my shoulder, wondering if Zeeve was going to appear.

But the alpha was coming from out of town. He was traveling to what he might consider a podunk town where we had one decent bar to hang out at and few restaurants. I could take him dancing. There was a club of elderly residents that met once a week. Zeeve had given no hints he was a dancer, but the man might have hidden talents. I'd hoped if he did, they might be in his pants.

I'd solve my dilemma by not canceling our date but telling him the truth when we met. If he walked out disgusted, I'd be disappointed and upset, but my conscience would be clear because I'd been honest. He might be a tad peeved I wasn't truthful before he came to town, but I'd deal with the guilt if that happened.

Meeting up with Zeeve, I didn't fuck around with what to wear as I did with Channon. I put on a just-ironed button-down shirt, a pair of pants I'd picked up from the dry cleaner, and a jacket. I didn't hang around outside, wondering what time to go in, as I arrived only a few minutes early.

As I pushed open the glass door, my phone buzzed, telling me he was here. I picked him out immediately when he was putting his phone away. I knew what he looked like, but wow, he was much more handsome in person. He took my breath away—literally, and the first thing he said wasn't, "Hi," or "Nice to meet you, Troy." Instead, he slapped my back because my face must have been the color of beetroot.

I gasped and gulped air into my mouth as he sat me down and kneeled beside me.

"I thought you were choking."

That was true, almost. But I didn't have food lodged in my throat. It was Zeeve's fault. Not only was he better-looking in person, but my body reacted to him, much as it had with Channon. There was no doubt the universe was fucking with me, but there was no manual showing me how to unfuck my life.

"Thank you." I couldn't give him an explanation, as there was none, or not one I could interpret. My plan about being honest and telling him about Channon didn't happen. The words got

stuck in my throat as I took him in, admiring his strong jaw and broad shoulders. Wishing I could peek under the table at his crotch would have to wait until I accidentally dropped a napkin.

Zeeve took a seat. It was as though his dark eyes told a story, similar to Channon's, but not identical. But how was that possible? Surely they couldn't be related? Could they? I wouldn't bring it up because I'd have to fib and refer to Channon as a friend. Better to stay quiet.

"Thank you for driving all this way to meet me."

"It wasn't far, and... I had other business."

He studied his beer as he said the last part. Goosebumps prickled over my body because a little voice inside me said he was fibbing. But perhaps I imagined it, as he asked me what I'd like to drink and we chatted about his trip and the place he was staying.

Each time I caught his eye, I shivered. Not because he scared me, but if I had to describe his expression it would be: hungry, ravenous. No, I didn't get the impression he wanted to eat me, though if he asked me to yank my pants down and stuck his tongue in my ass, I might have done just that.

I gulped my beer and droplets dribbled over my chin and onto my skin and shirt. Zeeve gave me a napkin, and when I took it, our hands brushed over one another. A jolt of something surged through my veins and sweat dotted my upper lip. I dabbed at them with more napkins, wishing the management would turn up the air-conditioning. Poor Zeeve. When he agreed to meet, he hadn't been expecting a sweaty mess.

He drained his beer while I concentrated on his long slender fingers, thinking about them tugging my cock or being shoved in my hole.

"Are you hungry?"

"Ummm." There were so many possible answers. For sex? Yes. For food? Maybe. To see him naked? Definitely.

I glanced around, hoping Channon hadn't snuck in here without me noticing. Perhaps he was sitting at the bar, hiding

in the shadows with a hangdog expression. He'd stroll up to the table and say how disappointed he was and walk out of my life.

"Troy? We don't have to eat."

I focused on Zeeve, holding a menu. "No, I could use a snack, unless you're famished."

I shouldn't have said that word. I was famished, wanting love, sex, and companionship from two guys. Opening the menu, I stabbed at the potato skins, nachos, onion rings, and mozzarella sticks, otherwise known as a heart attack on a plate, but I didn't give a damn.

"I'm starving too." He licked around his lips, making me regret wearing these pants. I should have bought a size bigger because my cock was hard and pressing on the zipper. If I came in my pants, I'd have to use two menus to hide the evidence as I ran out. One at the front and the other over my ass. Nothing like drawing attention to myself. I sniggered, forgetting where I was.

"So you don't get hangry but the opposite?" Zeeve smirked. "Would that be happgry or joygry?"

I giggle snorted at him making a joke when I'd been picturing cum lining my pants and the fabric shredded from the force of my orgasm.

"Something like that."

He took my hand, and the goosebumps appeared again and charged over my skin.

"We can be joygry together."

Together. I loved the sound of that, until an image of Channon appeared in my head. I'd obviously angered the universe somehow, and this was payback, falling for two guys. But I reminded myself, I'd only met them once. That wasn't enough to know if we were going to spend our lives together.

Our food arrived, providing a distraction, and we chatted about the cuisine we enjoyed. I loved Thai food, but there wasn't

anywhere in town that served it. Zeeve suggested visiting him one weekend, and he'd take me for Thai food.

Zeeve loved Ethiopian food, which I'd never tasted, but also Indian and Greek were high on his list of favorites.

"I'll introduce you to Ethiopian food too if you *come* for the weekend." The emphasis on the word "come" almost had me doing just that—coming.

"I'd love to." Problem was there was another man in the equation. I changed the subject. "What else are you doing while you're here?" He'd mentioned business but was kind squirrely about it.

He didn't answer straight away and pursed his lips and studied his nails. "Not much."

Not wanting to push him any further, I stuffed the last potato skin in my mouth.

"I had a great time tonight."

"Me too." This should've been when I spilled about going out with Channon, but something stopped me. I didn't want to witness Zeeve's reaction, much less watch as he stormed out the door.

I grabbed the check and he protested, saying we should split it. But guilt at keeping a secret had me insisting I pay, as he drove all this way and paid for accommodation.

What now? If we were going to see one another again, I had to tell him the truth.

EIGHT

CHANNON

I couldn't get Troy out of my head. And while he wasn't my true mate, that didn't stop him from calling to me as no one ever had before. And if it was just his scent, maybe I could push it aside and move along. But it wasn't. There was so much about him I wanted to learn about... experience... lick.

I tried to convince myself that he was my mate... that the connection I felt being enveloped in his scent was deeper than I realized... that I was simply misunderstanding what a mate scent should be.

Except my wolf, he didn't "do the thing," as my mated friends called it in jest, "the thing" being clawing his way out to claim the man as his own. No. Troy wasn't my true mate, no matter how much I wanted to smoosh him into that position and call it good. If only he could be, then I wouldn't be doing stupid things, like asking him on a second date, knowing it wouldn't lead to anything real.

Want to meet for coffee?

I'd left the message half an hour ago and was staring at the stupid phone like it held all the answers in the world, while at the same time filling my head with very improbable scenarios as to why he hadn't typed back yet. Current top contenders were: He hated me, aliens abducted him, and he was working.

I decided to do something productive instead of staring at my phone and headed into my bedroom to grab my hamper. Laundry was mindless and it had to be done anyway. It was the chore that never ended.

I had a load of colors running and a smaller one of whites waiting for the next load when my phone dinged. I'd be lying if I said I didn't race toward it. The truth was I ran like I was in the Olympics and I could see the finish line, only to see a scam text about getting a free cruise.

"Let it go." It wasn't as if he was ghosting me. We'd been chatting and had talked about meeting up. It was ridiculous to think that he would spontaneously be available for a coffee date. The guy had a life.

And as I set the phone down, a message appeared. *Sounds great. When were you thinking? Please say now because I need the caffeine.*

I messaged him that I did too, and we agreed to meet at a coffee shop in fifteen minutes.

We walked up to the shop at almost the same time, and he leaned in for a hug, one I gladly gave. I held him close, inhaling deeply, and my wolf lost it.

Mine.

Mine.

Claim.

Mate.

And on and on he went. Only it wasn't Troy's scent he was referring to. At least I didn't think it was. There was another scent there, lavender and honeysuckle mixed with anise. It was that scent that had my beast flipping out. But also, Troy smelled differently too... deeper and more intense than before. Had he scented that way when we first met, I'd have been sure he was our mate.

And now? Now nothing made sense. If he wasn't my mate, then why did he sort of scent like my mate, but not really? Either someone was or wasn't a mate. The scent didn't leave room for doubt, except his did.

Had he been a shifter, I'd have asked him. But Troy was a human. He knew less than I did about all of this. At least, I assumed he did.

I held him longer than I intended, and when he pulled back, I feared I had made him uncomfortable. Then I realized he wasn't doing it to get away from me. He was moving out of someone's way. We were taking up the majority of the sidewalk.

"Shall we get coffee?" he asked, and I nodded, not ready to trust myself not to ask him why he scented of my mate and to take me to him already.

We each grabbed a coffee. I tried to pay, but Troy insisted he pay his own way. It wasn't like I was trying to buy him a fancy dinner or a car. It was a cup of coffee, a fancy one, but hardly a big-ticket item.

We were lucky and found a seat, the entire place packed.

"This coffee is pretty decent." I went to take a sip, saw how hot it was and put it right back down, mouthing hot.

"Yeah, it's good." Unlike me, he had an iced coffee and was already able to drink it without getting third-degree burns on his tongue. "I was glad you messaged me."

It wasn't the first time I had, but it had been different. It wasn't a making-small-talk kind of text. It was an *I want to see you* one.

"I'm glad you were available. I figured you'd be busy. You know, with friends and such." My attempt to get information out of Troy was clunky and awkward. Go, me.

"I had to run a few errands."

"Alone?" And now I sounded like a jealous partner. I might as well be wearing a huge-ass red flag by this point.

"Yeah. I guess." Whatever that meant. "What were you up to?"

"Don't let your eyes turn green, but I did... wait for it... laundry."

He smiled and let out a small chuckle. "You didn't tell me you lived the good life."

"I live the good life." I picked up my coffee. This time, it was cool enough to take a sip.

I wanted to know who he'd been with, but every question I could think to ask was red-flag central. And so, I gave up. At least for the day. And besides, it was more fun to get to know Troy than it was trying to shake him down for information. I needed to regroup. Maybe when I was away from his yummy scent, I'd be able to piece it together.

And so I dropped it. Dropped any and everything that had to do with anyone but Troy. I was only managing to make this awkward and weird and not fun and engaging. There would be time to figure out the bonus scent later. Or at least that was what I kept telling myself.

“What are your plans for the night?” I asked when we finished our coffees, and we were getting some serious stink eye from people wanting our table.

“I have a work thing.” He stuck out his bottom lip. “It’s mandatory. But maybe the beginning of next week?”

“I love the sound of that.” I stood up and grabbed our two empty cups and tossed them in the bin. “We could even drive to that farm-to-table place. The food is delicious.”

“I’d like that. Thanks.”

We hugged again, this time both of us allowing it to simmer. Troy gave the best hugs.

We parted ways, and I got halfway home before realizing that I had a date with Zeeve later. The high of being with Troy, of liking him as much as he seemed to like me— it was everything. I didn’t want to ruin that by going out with Zeeve.

I pulled off on the side of the road and opened the app to decline the scheduled event. Only, when I went to do that, it gave me a stupid error message telling me the app was down. I needed to deal with it in person. Fuck. Of course I was too late.

“Can one thing go right today, like one entire thing?”

Resigned not to be a dick, I drove to where the two of us were meeting. He didn’t deserve getting ghosted simply because I scented my true mate after we’d been together a year or five. I

wouldn't lead him on, obviously. That was a part of the whole not-being-a-dick thing. But standing him up was off the table.

We were meeting at a diner. Nothing too fancy. And if things went south, I'd leave.

I pulled into a parking space and wondered if I should let my date know I was there or if I should wait until it was actually the start time of our date. I tried to pull up the app, hoping for something—anything to help identify him... to help me navigate the situation. It didn't work, leaving me to wing it. I was in over my head in all aspects of this online-dating thing.

Inhaling deeply, I tried to center myself. This would all work out. Just as I wasn't trying to be a dick to Zeeve, fate wasn't going to be a dick to me. You didn't get a fated mate waved in front of you and then never see them again. Right?

NINE

ZEEVE

I couldn't sleep. Wolves and humans interrupted my dreams, drifting into my consciousness. They didn't speak, instead sniffing me, their gaze roaming over my body. As they extended their hand or paw, I reached out, my fingertips brushing over their skin or fur. But the instant we made contact, they faded away, and it left me miserable and alone.

I woke up, my breath coming in short spurts and starts as my eyes darted around the unfamiliar room, until I placed myself in the B&B. Flopping back onto the mattress, I couldn't fall asleep as my mind went over the past few days.

Troy was my mate, even though we were both alphas. I'd deal with that issue later. Right now, him being human and me not was a far bigger deal, one I'd never encountered. There was no rule book on how to introduce a human to the world of shifters.

But the second problem was his clothes carried a whiff of another scent, and that *was* a shifter. It was possible Troy was aware of our existence and I didn't have to do the shifter version of show-and-tell. I doubted it, though. But he gave no sign he knew shifters existed. If he was familiar with our kind, he might scent us, and that included me.

Complicating the matter further, the other shifter was also my mate.

Gods, I couldn't see a way forward.

How likely was it that Troy would accept being mated to a shifter who was also an alpha and agree to a second mate, also

a wolf?

Despite wanting to find my second mate, Troy deserved my loyalty. We'd met, and I could always find the second shifter by ferreting out details from Troy where he'd been and with whom.

I had to cancel the date with Channon, smooth things over, and hopefully Troy would accept that we were mates. Once our bond was secure, I'd bring up the topic regarding the other guy. Or not. I was torn, because while the human alpha was my one of two, I yearned for my second mate.

Without giving myself another minute to waffle or hesitate, I grabbed the phone, intending to apologize to Channon, saying I couldn't make it. But the universe wasn't on my side, and the app was down, with no sign of when it would be restored. I tossed the phone on the bed and shouted into a pillow, not wanting anyone to hear me.

I had to meet Channon. Ghosting him, leaving him sitting there, checking his phone, glancing up hopefully whenever anyone entered. That was cruel. I had to alpha up and go to our meet-up.

Arriving early, I sipped on water and drummed my fingers on the table. Not because he was late, but I was impatient to get this over with and contact Troy.

The breeze announced his arrival, and my wolf perked up.

He was already tired of this merry-go-round of setting up a date, driving to and from a date, thinking about a date. The human was our mate, but now I'd put myself in an awkward situation of meeting another guy.

But my life just got a lot more awkward.

Better.

That too. I agreed with my wolf. But to reach better, we had to get over a hump, one that involved explaining to a human about shifters.

Channon's wolf was at the forefront of his gaze as he casually strolled toward my table. "Mate," he mouthed, presumably

because we were surrounded by humans.

I nodded and grasped his hand. With his palm molded to mine, we formed a connection. Not a bond. That required marking, but it was a formality, and we'd only exchanged one word.

“Shall we celebrate?”

He should have been bubbling over with excitement, both of us racing out to a car, hotel, the woods, anywhere to fuck and mate. But there was a reticence about Channon as he fidgeted with his collar, tugged his ear, and examined a knife from every angle as though he'd never seen one previously.

“To us?” I queried. But as he glanced around at the other patrons, I caught the unmistakable whiff of a scent, one I'd encountered before. And not just any scent. It was Troy's.

Our situation just became much easier—maybe.

I leaned forward and sniffed, needing to make doubly sure it was Troy's aroma permeating his clothes. There was no mistake.

A waiter approached, and we ordered the first thing on the menu. I could not concentrate on anything other than Channon and how he'd met Troy.

“You and I have someone in common.”

“Troy,” we both said in unison. I wondered if my face registered the delight and wonderment Channon's did, and we both laughed.

“He's our mate, and lucky me. I'm the only omega.” He wiggled his butt, and the chair rattled.

My cock stood at attention. Until now, I'd been concentrating on the logistics of humans and shifters, but Channon brought up sex. I almost asked the staff if they had a back room with a lock, but that wouldn't have been fair to Troy. If he agreed to mate with us, we had to do it with the three of us present and dicks in holes, or as many as possible. Perhaps a mouth suckling a cock or fingers fucking. There were several possibilities, and I longed to be naked with my mates, figuring it out.

The waiter brought out food.

“Did we order onion rings?” I asked Channon as I took a bite of the oily, crunchy goodness. Yum.

“I don’t remember us asking for crispy chickpeas.” Channon popped the spicy morsels in his mouth. “But I’m so glad we did.”

We ate our way through sliders, fries, and wings, both of us talking with our mouths full, which was a little ewww, but we were so excited we ignored our table manners. Or I did. Maybe Channon was a sloppy eater and didn’t bother with manners.

When we’d finished and were both sipping on sodas, the light mood evaporated with one word: Troy. It hovered between us, and the tension stretched taut. I could almost see it shimmering.

“How did you meet?” he asked.

“*Love and Hate*. But there’s supposed to be a shifter version and a human one.”

He nodded and mentioned he’d made certain of the S indicating shifters when he signed up. “Either Troy made a booboo or the app did.”

“And thank gods it did, or we’d have never met Troy and he’d have been alone the rest of his life or with someone who wasn’t his one and only.”

Neither of us said anything for a minute. My heart broke at our human mate stumbling through life, not knowing what was missing.

“How do we do this?” Channon threw the drink down his throat, causing me to lose concentration. I slid a finger along his jaw, and he gasped, spilling the soda. He ran his foot over mine, before pushing my legs apart and stroking my crotch. He must have removed his shoe because the sole of his foot pressed on my cock, causing it to swell further.

His glazed expression left me in doubt as to his intention, though he added, “Wanna fuck?” at the end.

It would have been easy to agree, bundle him into an alley, and yank his pants down. The scent of slick now wafted over me, mingling with the remains of our food.

“I do, but—”

“Troy.” Channon finished my sentence as his phone beeped.

He glanced at it and showed the name on the display: Troy. I checked my device and was disappointed I didn’t have a similar message.

Channon put his hand over mine. “If we’re confused, imagine what he’s going through.” He read the message out loud.

Great news. My plans have changed. Wanna join me for a picnic tomorrow.

That was more intimate than meeting in a public place, and jealousy flickered again. Why hadn’t he invited me on a picnic or to his place?

“My suggestion is that I accept, and we both turn up.”

I made a face, thinking poor Troy might feel as though we were pushing him to accept us, and he might not be ready.

“How about you go first and I’ll come a little later?”

Channon winked. “Perhaps by the end of the picnic, we’ll all be naked and we can all come.”

I gulped and shivered as I pictured the three of us frolicking in the woods. “Stop talking about coming.” I lowered my voice. “Or I might just do that right here.”

“Don’t worry. I’ll shield you as we leave. No one will see the wet patch on your pants.”

The mention of a wet patch tamped down my desire. There’d be no coming here.

TEN

TROY

Looking forward to it.

I jumped up and down, doing little clappie claps. Channon had agreed to come on a picnic with me. I knew just the spot. It was on the edge of town, a sprawling state park with hiking trails and picnic areas, but I'd found a more secluded place for a picnic. It required a short ten-minute walk from the parking area. Rather than being within hearing distance of other picnickers, we'd have privacy.

I went over my list for the tenth time. Blankets, cushions, music, a beach umbrella in case the day was hot, wine, sodas and juice, napkins, cutlery, and crockery. As for the food, I ordered it from the one deli in town. Crusty bread, a variety of salads, mini quiches, cold cuts, deviled eggs, fruit, crackers, and cheese. I'd ordered more food than necessary, in case Channon was particularly hungry.

My aim in inviting him was to make sure the connection I had with him on our dates wasn't a fluke or me being desperate to find my person. Once I'd established if the pull I'd experienced was real, I'd tell him. Beyond that, I couldn't imagine, because it involved explaining about Zeeve. That was the hard part.

An hour before the allotted time, I left the house. Choosing my outfits was much easier than the first time. Besides, this was a casual meet-up, and I was wearing jeans and a tee. After picking up the food, I drove to the park and lugged everything to the picnic spot. I had to make three trips and should have

waited for Channon, but I wanted it to be ready when he arrived.

With ten minutes to spare, I rearranged the cushions and the picnic basket a few times. I kept reminding myself he was coming to spend time with me, not to judge me on my cushion arrangement. At least I hoped not.

I sensed rather than heard him as he strolled along the path, or that was how I imagined it. But I had help when a flock of birds squawked and flew away, suggesting someone or something had disturbed them. Leaping up, I stood awkwardly beside the picnic and waved, sporting a silly grin. I'd never be one of those people who was cool, calm, and collected with not a hair out of place. Zeeve was that guy.

Damn, I'd done all of this for Channon and the other guy popped into my head. Channon made more sense as a partner because he was an omega. Two alphas marrying wasn't unheard of, but it wasn't common. And if we wanted kids, we'd have to adopt, not that there was anything wrong with that. I'd love to adopt a child or children who needed a loving home.

"Wow. This looks amazing."

He pecked my cheek, and my cock took notice. Damn, I should have worn bigger jeans. I positioned a cushion on my lap so he couldn't see my boner.

"Thanks. I wanted it to be special. Are you hungry?"

"Sure am, and not just for food."

I was opening up one cooler and my head jerked up. His raised brow, parted lips, and his... his... bedroom eyes suggested he was referring to sex. While this area was isolated, there was a path going past. Anyone could walk by. Having sex on the blanket in the open wasn't how I imagined our first time.

Channon heaped salad on his plate and nibbled on a mini quiche as he lay on his side and leaned on a cushion while I ogled him, especially the curve of his hip and the bulge at his crotch.

"Yum." He licked his lips and popped a grape in his mouth.

I squeaked, a sound any mouse would be proud of. Gods, he was gorgeous, and he was here with me, alone. I pictured him lowering his zipper, pulling out his cock and saying, “Is this what you wanted?”

“What was that?”

I opened my mouth but nothing came out, so I shoved a piece of bread between my lips to give me time to think. “Oh, just admiring the surroundings.”

“Am I part of those surroundings?”

I had to come clean. “Most definitely.”

He sat up and brushed crumbs off his jeans. “I’m glad ‘cause I like you too. More than like.”

Another piece of bread went into my mouth as I considered the meaning of more than like on a third date. What came between like and the other L word, love?

“Please don’t be annoyed, but I invited someone else to join us.”

Annoyed, I was freaking furious. The guy just admitted he cared about me, and now he wanted a threesome. Fuck the fuck off.

“I don’t know what your game is, but I want no part of it,” I said through gritted teeth as I willed away the tears that were threatening to spill. He’d shredded my hopes and dreams and stomped on my heart.

I rushed past him, forgetting about the food, just wanting to get in my car and leave Channon far behind. But he grabbed me, saying it wasn’t what I thought it was.

I shook him off. “How do you know what I’m thinking, asshat?”

Leaves crunched under someone’s feet, and the cold claws of fear gripped my heart. What did I know about Channon? Not much. I was a fool for having the picnic here. If we’d been near other people, I would have been safe. If I’d invited Zeeve, it would have been so different, and now I might never see him again.

“Zeeve!” The alpha appeared on the path. I glanced from Channon to Zeeve. They were both in on whatever this was. They’d hacked the *Love and Hate* app looking for needy guys, and I fit the profile.

“It’s okay, Troy. Channon and I met through *Love and Hate*, just as you and I did.” He extended a hand, but I backed away. “Why don’t we sit down? This picnic is fabulous, and I’m famished.” He plonked himself on the blanket and grabbed a piece of bread and salami.

“I’m fine standing.” Though I was wary, I couldn’t deny I was attracted to both of them. Even if they were aiming to drain my bank accounts or worse.

“It’s a little complicated,” Channon began.

Zeeve shrugged and added, “Not really.” He pointed to Channon and then to himself. “We really like one another.”

“Is that what you came to tell me? That you two are going to waltz off into the sunset?”

Zeeve grinned. “Only if you’re with us.”

“Huh?” My brain couldn’t comprehend what he was trying to say.

“We both like you too. More than like.”

There it was again. Not like but something else. “I don’t understand.”

“Zeeve and I want to spend the rest of our lives with you.”

My legs gave out just as my heart sped up. Zeeve fanned me with a paper plate and Channon offered me water. I guzzled half a bottle, wiping my mouth with the back of my hand.

Putting my elbows on my knees, I placed my head between my legs and breathed deeply. Without looking up, I asked, “You like one another?”

“Yes,” they both replied.

“And you like me, too?”

“Agreed.”

I lifted my head and studied the two men I cared about. “Before we go any further, can we stop using the word ‘like?’ Makes us sound like toddlers.”

They laughed. “How about we love you?” That was Zeeve, and a knot of anticipation formed in my belly.

“Adore you and want the three of us to bond and become a family,” Channon added.

“Fine.” I grinned at them. “If you love me so much, show me.”

“Here?” Zeeve glanced over his shoulder.

I giggled, unable to contain my joy. “I’m not talking about sex. Not here. But you could hug me. Both of you.”

They bounded over. Wow, they moved quickly. Zeeve and Channon wrapped their arms around me, and I inhaled their unique scents. I’d found what I was looking for with two men, one an alpha like me.

“How will this work?” I rested my head on Zeeve’s shoulder, content to stay where I was and never move. “With the three of us.”

“It’s simple. We love each other and live together, have sex, do the dishes, cook, and occasionally argue.” Channon kissed my cheek.

“But where do we sleep? Do we all share a bed? Or do we take turns?” My head was spinning at the possibilities.

“We’ll do whatever feels right to us, but there’s more to life than sex. Those dishes don’t wash themselves,” Channon joked.

“We’re getting a dishwasher,” Zeeve chortled.

“There’s just one small problem.” Channon ran his fingers through my hair.

I was pressed against both of them, and there was nothing small about them.

“We’re not like you.” Channon pulled away and turned my head toward him.

“Is there a problem that two of us are alphas?” I asked. I didn’t care. We could live in the woods far from anyone. I wasn’t giving them up.

ELEVEN

CHANNON

“Is there a problem that two of us are alphas?” Troy asked.

Troy amazed me. He just had two people tell him they loved him after only knowing him for a few hours, and he went with it, embracing it instantly. If he had been a wolf or any shifter, I wouldn't have thought anything of it, but he was human.

Humans flirted, dated, freaking wooed... they didn't just smell someone and move on it—at least none I'd ever met or heard of. It wasn't their way. Only with Troy, he didn't appear to have gotten that memo, instead latching onto us as quickly as we did him.

“Two alphas? I call it hitting the jackpot,” I sassed, meaning every word. “Is it a problem for you?”

Troy looked at me, then Zeeve, then back at me. “Not a problem, but also... how will it work? I don't want to just share you—I want more.”

“Agreed. If you both share me, then how am I supposed to get a front-row seat of hot alpha-on-alpha action?” Gods, my pants were getting tight just thinking about it.

“I'd like to make you all hot and bothered by putting on a little show with our mate.” Zeeve watched Troy's face as he spoke. Was Zeeve going to be the mate who was into sexy talk? Fuck, I hoped so. I loved me some dirty talk.

Troy swallowed. “So we are doing this... now?” The scent of his need hung in the air.

It was all I could do not to jump in with both feet. I wanted both him and Zeeve as badly as his scent indicated he wanted us. But sleeping with him without him knowing the truth? He deserved better than that.

“After we talk a bit.” Zeeve took Troy’s hand in his. “You know how you downloaded the app. How did you find it?”

“Oh, my cousin Ray put it on the phone for me.”

Which didn’t clarify how he had the shifter version, but it told me that no matter how it happened, our mate knew nothing about it. He soon would, though. Because we couldn’t go even a step farther with him in the dark. It wasn’t right. He deserved all the knowledge and to decide from there. Even if that decision broke my heart into a million pieces.

“Is your cousin mated to someone who might be a little bit... different?” I asked, and based on the look Troy was giving us, he had no clue what I was talking about.

“Quirky? Is that what you mean? If so, no. At least I don’t see them that way. But what does that have to do with anything?”

“There are two *Love and Hate* apps,” Zeeve took over. I was getting nowhere fast with my attempt. “One for people like you and the other for people like us. You got the wrong one.”

“You mean the right one?” Troy asked. Did he think we meant he wasn’t for us? I thought we’d done well at that part, at least. The rest, not so much.

“The right one in that it led us together.” I took his other hand. “Absolutely. But it wasn’t the one designed for you. It was for people like us.” I leaned into Zeeve’s side.

“Zeeve and I are the alphas... is that what you mean?” he asked.

“There is no real right way to say this,” Zeeve stood up and pulled off his shirt. “So I’m going to show you, and Channon can talk you through it, and then we can swap places.”

Zeeve met my eyes, as if wanting confirmation that this was the best idea. I wasn’t sure if it was, but it was the only idea I

could think of, so it worked for me. I gave him a subtle nod and down his jeans went.

“Gods, that thing is huge. I don’t know if I could get it all in my mouth, but I’m willing to give it a go.” Troy’s eyes would not leave our mate’s naked body, especially his cock. I should know, my eyes were there too. He was both long and thick. He was going to be a good time.

“I’m sure it will,” Zeeve said, completely unfazed by what had just transpired.

“But as distracting as our mate’s gifts are, and damn, Zeeve, that is some gift...” Where was I going with this? I didn’t even know. I just needed that cock in my mouth and stat. “Now all I want is your cock.”

“Maid?” Troy was somehow able to focus on Zeeve’s cock and the conversation at the same time. “What does that mean? Like, you want a maid?”

“Not maid. Mate. With a T. Think husband, but more... binding. Maybe if Zeeve—it’s time.”

Zeeve walked a short distance from us and took his fur. Gods, he was a gorgeous wolf.

“Mate. Duh, I’m not sure... wait, are you a wolf too,” Troy asked, completely unbothered by our mate’s sexy ass now covered in fur.

“You know about shifters?” I’d thought so a couple of times, but talked myself out of believing it both of those times.

“Yeah, my cousin Ray’s partner... oh, that’s why you asked about... so yeah, I just recently met Evan and learned about him... it was sort of an accident, but you know... my cousin has never been happier, so it didn’t freak me out.” He looked back and forth between us. “I didn’t babble my way into a new conversation, did I? That is what you meant?”

I nodded.

“Then yes, he’s really different when he turned into his bear.” Troy dropped my hand and got up. “Do you think Zeeve will let me pet him? Is that weird or disrespectful or something?”

“You can talk directly to him. He can hear you. But for me, yeah, you can pet me.”

He stepped over to Zeeve. “You’re gorgeous. I was thinking... can I...” Before he finished his thought, Zeeve was rubbing his head against Troy’s leg. “Thank you.” Troy reached down and gave our mate some scratches.

The two of them bonded beast to human for a few minutes. They wanted more time, and I was sure if it had only been the two of them, they’d have continued to get to know one another. But it wasn’t just them.

Troy bent down and kissed the top of Zeeve’s head. “Want to change back so we can talk about this?”

Zeeve took his human form. “Let me get my clothes on.”

“Sure.” Troy turned to me. “What animal are you?”

“I’ll show you.” This was so much easier than I feared it would be. The confusion and fear that could come with discovering people morphed into furry things and claimed to love you already didn’t happen. This was about him meeting our beast and accepting the notion of two men instead of one as his always and forever.

I took off my clothing, not paying attention to my erection, even when Troy looked at it, his tongue darting out and wetting his lips briefly. He liked what he saw, which only made it harder.

Come out and meet our mate.

Mate.

Claim.

Nope. You will not claim him. Not yet. I’ll let you know. He’s human. I’m pretty sure there will be a lot of wooing involved. And I was looking forward to every single second of it.

Once in my fur, I went over to Troy and licked his hand. He giggled, and I wanted to do it again and again. Only there were other things I wanted to do more... human things.

When I shifted back, I pointed to my cock and very bluntly said, “Am I the only one like this?”

“No!” Both of them said it a bit too loudly and in unison.

“I wonder if we should address the boners in the room?—clearing?—at this picnic?” Zeeve said, his eyes raking my body up and down as I got dressed. If he was trying to get me to go faster, he was going to need to try a new tactic. If anything, I wanted to strip again, slowly teasing them both.

“Who lives closest?” Troy asked. “I plan for us to wear ourselves out, and a bed would be nice.”

He was absolutely freaking adorable.

“I’m at a B&B,” Zeeve said.

“I think I’m closest, and if not, I have a king-sized mattress, a waffle maker, and an on-demand hot water system. The shower is tiny, but the water is hot and endless.” It was my favorite thing about my place.

“I can’t wait to get you two naked.” Troy pulled his bottom lip in with his teeth.

“We don’t have to rush it. We haven’t even talked about the mating bits,” I said. Not in the detail they deserved.

“It doesn’t feel like rushing, does it?” Troy asked.

I owed his cousin’s mate a huge-ass thank-you for giving him all this knowledge. It made things a thousand times easier than they could’ve been.

“Yeah, it doesn’t to me either.” Zeeve wrapped an arm around his shoulders. “Ready to see our mate’s place?”

“So very.”

I’d never seen a picnic packed up that quickly.

TWELVE

ZEEVE

We barely made it into the doorway when lips and hands were everywhere. There was nothing better than having not one, but two sexy shifters worshipping your body as you fumbled to do the same to theirs. We had all longed for this, and now that we had given ourselves permission to partake of the yums, there was no holding back.

Had anyone asked how things worked in the bedroom when you had two mates, I'd have not offered any advice. There were too many hands and lips and... well, dicks. Who would even go there?

But now it was happening, and the three of us were allowing ourselves to be together. It all came naturally and with such passion. We couldn't get enough of each other. And suddenly, who did what to who and when didn't matter. It was all about exploring each other's bodies and giving our mates pleasure.

Clothes were the first things to go. And as we worked our way to the bedroom, we left a trail of them in our wake. There was no time to take this slowly and make it romantic. We could get to that later. For now? Now we needed to give into all the feelings that had been building up.

"I need you. Both of you." Channon climbed onto the bed. "Don't let me be here all alone." His eyes raked our bodies, stopping at each of our stiff cocks and licking his lips, the scent of his slick only making me harder.

"What do you say, alpha?" I pulled Troy in for a long, hot kiss and then spoke against his lips. "Do you think we should join

our omega on the bed?”

“Does he need us?”

I twisted my head to see our sexy omega playing with his hole and jerking himself with the other hand.

“What? Like I could watch you two kissing and not need to relieve some of this arousal? I’m an omega, not a saint.” He didn’t skip one beat of his ministrations, and it was hot as hell.

“You like watching us?” Troy reached in front of me and grabbed my cock. “Would you enjoy watching me suck our alpha’s dick?”

I never let my eyes leave Channon. Gods, Troy’s tongue was made of magic. He had me teetering on the edge already, and we’d only just begun.

His lips were now wrapped around my dick which was inside only to the tip. And it wasn’t because I was too big or he wasn’t that into it or the bazillion other reasons it might have been. Based on the way his eyes were laser focused on our omega, he was waiting for Channon’s reaction.

Sexy as fuck.

Troy swirled his tongue around my tip, keeping me inside his mouth the entire time, and a moan escaped my lips.

“Imagine how good that would feel if he took you in deeper,” Channon said, and I didn’t need to imagine Troy deep throating me, and it took all of my willpower not to cum down his throat.

“Has anyone ever fucked you, alpha?” Channon came up behind Troy. “Would you like me to?” He grabbed Troy’s hips.

Troy pulled up and off me. I already missed his mouth on me, but seeing him get fucked by Channon? That was going to be hot as heck.

“Gods, yes. But I... it’s not something I’ve done.” And that he didn’t have natural slick didn’t go unnoticed. Not by me, anyway.

“Good thing I’m so slick and needy right now. Look at how my cock is hard and glistening just for you.” He meant that for Troy, but I took in his glorious form and instantly wondered how I missed him slicking his cock up. It now stood there, hard, needy, and slippery.

“You... gods, you’re fucking perfect.” Troy licked his lips.

“Hardly.” He bent down and nibbled on Troy’s ass. “Do you like that? Would you like me to fuck you while you make our mate come with your mouth?”

“More than my next breath.” Troy swallowed hard. “It tastes so good and fits into my mouth perfectly.”

“I’d love to see that.”

There was something extra hot about having our omega in charge, social norms be damned. My brain probably would’ve gone deeper down that train of thought had Troy not taken that moment to lick my cock from root to tip.

“Do you want to watch me as I get our mate ready for my cock?” Channon tilted his head to the mirror on the dresser. The angle wasn’t a great one, but it worked.

Channon gathered up his slick onto his fingers and then began to swirl them around Troy’s hole. He kept working his hole, but I wasn’t able to focus enough to appreciate it. Troy’s tongue officially stole all of my abilities to do anything other than to feel—feel his tongue, his lips, his teeth as they grazed over my cock. But also my canines were already descending, my beast wanting to mate them—both of them. To claim them as ours.

Troy swallowed around my cock and then froze. When I looked up to see what was going on, Channon was entering our mate from behind. He was going slow and held onto Troy’s hips, refusing to let him push back and take control.

“You look amazing in our alpha’s ass. Maybe one day you can be in mine, too.”

Channon looked me up and down and licked his lips. “I think that can be arranged.”

I watched the mirror, loving the way I could watch Troy and Channon at the same time.

Channon started out slow and easy, but picked up speed with each thrust. It was hot as fuck to watch. It was equally hot to feel each movement as Troy, whose mouth was currently paying homage to my dick, was pressed forward.

I focused on very nonsexy things, trying to keep from exploding into Troy's mouth and being only partially successful. I wanted Troy to go first, to enjoy his first time being filled by our omega.

"You look so hot, alpha—with my cock in your mouth." I grabbed a handful of his hair. "But if you keep going like that I'm going to come down your throat before he fills your hole."

"Good thing there's a round two... and three... and as many as we need to wear our sexy asses out and be sated." Channon ran his hand down Troy's back.

There were probably words that needed to be said, but my mind was blank. He was so hot when he talked like that, and Troy must've thought so too. He moaned around my cock, and swallowed around me, my balls tightening up, my orgasm imminent.

"Yes!" I cried out, my eyes fluttering shut as my cum shot into his mouth.

Troy's body stilled, and I snapped my eyes open to see Channon holding his hips tightly, his body quaking as he emptied into our alpha.

Claim.

Ours.

And before I could take control of my wolf, Troy's teeth sank into my thigh, marking me, as Channon molded his body against Troy's back, his teeth sinking into Troy's shoulder. It was nirvana, and yet, not quite enough.

Claim.

Ours.

“Mine.” I heaved Troy up as I bent down to meet him halfway, marking him on his shoulder, the metallic taste of blood sating my beast.

We crumbled into a pile of sweaty limbs onto the bed.

“Oh no.” Troy cupped Channon’s cheek. “My cock is already stirring, and someone here hasn’t been marked by me, yet.”

“We can’t let that happen.” I snuggled in closer to Channon. “I wonder if we could brainstorm a way to fix this situation.” I pressed a kiss to his shoulder. “Something that includes Troy’s knot, maybe?”

Channon walked his fingers over Troy’s chest. “I do like a good knot, and my slick hole is begging to be filled.”

I loved the way the three of us could be playful and fun like this already. We were partially marked, and if they were like me, their beasts wanted to remedy that quickly. But the human sides of them were simply enjoying these few moments of recuperation, and I was here for it.

“I think I might need to investigate how slick you are... for practicality’s sake.” I licked my lips. “With my mouth, of course. It’s the only true way to do so.”

“I’ve heard the same as well,” Troy said. “But it’s tricky work. I might need to observe to make sure it’s done correctly.”

“Obviously. we can’t leave a job as important as this one half done, can we, Channon?” I scootched down the bed a bit.

“No. I suppose not.” Channon rolled fully on his back as I settled between his legs. “Because... science.”

“Science,” Troy and I both said before I licked Channon’s slick entrance for the first time, and all speaking other than begging for more ceased.

THIRTEEN

TROY

I stroked my dick as I observed Zeeve's thick cock nudging Channon's hole.

My breathing came in spurts and starts. Never had I imagined not only being with two guys, but loving both of them, being fucked by an omega, and readying myself to fuck another alpha.

Leaning over Zeeve's shoulder while his cock prodded our omega's mate's entrance, I whispered, "I need some of that slick."

Zeeve paused. "In your mouth?"

Channon's eyes grew wide, and he circled his hole, coating his fingers with slick. That hadn't been my intention, but I was greedy for a taste of both my mates, and I stuck out my tongue, the tip connecting with the slick. I savored the musky, earthy taste and lapped the remaining slick from Channon's fingers.

Zeeve pouted. "I want some too."

Rather than having him take it from our omega mate, I edged my fingers toward Channon's hole. "May I?"

He nodded, and his lips parted, the tip of his tongue just visible. He lifted his head and fixed his gaze on my hand as I gathered slick from his hole.

"You could finger fuck me?" His panting was louder than my ragged breathing.

But the three of us were so in sync that I sensed the tension in Zeeve.

“I could, but let our alpha mate shove his cock in you first.”

“I can’t wait.” Channon’s glazed eyes signaled his desire.

Running my fingers over Zeeve’s lips, he mewled as I probed his mouth, and he allowed me entrance. He licked the slick, smacking his lips and pronouncing it just as he imagined.

“Why is everyone tasting me except me!” Channon’s testy exclamation had Zeeve and me sharing a glance, and I quickly blanketed my fingers in more of his slick and gave him a taste. “That’s a first.” He opened his mouth wide. “More, please.”

“Today is a day of many firsts,” Zeeve noted as I thrust my slippery fingers in his hole. “Oh! I wasn’t expecting that.” He nestled between Channon’s legs again and inched the tip of his dick into our omega mate’s hole.

“Yes,” the three of us cried in unison. While I wasn’t participating, I was turned on watching them fuck. But I was also eager to plunge inside Zeeve.

“You’re so big.” Channon’s head fell back, and Zeeve placed his hands on either side of him.

“Am I too much?” Zeeve asked.

“Never.” Channon was gulping huge mouthfuls of air. “I just need time to get used to you.”

Zeeve’s ass was up high as he waited for Channon, and as he kissed a trail from his throat to his belly button, I eased my fingers in and out of his hole.

“Mmmm. I like that, but I’d love your length in me more,” Zeeve murmured.

That was an invitation I wouldn’t refuse, and I replaced my fingers with my cock. Rather than going in slowly, I fucked him hard, going all the way, so I was buried in his depths.

“Gods.” That was Zeeve.

“Gods.” That was Channon.

“Everyone okay?” Me inserting my dick in Zeeve had him jerking forward, and his cock slid into our omega mate’s channel. “Sorry.” My cock was wedged in our alpha mate. He, like me, had never been fucked before, and now neither of us were virgins.

Sliding a hand over Zeeve’s hip, I clamped my hand over Channon’s dick. Air whooshed out of his mouth. He bucked his hips, and Zeeve gasped.

“So good.” Channon’s breathy voice sent desire surging through me.

One, two, three quick pumps of our omega mate’s cock, and I removed my hand. He whimpered, but Zeeve pulled almost all the way out and thrust into him, silencing Channon except for his moans.

“Yes. I love your big, thick, long cock.”

“I’m glad.” Zeeve panted as he lunged in and out.

I glanced down as my dick filled Zeeve’s hole, and I matched his pace. As he plunged into Channon, my cock did the same in his channel. The room was filled with moans, grunts, and whimpers, along with murmurs of “That’s so good,” and “Harder, faster,” and “More, please.”

Sweat trickled down Zeeve’s spine, and I lapped at the droplets, sending goosebumps spiraling over his skin.

“Next time we fuck, I want your tongue in my hole.” Zeeve squeezed around my cock. Gods, he was so tight. I closed my eyes, enjoying the sensations rippling over my body.

“I can’t put my tongue in your ass right now.” I stuck it in his ear, and he shivered. “But what about fingers?”

“What are you doing?” Channon grunted as Zeeve bucked his hips and plunged his cock into our omega mate. “Am I missing out?”

Though my dick filled Zeeve’s hole, I maneuvered my fingers in him, alongside my cock.

“Gods.” Zeeve arched his back. “Troy’s fucking me with his fingers and his cock.”

“I want that too.” Channon’s demand reminded me of a toddler, and I giggled as I wriggled my fingers in Zeeve’s hole.

“I’ve got you,” our alpha mate assured Channon.

From that moment, there was no talking, just fucking, moaning, and whining. Sweat, slick, saliva, and pre-cum combining, the heady scent overpowering me so I seemed to float while the room spun around.

I quickened the pace as I raced to my climax, my eyes clamped shut, my lips pressed together. I both wanted to prolong being inside Zeeve but also embrace my orgasm.

But I didn’t have a choice because Zeeve yelled Channon’s name and then mine, and his body tensed and he shuddered. Channon followed, shouting, “I’m coming,” and I let go, releasing inside our alpha mate.

As my knot filled Zeeve and his knot swelled inside our omega mate, Zeeve grazed Channon’s chest with his teeth, and Channon yelped.

“My turn,” Channon panted as lifted his head and sank his teeth into Zeeve’s flesh. But there was something missing. As much joy as I’d experienced at us having sex, part of me was lonely and sad. A tear trickled over my cheek.

This wasn’t right. Today should be the best day of my life, and instead of exhilaration, I was mourning the loss of something.

“Troy.” Channon’s voice pierced my consciousness.

“Yeah?” I was feeling sorry for myself, and I didn’t want my mates to catch on. Channon couldn’t see my expression because Zeeve was blocking me, thank gods.

“We’re not bonded yet.”

Huh? How much more connected could we be? It was because I was human. As shifters, my mates shared a link that I couldn’t be a part of. I slumped onto Zeeve, my cock still embedded in his channel and my knot claiming his ass.

“I get it. I’m the odd man out.”

A tear dropped onto Zeeve's back, and he glanced over his shoulder.

"Hey. I wish I could hug you, but I'm hoping those tears you're spilling are tears of joy." Zeeve reached behind him and rubbed my thigh.

"This mating procedure... it's not..." I sniffed.

"We're not finished." Channon grabbed my hand.

"We all came, didn't we?" Maybe I had this mating caper all wrong.

"You haven't marked me." I couldn't mistake the desperation in Channon's voice.

"What?" There'd been fucking, biting, more fucking, and more biting. I couldn't keep up with who had marked whom.

"Bite me, Troy, and the mating process will be complete," Channon begged.

More tears dripped onto Zeeve, but these were happy ones.

"You belong to us just as we do to you." Zeeve's comforting tone was like a warm blanket snuggled around me.

Zeeve's knot kept his and Channon's bodies meshed against one another, just as my knot held me and Zeeve in its grasp.

"Mark me."

Channon's anxious pleading touched my heart. I couldn't reach his shoulder or chest, only his lower leg.

"Is this okay?" I wrapped a hand around his calf. "Does it matter where I mark you?" My voice wavered as I wondered if I could do this right, needing to be joined with my mates until I took my last breath.

"Yes."

"Do it, Troy," Zeeve instructed.

I needed to be a contortionist, but someone once said life wasn't meant to be easy. Channon was a champ and raised his leg. My teeth skimmed over his skin, and I bit down hard.

Blood trickled from the wound and coated my tongue, but in that instant, I was complete.

“It’s done.” My mates and I were bound.

Zeeve and I collapsed on the mattress, our limbs and arms entangled. I was in the middle with a mate on either side.

My belly rumbled. “I’m hungry.”

“For more sex?” Zeeve yawned.

“No. Our marathon sex session depleted my energy. I need food.”

“Me too,” Channon chimed in.

“Pizza? Or do we eat the remains of the picnic?” I already had the pizza parlor’s number ready to call them. One of my high school friends was the manager, and his son did the deliveries.

“I think the picnic food is in the car.” Zeeve made a face. “That was hours ago, and it was a warm day.”

“Ewww.” Color blanched from Channon’s face.

“Pizza it is.”

FOURTEEN

CHANNON

I woke up nestled between my mates. Mates. Not one, but two mates. Who would've thought that college research could lead me to the happiest I'd ever been? Heck, happier than I ever thought I could be. They were mine, and I was theirs. I was the luckiest omega on the planet.

I inhaled my mates' scents, loving the way they mingled. So much made sense about how I felt about Troy the first couple of times we met. The scents alone were mesmerizing and delicious, but together... gods, it was like a net, pulling me to them.

Staying in their arms all morning sounded like the best thing ever. My bladder disagreed. And that was how my game of wiggle out from under the embrace of my mates without waking them began.

Thirty seconds into my attempt, not one, but both of them were wide awake and sitting up.

"I'm so sorry. I had to use the bathroom, and I didn't want to wake you."

"Hurry on then," Troy smiled sweetly at me, and I bounded off the bed and to the bathroom as quickly as I could get there, and when I came back in, Troy and Zeeve were snuggled in each other's arms. They looked so adorable like that. Hot too, but there was a cuteness that came with that kind of affection, and I could've stood there all day watching them.

It still amazed me at how easily things went with Troy. A human learning a mate scents them as theirs could've easily

gone in multiple directions, including him running for his life. But instead, he embraced everything completely. Sure, it helped he was familiar with our kind, but it was so much more than that. Troy felt it too, though he might not have understood what he was feeling.

“Everything okay?” Zeeve looked at me.

“Oh sorry, yeah, it’s better than okay. I just enjoy watching you two being snuggle bunnies.” I walked over to the bed and climbed in.

“Is it weird that I don’t feel jealous?” Troy’s words caught me off guard.

“Of me having to pee?” I knew it wasn’t that, but in my head I thought I was funny. I wasn’t.

“Of you and Zeeve being together.” He reached over and took my hand. “Like, I don’t know. Isn’t that the norm?”

It wasn’t, not in our case. But true mates were true mates. All of this was so new to me, but these two men were now my life, and I didn’t want it any other way.

Zeeve kissed the top of his head. “True mates long to see their mate happy and will work hard to make that happen. In our case, we’re a triad. All three of us need the other two to be complete. If anything... seeing our mates together should bring us comfort.”

He said it so much better than I ever could.

“That checks.” I snuggled against Troy, throwing my leg over the two of them all possessive like. “Speaking of check, you both have ruined my hypothesis.”

Both of them looked at me in confusion.

“For my thesis. I was sure that the more comprehensive questions would get the best matches, and here we are, one love and hate a piece and mated.” I’d already told them a bit about why I was on the app in the first place during our recovery time.

We actually talked a lot about Troy’s job and the town that Zeeve lived in. It was the getting-to-know-you stuff, but after

we had committed to one another.

It was common for shifters, but humans had long courting rituals, especially the whole “getting a ring before you got the real ring” thing. Like, if they knew they were always and forever, why wait another year or two to get on with it? Humans were weird.

But not my human. He was fabulous.

“What do you two need today?” I asked my mates.

“To spend time with you,” Troy said.

“That’s my plan too,” Zeeve said. “How about you?”

“You will not get me away from you two, that’s for sure.” I yawned, unable to stop myself. “Possibly after a nap... is it a nap since we only got up a wee bit ago?”

“A nap, for sure. You got out of bed.” Troy seemed to have put some thought into his answer.

“It’s sleeping in.” Zeeve had already closed his eyes. “Naps make it sound like you did something in between sleeping and waking up.”

“I feel like this could be a far too intense discussion if we allowed it.” I chuckled. “And in the end, we would all be right.”

We ended up falling asleep and waking far closer to noon than I had planned. This time when I got out of bed, we all did, taking a shower and getting dressed for the day. We had made no plans, but food was definitely part of them.

“We could go to the diner,” I offered. There weren’t a lot of options locally.

“Or we could whip up something here,” I said. “I have eggs, ham, bread, and some cheese. Omelets, anyone?”

The three of us worked together making breakfast, or I supposed brunch, given how late in the morning it was. Troy made the coffee, I made the toast, and Zeeve cooked up the eggs.

“We’re a good team.” I took a long sip of my coffee. “Everything is scrumptious.”

“It is.” Zeeve took a bite of his toast.

“Speaking of ideas, I had one.” I set down my mug. “What if we do some overly human dating type activity today—like rom-com cliché human?”

I cringed at what I said, realizing that it might do the opposite of what I had intended and make Troy feel a bit like an outsider.

“Because last night we mated and that was mega shifter.” And just like that, I managed to make things more awkward. “I’ll just stuff my mouth with food now.”

Troy reached across the table. “Not cringe. Sweet. You were thinking of me and how some of this—fine, most of it was outside my realm of reality, and you attempted to turn today into an experience I understood. I love that.”

“We do have a great mate.” Zeeve squeezed my shoulder. “But that begs the question, what should we do today?”

After batting around about a dozen different ideas, from going to the woods for Troy to hang out with our beasts, to grabbing coffee, to going for a drive. All of them were fine. But once Troy suggested we have a movie marathon at his place, they were all but forgotten.

We hit up the grocery store, grabbing snacks and sandwich makings, and then went back to Troy’s to get our marathon on.

“Horror? Rom com? Fantasy? What direction are we leaning?” Troy was the master of the remote, which was good because I did not know which services he had.

“We could do that vampire show, the one where she has to kill her boyfriend because he turns evil,” Zeeve suggested.

“I love that all three of us know which one you mean.” I leaned into Zeeve’s side. “I’m game.”

Troy found it streaming and started it, then curled up against me. The three of us watched the silly show, shocked at how

dated it was already, and had a blast. At least I was having a blast until I fell asleep.

It was a lazy day, and I wouldn't have had it any other way. When I woke again, Troy's head was on my lap, his feet on Zeeve's, and his soft snores filled the room.

"He's remarkable, isn't he?" Zeeve's eyes never left our sleeping mate. "He took everything in stride and sees us for who we are."

"He sees me. No one ever has." I studied his sexy face, looking so peaceful while he slept. "Fate shone bright upon us."

"So very." He kissed my cheek. "I expanded the distance on my app, hoping for one mate, and look at me, coming here and finding two."

We were going to deal with his location soon enough, but for now, I wanted to pretend that it wasn't close to an issue.

"I'm glad you did, Zeeve. I know fate would've connected us at some point," as least I would hope that was the case, "but I'm glad it picked now."

"So am I, mate."

FIFTEEN

ZEEVE

I hit the cushions on the sofa so they had that little indentation in the middle and rearranged them before glancing around the room, making sure nothing was out of place.

Channon and Troy were on their way, and I was taking them out for lunch, then visiting a museum before dinner, and maybe catching a play afterward. My wolf was doing the shifter version of rolling his eyes. They were my mates. Who cared if there was a smudge on the window or we didn't have five different types of fruit, eight flavored soda waters, and three body washes for them to choose from?

Gods, I was nervous, and I raced into my bedroom and changed my shirt, adding more deodorant. Not that a man-made product could mask my natural scent completely.

I checked the phone, but there were no new messages. Troy was driving, and his car had GPS. It wasn't as though they were studying an old-fashioned street directory. They couldn't get lost.

Channon had been updating me for the first hour and a half, but his messages had stopped in the last thirty minutes. I suspected it was the city traffic and hoped Channon wasn't yelling at Troy, "Watch out for the cyclist," and my alpha mate wasn't responding with, "I can see him. Stop being a backseat driver!"

We hadn't decided where we were going to live. As adults, deciding to move to a new place wasn't simple. There were jobs and homes, friends and family to consider. Both Channon

and Troy were small-town guys, and if the traffic horrified them, they might turn around and go home.

Also, Troy had a large extended family who'd welcomed us as his husbands. There were a few raised brows, but they loved him and wanted him to be happy. We made him happy. But it would be a wrench for him moving even a couple of hours away.

I took deep breaths and reminded myself they had been here previously. It wasn't as though they lived on a deserted island and had to be taught how to cross the road or turn on a TV.

A car horn cut through the silence, and I flung open the door and charged down the path. I didn't care who saw me as I threw myself into Channon's arms, then Troy's, and the three of us hugged. There might have been a few sneaky hands on butts as we made our way to the house.

"This is lovely. You have a big garden." Troy peered around the side of the house to the backyard.

"I enjoy weeding and mowing the lawn when the weather's nice, but I'm no expert." The people at my local garden center were who I turned to when I needed advice about plants.

My mates explored the house and its three bedrooms before going out back and admiring the flowers.

"How was the drive?" I asked as we wandered inside and I offered them a cold drink.

"Don't ask." Channon was gritting his teeth, and he only did that when he was stressed. Perhaps I shouldn't have asked.

"Oh, stop. I hit nothing." Troy glared at our omega mate.

Damn, I'd really stepped in it asking what I thought was an innocent question. I brought out an array of drinks and snacks, hoping that would steer us away from focusing on a difference of opinion.

Channon stood behind Troy, shaking his head and motioning with his hands. I think he was telling me they came so close to an accident.

“I may be human, but I know what you’re doing.” Troy sipped a juice and grinned.

“No idea what you’re talking about. I was showing Zeeve the size of... of...” Poor Channon floundered, trying to fib.

“The size of your cock?” Troy popped a grape in his mouth.

“Why you...” One of my carefully arranged cushions was aimed at Troy’s head until I grabbed it off Channon. Troy giggled, and our omega mate pouted until Troy flicked his ass with a dishcloth and Channon joined in the laughter.

“Hungry?”

“For dick?” That was Troy. As an alpha, he was enjoying being fucked.

“For ass?” And Channon was reveling in being able to shove his cock in an alpha’s hole.

“We can, but I was thinking about food. I have a reservation.”

Troy grabbed a handful of nuts, and we headed out. I drove so there were no arguments about switching lanes or near misses.

“I’m so used to eating at the diner, I forget there’s a world of food other than chili.” Channon scanned the huge menu at the Mediterranean restaurant. Troy told me to order for him as he gazed around the room, and Channon shrugged and did the same.

“This is spicy. I love it. What is it again?” Troy chewed a forkful of lamb.

“It’s a tagine. It’s cooked slowly over a fire.”

“Yum.” Troy took another helping as Channon inspected the tomatoes in a bowl of tabouli.

Troy announced he could eat this food every day, while our omega mate shoveled in mouthfuls of shakshuka.

“Can we walk off our lunch?” Channon asked as he patted his tummy and groaned.

We strolled through a park full of kids and people walking their dogs before heading to a museum. My mates were in awe

of the paintings, pottery, furniture, and clothing.

“You could come here every Saturday for months and still not see everything.” Troy peered at a collection of coffee pots. “I could live here.”

Channon shivered. “In the museum? Might be a little cold at night and kinda spooky.”

Troy nudged our mate’s shoulder. “Here in the city, silly. I love the food, the culture, and the atmosphere. There’s always something to see or do, and it’s not too far from my family. A few of them live here in town.”

“I wouldn’t mind, but you’d have to promise me one thing.” Channon’s smirk was a giveaway.

“You’re like a broken record,” Troy huffed as he pinched our mate’s butt.

“Let’s go home.” I led them to the car, and Troy asked if he could drive. I handed him the keys without a word. Channon sat in the back and also stayed quiet, though his mouth was set in a hard line.

The drive was uneventful, and I pointed out interesting landmarks and places where I’d gone to school and fallen off my bike. We discussed whether my mates liked the city enough to live here full-time, but we were all hungry again and decided to stay home and order takeout, as none of us felt like cooking.

“You have three bedrooms, and there are three of us.” Channon inspected the main room and the two smaller ones. “Is that how a throuple works? Each person has their own room?”

Huh? My wolf had never heard of a throuple, and he wasn’t alone.

“What the fuck is that? Sounds painful.” Troy wiped sweet-and-sour sauce from his lips with a napkin.

Channon explained it was a relationship with three people. “It’s a human word. Are you sure you’ve never heard of it?”

“Nope.”

Troy and I agreed we didn't need a group name to describe what we were to one another. We were mates, and a title didn't change that. But Channon insisted on pinning down the bedroom rules.

I shrugged. Some days we'd all sleep together, other days two of us might, and there'd be nights when we all wanted alone time. As long as we respected one another's choices, we'd be fine.

We took a walk after dinner and got ice cream. Despite being mates, we were so different. I preferred plain old vanilla. There was nothing better than a locally made ice cream—none of that manufactured in a huge factory crap—with the distinct flavor of vanilla.

Channon liked multiple flavors in a cup, not a cone, and Troy covered his strawberry ice cream with sprinkles. Channon and I teased our human mate, saying he had sprinkles with his ice cream, rather than the other way around. Channon made faces at Troy and me as we tried to eat our ice cream before it melted, but it dribbled onto our hands.

“Cup over cone,” he said, more than once.

At bedtime, we snuggled in my huge bed and argued about the comforter. Both Troy and Channon got cold at night but Troy liked a light duvet, while Channon preferred a heavy quilt. These were the little things that would get sorted out. But if we all moved in together, we'd have to get them worked out, because little insignificant problems became bigger ones.

Even though shifters bonded for life, I'd met couples who stayed together but lived separate lives. I didn't want that to happen to us.

“Okay, mates, tonight we compromise.” I handed Channon an extra blanket and put him on the side of the bed farthest away from the window. Troy was on one side, and I was in the middle. Not my favorite position, but I wanted my mates comfortable on their first night in my home, a place that could become our home.

“Everyone happy?” I asked.

“The three of us are together, and nothing else matters.”
Channon kissed my cheek.

Troy rubbed his foot on mine. “What he said.”

SIXTEEN

TROY

Channon insisted on driving, and I sat beside him most of the way with my arms folded, not saying a word. Until I said more than a few words.

“It’s not so much that you hate my driving skills, or lack of them, but you just like being in control.”

“Yes.” He didn’t take his eyes off the road. There was no long pause between me asking and him answering, and his tone was matter of fact.

“Oh. Okay, I get that.” We each had our quirks, and this was Channon’s, or one of them.

“You’re talking to me now?” he asked.

“I guess.”

“But I’ll say this for the last time. You can’t park for shit.”

He was right, and there was no point arguing or getting defensive. “Yes.” That was the end of the matter, and we moved on to another topic. I’d learned a lot about people and mate dynamics since bonding with two shifters.

I yawned as we reached the outskirts of Zeeve’s town. With Channon studying for his finals, Zeeve and I working but living in two different locations, there was a lot of traveling. As Zeeve had the biggest place, we usually went to him for the weekend. And two hours wasn’t a long drive, but it was the grind of packing a bag, jumping in the car, getting there, and doing it in reverse either Sunday night or before the sun rose on Monday.

Once Channon graduated, we'd decide about where to live, but we were leaning toward Zeeve's three-bedroom house.

Channon slowed as we approached a set of red lights, but he pulled over and jumped out, saying, "You drive. I can't keep my eyes open."

We switched places, and I got us to our alpha mate's house.

"Thanks for recognizing your limitations and allowing me to take over." The news was full of drivers who'd fallen asleep at the wheel, often with fatal results.

"I have to see Zeeve every Friday. No matter how lousy the week has been. The three of us being together soothes away the crap and the tiredness and prepares me for any shitstorm in the week ahead."

I suggested Zeeve come to us next Friday. Space was tight in my place, but better than Channon failing his finals because of exhaustion.

"Maybe." Channon hauled himself out of the car and into Zeeve's arms. Our alpha mate studied me as he hugged Channon, and I mouthed, "He's exhausted."

Zeeve led him inside and onto the sofa, saying he'd made soup and we were staying home this evening. "All weekend, if you prefer."

Most Saturdays and Sundays we explored the city, doing something we hadn't done together. We saw a play, attended a ballet performance, did a mini marathon—a very mini one—went to an art gallery, and sampled food that was new to us.

But Channon had to study this weekend, so Zeeve and I would cook and look after him so he'd be prepared for his exams.

Channon sniffed. "Is that chicken soup?"

Zeeve nodded.

"Love me some chicken soup." He fell asleep, and we let him nap until the soup was ready.

"I'll be glad when his exams are over," Zeeve confided in me while Channon napped some more. "Poor guy can't keep

doing this.”

“Not long now.”

Zeeve and I had been roped into being our omega mate’s unofficial study buddies. We’d look at the textbook, or notes, or a website and pepper him with questions, not that we understood much about the subject.

Much as we wanted to cuddle our mate until he fell asleep at night, Channon opted to sleep alone, as he was tossing and turning all night. To me, that was a reason for us to be together, as being with his mates might have had him sleeping easier. But he insisted it was stress from the upcoming exams, and he wanted his mates to get a good night’s sleep.

Much as I wanted to snuggle with both my mates, I was also tired. Nobody told me having sex with two guys was not only mind-blowing and exhilarating but also strenuous. I’d never slept as well as I did after our sex marathons that took more energy than a marathon where I pounded the road.

“There’s a light under Channon’s door.” It was six in the morning, and I’d been to the kitchen to get water. “Should I take him coffee or food or just check in on him?”

“Let him be. If he wants us, he’ll come in. He’s probably studying or stressing. Or both.”

Zeeve and I lay in one another’s arms. I was too preoccupied thinking of Channon to want sex, though I wouldn’t have said no to him giving me a blow job. But our omega mate barged in with two coffees. He was the opposite of slow and sluggish, and he may have been quaffing caffeine since early morning.

“What? You’re still in bed? I hope you haven’t been putting cocks in holes without me?” He handed us each a mug.

I took a sip and nudged my alpha mate under the covers.

“Did you sleep well?” Zeeve asked.

Channon screwed up his face. “Hmmm, I was up most of the night, but I accomplished a lot.”

Zeeve and I shared a glance. “And how much coffee have you had?”

“Tons. I love the roasted coffee beans you buy at the speciality store, mate. I must remember to take some back with me. They boost my energy when I pull an all-nighter.”

Working or studying all night wasn't unusual for students preparing for finals or someone needing to finish a project, but Channon was teetering on the edge of coping or not. I worried he'd topple and collapse in a heap, unable to study or complete the exams.

I flung off the covers and steered Channon to my place in the bed. He needed something other than caffeine in his belly. Everyone needed protein in the mornings, and I was going to make him an omelet.

“Stay there. Zeeve will look after you while I make breakfast.”

Channon giggled and slithered under the covers so only his head was visible. “Does that include a cock, tongue, fingers, or all three?”

“If that's what you'd like, absolutely.”

I pretend pouted at not being in bed with them, 'cause I needed cock too. Since mating, I'd learned to love having one in my ass. Most alphas didn't know what they were missing out on.

“Not fair.” I stomped out of the room, but Zeeve followed me a minute later. “I was kidding,” I said as I got eggs and butter out of the fridge. He put his arms around me and nibbled my throat.

“He's asleep.”

I paused as I was about to crack the first egg, but my mate told me to go ahead, as Channon would probably wake up in ten minutes. “He's already mumbling about a professor who he claims is a jerk.”

He was right about our mate—not sure about the professor. Channon sat up in bed and ate the omelet, toast, fruit, and juice.

“No coffee.” He side-eyed me as I studied the juice. Zeeve and I were juice-with-pulp guys, but Channon's face tinged with green if he caught sight of any pulp.

“Don’t worry. There’s none of the yucky stuff in yours.”

The three of us giggled because Channon always called it that, and now we used the expression whenever we encountered something we didn’t like.

“Thank you. If I didn’t have you both supporting me, I’m not sure I would have gotten through this.”

That was what mates did. When one of us was struggling, the others took over and did more than their share. Mating or marriage was about being there for your person or people, while they reciprocated.

The weekend continued in much the same way, though Channon wasn’t as frantic as the first night. When it came time to leave Sunday afternoon—we’d decided not to drive in the dark so we were leaving earlier than usual—we hugged and tears spilled.

“Message me when you arrive.” Zeeve waved at the car until we rounded a corner. I was driving, and Channon hadn’t attempted to take over. The closer he got to home, the more down he seemed, though it wasn’t home without our alpha mate.

“I hate leaving Zeeve each week. Let’s move there after I graduate.”

“Good idea.” I didn’t mention that he’d have to find a job, as the idea of us moving in with Zeeve seemed to bolster his mood.

“But we might have to redecorate. Zeeve likes bland boring colors, and I prefer splashes of color.”

I grinned, certain there’d be plenty of arguments about paint and fabric color in our future, and I’d relish every minute. Channon pulled up paint swatches on his phone. “Do you like hot pink?”

“It depends on where you want to put it.”

He turned to me, his dazzling smile making my dick hard. “Everywhere.”

SEVENTEEN

CHANNON

The day had finally come; I was donning my cap and gown and getting my degree. I'd been looking forward to this day for years. Who didn't want to graduate and start their new life, complete with career?

But it was different now. Sure, graduating instilled a sense of accomplishment and all that jazz, but none of that mattered. My joy one hundred percent came from being free from the shackles of the institution. While I was in school, I had no choice but to stay local. Transferring during your final semester wasn't a possibility, even if I wanted to. And besides the practical sides of things, my mates wouldn't let me.

My mates wanted the best for me and that included me finishing my degree and getting a job in my field. They supported me completely. They didn't want me giving up a dream job to stay close to them, and if I asked them to move across the country for the perfect opportunity, I would bet money that they wouldn't think twice before agreeing to do so. They made me promise not to decline a position based on location without discussing it with them first.

And fair enough, before our conversation, I would have one hundred percent declined a position that was too far away from them, and in reverse, would instantly have accepted a job that I didn't really want if it was in Zeeve's neighborhood. It could have had red flags, but I'd have signed on simply to be near him. Was this a logical or wise way to go about making decisions? Abso-fucking-lutely not. But I hated it when the

three of us weren't snuggled into bed each night and woke up each morning together.

"I gotta go." I kissed Troy on the cheek. "Meet you on the flip side?"

I needed to be on campus early, for I didn't even know what. But there was no reason my mates had to wait in the sun for graduation to begin. It was bad enough that they were going to have to suffer through a bunch of long, boring-ass speeches that were going to make up most of the ceremony. Adding a sunburn to the mix was just cruel.

"You have everything you need?" He looked directly at my empty hands. "Maybe your cap and gown?"

"Suck. Could I be any more out of it today?" Part of it was graduation, part of it was Zeeve still not here yet, and part of it was knowing that I was about to stop in a park-and-ride to hop on a Zoom call about a new job I'd applied for.

"Good thing you have me." He kissed me until I nearly forgot my name and he handed me the cap and gown, sending me on my way, stopping me ten seconds later when his phone dinged. "Zeeve is about ten minutes out."

I jogged to my car and drove to campus, stopping midway at the park-and-ride. I had three minutes to spare, and I spent every one trying to find the best angle to film from. Ideally, I'd have been at my desk, but it was graduation day, and if they didn't understand that, I doubted the job would be worth keeping.

I logged into the meeting room and was quickly joined by HR, which was not what I'd been expecting. I thought I still had a few more interviews to go. Turned out, I was being offered a job right before graduation. It was officially the best graduation gift ever.

Me having gotten this far in the interview process was mind-blowing. I only applied for the position on a lark and for no other reason than their app connected me with my mates. I already was full-on invested in seeing the company succeed before I even had the first phone interview. Sure, they were the

reason I had my happily ever after, complete with an A on my final thesis, and not one but two magnificent mates. It was more than that, though. How many couples and throuples had they connected already, and beyond that, how many more people would they set up in the future?

And even if the company wasn't one I already loved, the job was 100% remote, which took my job out of consideration when we chose where we lived. I was glad about that. I didn't love the idea of everyone picking up their roots simply because I was starting a new job, one I might not even like enough to stay long. This was better. The only consideration was that I needed a place to work.

The company wasn't even picky on the where of it. They didn't demand a locked office or even a separate space. They said "we trust our employees to be professional," and while I wasn't exactly sure I believed them, it was enough for me to give them a shot.

I couldn't wait to tell my mates, but first... graduation.

The parking lots were packed, most likely thanks to me arriving later than I wanted to, thanks to my meeting. I found a spot and ran to be with the other graduates. I thought that being part of the graduation would make it feel less long and drawn out. How wrong I was. First, we waited in a packed room for it to be time when we could line up and walk in. From there, we had to listen to far more speeches than should be legal. Every one of them had the same message; you can do this.

I half chuckled, wondering if there was a list of acceptable graduation speech topics and this year everyone just took the first on the list and called it good. Heck, I could give a speech on "making a difference" without trying after listening to them all.

Finally, it was time to walk up and get our diplomas. I could hear my mates cheering me on as I walked across the stage, shook the hands, and posed for the camera at the end.

I had done it. I was officially a graduate.

When the ceremony was over, my mates insisted on taking a thousand pictures. I hated it, but attempted not to show them. They were so excited for me and proud. My family didn't show up, but these two amazing men were standing by my side to show they supported me completely. A handful of Troy's cousins came, which warmed my heart. His family was the sweetest.

It wasn't until we sat down for a late lunch in celebration that I got around to telling them about the new job.

"That sounds amazing. Which company is this for, again?" Troy asked.

I'd purposefully not told them, for no other reason than I wanted to see the looks on their faces after I had already sold them on the job. It wasn't using my degree to its fullest extent, but it was a company I had a passion for, and it sounded like fun.

"*Love and Hate.*" It wasn't the company's name technically, but the app was their biggest investment, so I called it good. "Figure I can help other people get their happily ever after while living mine."

"And it's full-on remote?" Troy asked.

"Yep. So I'm not in the equation." Which made me feel a thousand times better.

"You are never not in the equation." Troy kissed my cheek, and Zeeve took my hand.

We spent the next hour discussing if we should buy a bigger place or not, now that I was a graduate and had a "real" job. And in the end, we came back to Zeeve's place still being the best option. It made sense in many ways. He had a decent-sized home, one where I could work, we could all have our privacy, and the neighborhood was safe. Would it be our always and forever home? I suspected that wasn't the case, but there were worse things.

"And if it doesn't work, we're open and honest about it not working," I clarified.

"Absolutely," Zeeve said, and Troy nodded.

The next weekend, we moved in. We were so thrilled to start our new lives under one roof.

Had I not had to finish school and Troy and I both didn't have leases, we'd probably have moved in together right away. We loved each other, and the nights we weren't together sucked.

"Pizza?" I asked, not wanting to cook after a long and physical day.

"Pizza," they both agreed. I ordered from the local place, and they gave us an estimate of 90 minutes until delivery.

"Plenty of time to shower and change." I padded toward the bathroom. And it had been ample time, even with the three of us dawdling... fondling.... same difference.

After I was clean, dried off, and dressed, I climbed into bed for a short rest. I called it a power nap. The next morning, Zeeve referred to it as me going to bed early. He was more accurate, for sure.

EIGHTEEN

ZEEVE

I loved having all of my mates under one roof—my roof at that. My wolf loved it, too. We were experiencing a lot of growing pains over the last few weeks. That was the way of it when you combined households, and in this case, we'd combined three into one. Taking that into consideration, we were kicking ass in the adjustment department.

“Morning, Zeeve.” Channon came into the kitchen wearing his work clothes, AKA grey sweatpants with a button-down shirt and tie.

“Morning, love.” I kissed him. “Breakfast? I just made myself some eggs and there are plenty.”

“No. My stomach is not happy about last night's dinner.” He shrugged. “Maybe I shouldn't have had triple pickles on my burger.”

Triple pickles didn't sound like enough to turn your stomach, but the greasy excuse for a food truck we'd hit up had been a little suspect, so it didn't totally surprise me. It tasted soooo yummy, though. I was half thinking about heading there again this weekend.

“Do you need to call in?” I wasn't sure how that worked when you were fully remote, but there had to be a protocol for when you weren't up for working, right?

“No. It's fine. I'm not sick. More like I'm uncomfortable.” He leaned into me, and I wrapped my arms around him. “Hugs help.”

“Hugs?” Troy said, walking in to join us. “Does someone need a hug?”

“Dinner didn’t sit well with our omega,” I told him.

“I’m sorry. What can I do?” Troy asked.

“Is the hugging still an option?” Channon asked, and Troy joined us in a group hug.

Far too soon, the three of us needed to part ways so that we could go to work. I hated to leave our omega when he wasn’t feeling well, but he insisted he was fine and to be on my way. I agreed. Channon didn’t want me hovering, anyway.

But my mind never left him. I hated him being sick, even if he insisted he wasn’t. On my way home, I texted and asked if he needed anything, and he asked for some antacids, which was how I ended up at the pharmacy staring at a wall of bottles.

“Do you need help finding anything?” an employee wearing a blank name tag asked. I wasn’t sure why he bothered wearing a nametag, given it told us nothing, but I wasn’t going to say anything. I needed the help.

“Yes. My omega has a sour tummy. He mentioned antacids, but there’s a wall of them and I can’t tell the difference.” And staring at them wasn’t getting me any closer.

“Hmmm, I guess that depends.” The employee went to the shelves and pulled three different products. “This one is great in the beginning, but people say it doesn’t work past midpoint too well.” He held up the second box. “This is the most popular, but I’m not sure if it’s because they have a great advertisement or if it’s good.” He held up the final one. “This is great, but you can only use one dose a day, and depending on how bad the morning sickness is, that might not be the best.”

“Morning sickness? No, he just ate a bad burger.” Only now that he mentioned it, I was wondering.

“Oh, sorry. I just thought.... In that case, go with this one.” He reached over the counter and got another box of medication. “It’s perfectly safe, except for when you’re pregnant.” He handed it to me.

“Thanks.” I took it, but instantly wondered if I should shove it back on the shelf... just in case he was pregnant.

“Anything else?”

“What aisle are the pregnancy tests?”

He led me to that section, and I grabbed three different ones, wandered back to the tummy section for some Tums, and ultimately gave the cashier gobs of money.

Hey. Are you home? I messaged Troy.

I just pulled up. Why?

I snapped a picture of my purchases and sent it. My phone rang less than thirty seconds later.

“I’m still in my car. Talk quickly before he realizes I’m home. Did he ask for those?” Troy asked.

“He asked me to get the medication, and the person at the store assumed he was pregnant, and the more I think about it, the more I wonder if maybe he is. But also, I don’t want to get his hopes up if he isn’t.”

I didn’t want to get excited, although I was fairly confident that it was too late. I even had a short list of baby names that had potential forming in my head.

“We can wait until he tells us...if he is pregnant, that is. And then if he isn’t, his stomach will feel better.” I would just need to keep the one medication out of the bag.

“I guess that’s an option,” Troy said. “Come home?”

“On my way.” I hung up and got in my vehicle and headed to our house.

I wasn’t far away, and when I arrived, Troy was already out of his work clothing and into his joggers and a t-shirt. Channon was nowhere in sight.

“Is Channon even here?”

Troy shook his head. “Sticky note on the counter said he would be back in ten minutes.”

A glance at my watch told me that ten minutes had already come and gone.

“Should I message him?”

Troy shook his head. “No. He’ll be back soon enough. Why don’t you get comfy? There are some pretty good movies streaming this month. Maybe we can all be lazy, watch too much on the television, and possibly order in. And if Channon is still not feeling well, we can snuggle up in bed to watch the movies. How’s that sound?”

“Sounds like a plan.” I set the bag on the coffee table and went to get dressed.

When I came back out, wearing my sweats and tee, Channon was coming in the front door with his own pharmacy bag, and his eyes darted from side to side.

“You okay?” I wasn’t sure why I asked. It was pretty universally understood that when you asked people if they were okay, they had to lie and say they were.

“Yeah... no... maybe... I think so.” He shoved the bag at Troy, who was currently closer to him than I was.

“Is this for me?” Troy asked, and our mate shook his head.

“It’s sort of for me.” He hugged himself. “Because I think maybe... because of Google MD... I might need... Open it.”

Who used the internet to self-diagnose potentially health-related problems? People who thought they were dying, only to discover they had a splinter or a bug bite. That was who.

Troy opened the bag and pulled out a pregnancy test. “I think our omega is telling us something.”

“I don’t know yet. Can I get back to you on that?” He snatched the test from Troy’s hand. “I need to pee first.”

Channon ran to the bathroom, leaving the two of us staring at the doorway he had torn through.

“We might be dads.” I leaned into Troy’s side. “Is it wrong that I really, really want him to be running out with double lines on his stick?” Maybe, but I didn’t care. This was about

the message, not the messenger. And I wanted this message so badly.

I'd always wanted children but had long since given up on it being possible. I hadn't found my mate, and time kept on ticking. And now that the possibility was there, I was allowing myself to travel down the path of what-ifs.

"It's not wrong to want to start our family," Troy said, and I took his hand in mine. "And you aren't the only one."

Channon called us, and the two of us sprinted to the bathroom. We found him staring at his watch. It was flickering showing the timer had gone off but wasn't shut down yet. We'd be fine, no matter what the answer was and how he felt about it. I would love and support him. That was all I could offer, and I felt woefully unprepared for this.

"I took them all." On the back of the toilet, the pregnancy tests were lined up perfectly.

"Did you read them?" Troy asked.

"I thought we could do it together," he said.

"Okay," I said.

He walked over to the tests all lined up, and we followed him in.

Every one of them indicated he was pregnant.

"We're having a baby!" Channon squeed.

"We're having a baby!" I was thrilled.

"We're having a baby." Troy snuggled into us.

We were having a baby.

NINETEEN

TROY

Suddenly, our plan to live in Zeeve's house had fallen apart.

Three bedrooms were fine for us, though with Channon working from home, his room also served as an office. He often worked at night, and if he used a corner of the living room, Zeeve and I had to slink off to one or both of our rooms.

And now that he was pregnant, we had to rethink where we were going to live. Wherever it was, our omega mate suggested we put an in-law apartment in the garden, using a shipping container to save costs, that would serve as his office.

But while Zeeve's home, now *our* home, had three bedrooms, we needed four or five.

"Really?" Zeeve cocked a brow when I suggested it. "Most families squeeze into three, two, or even one-bedroom houses."

Channon counted off on his fingers. "We need a nursery and another bedroom in case we have more kids, and then each of us needs a bedroom." Zeeve and I both nodded.

When we'd first chosen a bedroom each, I'd doubted we'd ever use numbers 2 and 3, but it'd become invaluable to have our own space. Mates we may be, but we had our own likes, dislikes, and idiosyncrasies, and I was sure we'd avoided plenty of arguments by separating at night. Neither of my mates shared my habit of reading, and they complained about the lamp or the glow from the tablet.

"This looks perfect. And it's in the neighborhood." Channon stabbed at a listing on the realtor's website.

“It is if you can cough up two million dollars.” I pointed at the zeros in the listing price. “We could build a place, but with a baby on the way, I would avoid that option.”

“All that dust.” Channon wrinkled his nose. It was so cute, I kissed him and my grabby hands undid his zipper, while Zeeve got behind him and shoved his cock in our mate’s hole. Thoughts of buying a place were forgotten while we got busy, thrusting, licking, pumping, and moaning.

When we crawled into bed, Zeeve suggested looking at homes that needed renovating. “It’d be cheaper than buying a place where we didn’t have to make any changes.”

“Are you handy with a hammer?” Zeeve might have hidden talents. I was aware of some, but they were confined to the bedroom.

“Ummm, I know which way is up.” He grinned, and I rolled my eyes. We could cross renovating off our list. Besides, Channon shouldn’t be around dust and wet paint while he was pregnant.

We’d have to move out of the area and farther away from the city center. We each had a car, and the city had an extensive public transport network. So, we scoured the listings and found a few options we could afford. Selling Zeeve’s place, which was a great location and our asking price reflected that, enabled us to look at houses that would be out of our reach without that chunk of cash.

We found three places in our budget; one a sprawling bungalow, one a three-story home, and the third had two stories with an in-law apartment already in place.

Saturday morning dawned cool and rainy, and I hoped that would deter prospective home buyers and keep them away from the three open houses. Instead, the weather apparently foiled people’s plans and they came out in droves to view each of the homes.

The bungalow was our favorite, as we pictured ourselves growing older and not wanting to climb stairs.

“We’ll never get it.” Channon’s bottom lip quivered. “Those people with the three kids are going to offer way over the asking price.”

“I heard them whispering too.” I was impressed with my hearing. Perhaps being mated to two shifters had improved it.

Dejected, we wandered to the car.

“It’s a lovely neighborhood.” Channon strolled not toward our car, but in the opposite direction.

The tree-lined streets and the older-style homes—no modern builds here—gave off a settled, peaceful vibe, and I imagined our child or children riding their bike to the park. We turned one corner and then another until we reached a home where a man was banging in a sign.

Zeeve grabbed my arm and flapped his hand in the guy’s direction. His mouth opened and closed, but no words came out.

The sign said “For sale,” and the three of us bounded across the road. The man’s hand holding the hammer froze, and his eyes were wary as we charged toward him. He was a shifter, a lion perhaps, and his expression changed after he scented us.

“We’re looking to buy a house in this area.” I draped an arm over Channon’s shoulder. “Our mate is pregnant, and we need a bigger place.”

He invited us in, and we met his mate. They were both lion shifters, and their kids had left home—all four of them—and the couple was downsizing. The home had a renovated basement, and an attic, which their children had used as a playroom, but Channon already commandeered it as his office. My attempts at telling him to downplay his hopes went nowhere, and he tapped at his phone, imagining where he’d place our furniture.

“Oh my gods, look at this!” Channon’s shriek had both Zeeve and me running through the house, only to find him in a bathroom. “It has a bright pink wall.” He lowered his voice. “We have to buy this house.”

“Have you had any other offers?” I asked George and Irene, the owners.

“No. You’re the first.”

Though Channon wanted to secure the sale by handing over a chunk of change, he agreed to temper his enthusiasm. George and Irene agreed to let us consider their very reasonable asking price overnight and promised not to sell the house before we spoke at nine in the morning. We practically had to drag Channon out of the house, as he didn’t want to leave the pink bathroom behind.

We spent that night around the dining room table with calculators and scribbled numbers on large pieces of paper. We’d already had several offers for our place and were confident of how much we’d have left once we had paid all the fees and taxes.

“Can we swing it?” Channon was practically squeaking at us owning George and Irene’s home. And while it wasn’t a bungalow, we agreed we’d all be able to climb stairs for decades to come.

“Everyone show your figures.” We each held up our pieces of paper where we’d calculated the mortgage based on the sizable down payment we’d make after the sale of our current home.

Zeeve had columns of figures, some crossed out and with the final figure circled, whereas Channon had one word on his. “Yes!”

Thank gods I worked in banking and my calculations showed we could do this.

“Are we agreed?” My mates nodded, and we leaped up and hugged.

While Zeeve’s home had become ours, moving to a new house, where we could start afresh and put our own stamp on each room, made it more special—as long as Channon didn’t insist on painting everything pink.

I texted George and Irene. That was the easy part. It would be weeks before we could call it ours, but we’d taken the first step. But as we toasted with sodas, Channon clutched his belly.

Gods no, don't let there be anything wrong with the baby, I begged the universe.

"It's the baby." Color had drained from his face as Zeeve grabbed my hand, his palm clammy. "Come here."

"Should w-we c-call 9-1-1?" My voice wavered, and it reminded me of when we first met and I lacked the confidence I had now.

"No, silly. Sorry, I didn't mean to frighten you, but I wasn't expecting it."

"Expecting?" Zeeve glanced at me and shrugged.

"Give me your hands."

Zeeve and I held out both our hands, but Channon only wanted one from each of us. He placed them on his belly. "Do you feel that?"

"Is it gas?" There was a tiny fluttering, and I imagined his tummy gurgling.

Our omega mate giggled as Zeeve, his eyes wide, whispered, "It's the baby. That tiny movement is our little one." He fell to his knees and rested his cheek on Channon's belly.

"Don't hog all the space," I complained and got beside him. "I want to feel the baby too."

We put our ears against Channon's still-flat belly, and the fluttering had me in tears. There was life inside him, and I thanked the universe for introducing me to my mates.

"Hello, beautiful. We're all here, and we can't wait to meet you."

Channon interrupted me. "This is your omega daddy. I hope you like pink because there'll be a lot in your life, my darling."

I didn't point out that our child was the size of a peanut. Instead, I joined in my mate's laughter at Channon painting everything in the new house pink. There was nothing I looked forward to more than arguing with him about everything pink.

TWENTY

CHANNON

It was moving day, and all I wanted to do was stay in bed. I was exhausted... exhausted to where just rolling over took far more energy than I currently had. My hip was aching, but even so, I stayed lying right in that position, not having the wherewithal to do anything about it.

Zeeve and Troy were already up and about. I made my first attempt to get out of bed when the alarm went off. The attempt was feeble, and when Zeeve kissed my brow and told me to rest more, I did without pretending to think about it. According to the book I bought, this was normal. Your first trimester was all about needing to sleep, and then suddenly, you would regain all your energy and more for the second trimester.

Maybe I could just sleep until then. Only I couldn't do that. I had moving to do, and even if I lifted nothing, they still needed access to the bed if it was going to come with us. And also, I wanted to be where my mates were, and that was not here.

I closed my eyes and took a deep breath, giving myself an inner pep talk. I could do this. And then I would find some juice. It didn't do the job that coffee did, but it was better than nothing.

"Are you okay?" Troy asked, and I looked up at him standing in the doorway with a tape gun. "You look in pain."

"Oh, I was pep talking my way out of the bed." I flung the covers off. "I'm fine." I rolled onto my back and, after a bit of

effort, into a sitting position. Stupid hip.

“You don’t look fine.” He came into the room. “Do you need a doctor?”

“I’m a big bad shifter. I just need to shift.” At least that was my current theory. “I’ll do that and then take my shower. All will be good. I just slept on my hip wrong.”

“You would tell me if it was more than that?”

I climbed out of bed. “I promise. I’ve just been sleeping too much.” Or not enough. One of the two. I padded over to him and kissed his cheek. “Promise.”

Normally, I’d have gone outside to shift, but we had someone coming to clean the carpets and my hip was being a butt, so I did it right there. Either the location of our shift or the short time did not impress my wolf, as I gave him his fur but shifted straight back. I was pain-free. I couldn’t do this the entire pregnancy, but for now, it was effective.

A quick shower and breakfast later and I joined my mates in finishing up the last-minute packing. The moving truck was coming in a couple of hours, and there was still much to be done.

“The only room left is the kitchen,” Zeeve said half an hour before the movers were to be there. “We’re not going to get it done on time.”

“We’re paying them.” Troy gave his shoulder a squeeze. “If it’s not done, they can do the rest of the house or wait.”

“I hadn’t thought of it that way.” Zeeve’s shoulders relaxed under our mate’s touch. “We hired the movers to make things easier, and I need to let them do that.”

We’d had a huge discussion about how to do the move. We had Troy’s family, who would help, but also, moving sucked. Why would we do that to them? Which was the same logic we applied to ourselves. If this part was horrible, why not give it to someone who didn’t mind—hire movers to help? Especially with me being pregnant. It wasn’t as if we wouldn’t have had to rent a box truck, anyway. This wasn’t that much more money from that perspective.

“I think we can get it done.” I fist-bumped the air with the tape gun in hand.

“Agreed.” Troy grabbed a stack of boxes that needed to be taped from the counter. “Let’s build these and get to work.”

We didn’t get it all done on time, but we made a huge dent. The movers did their thing while we finished it up. Shockingly, I had a lot more energy than I’d had lately, something I chalked up to the excitement.

“We’re going to sleep in our new house tonight.” I leaned into Troy. “No. Not our new house, our new home.” There was a huge difference.

“My home is right here,” Zeeve wrapped his arms around the two of us the best that he could. “With you both.”

“You’re sweet.” I scented him deeply. “And my home too.”

“So we didn’t need to move,” Troy teased.

“Nope. Let’s unload the truck.” I rubbed my cheek against both Troy and Zeeve, loving that they would scent like me.

Zeeve went on ahead and met the movers when they pulled in, while Troy and I vacuumed and swept our old place. It was mind-boggling how much dust we discovered. We threw those last few things into our vehicles and left our place for the last time.

And it had become our place, unlike in the beginning, when it was Zeeve’s place and we were long-term guests. I was sorry to say goodbye. It hadn’t been the right place for us forever, though. And that was okay.

When Troy and I arrived, the movers already had half the truck unloaded. Turned out it was quicker to unload than load the thing. I had plans to get everything unpacked by bedtime. They were foolish plans, but they were mine.

“They have the full kitchen unloaded, and I’ve been working in there,” Zeeve said. “I figure as long as we have the kitchen, bathroom, and our bedroom unpacked today, we’ll be doing well.”

“I was thinking we could have it all done,” I said.

They both laughed and rightly so. It took us a long time to get the kitchen done, even with the three of us working on it. The bathroom was significantly faster, leaving only the bedroom.

“Why is the bed in pieces?” I stopped dead in my tracks, the head and footboards both flat against the wall. “Isn’t that part of moving it? To take a bed and put it in a new place. Not take a bed, reverse engineer it, and leave it that way at the new location.”

“You won’t want to hear the next part.” Zeeve came up behind me. “They just told me they lost the bag of screws.”

“We’re going to the store on a scavenger hunt, aren’t we?” Troy asked.

“Maybe.” Zeeve let out a long breath.

“Nope. They sent someone to do it for us.” Zeeve turned his phone for us to see. “The message just came through.”

“Worst-case scenario, we buy a new bed frame and sleep on the mattress on the floor tonight.” I didn’t love the idea, but it would do for one night. “It will be an adventure.”

“Don’t be mad.” Troy cleared his throat. “I think we should go shopping now... at a bed store. I didn’t like the way you looked this morning, and I think a new mattress will help.”

I said, “It’s because I’m growing a baby, not because of the mattress.” Although, now that he mentioned it, I was all in. It would be nice to get a new mattress and possibly a bigger one than we currently had. The place was for sure large enough for that.

“I’m not carrying a baby.” Zeeve set his hands on my middle. “You are, and if we can find you a bed that would make these next months more bearable, that’s what we should do.”

Shopping wasn’t on my top 100 favorite things to do list, but getting a good night’s sleep was. The furniture store not only had a mattress we all agreed on, but it also had a ton of random screws that we needed. Turned out we weren’t the only people who found themselves with a missing bag of screws during a move, and they could hook us up there, along with getting an oversized mattress with sheets, all of which

they could same-day deliver. We were only home an hour when it arrived.

“The bed looks much bigger in this space,” I noted and then pushed down on the new mattress, already covered in our sheets thanks to my mates. “So much so.”

“And comfy?” Troy asked.

“Let me see?” I stripped down to my boxer briefs and climbed under the covers with a sigh of contentment. “What do you think?”

“I think that all the commotion of the day mixed with growing a human has you needing a break,” Troy said.

“It’s super comfy in here. Join me.” If I was taking a break, he could too.

“Yes, please.” He took off his jeans and climbed under the covers with me.

“I really should be finishing the unpacking.” I yawned, not wanting to get up.

“Or you could just cuddle me and take a nap.”

“Did someone say nap?” Zeeve climbed in on my other side.

It wasn’t long until I was sound asleep, wrapped in my mates’ arms.

TWENTY-ONE

ZEEVE

Did you take the meat out of the freezer for dinner tonight?

I had the day off, and Channon was working in his attic office. At this stage in his pregnancy, he was having a hard time concentrating on work. He wasn't quite halfway through his 40-week term, so I hoped, for his sake and Troy's and mine, that he would get through that phase.

Yes, I texted.

"Don't forget to put it in the fridge." There was no need to look up because Channon would be leaning on the railing and shouting down the stairwell.

"I didn't."

The phone rang as I was hanging out the washing. Troy's name popped up on the display.

"Hi."

"Can he hear you?"

I wandered farther into the back garden and tugged at a clump of weeds. "Nope."

"He wants me to go to the store and compare two cribs, write a list of pros and cons, and send it to him by the end of day. But I'm working."

Poor Channon. His mind was running a mile a minute, going in one direction, before doing a U-turn and heading in another. I assured Troy I'd do it before he cut the call.

So much for my day off. I checked that Channon had snacks and something to drink before heading to the store and eyeing the two cribs from every direction. I sat outside on a bench before typing up a pros and cons list for both cribs. Rather than sending it to our omega mate, I forwarded it to Troy so he could pass it along.

But more importantly, I had to look into how to get our pregnant mate to relax, otherwise by the time our baby arrived, Troy and I would have jaw pain from grinding our teeth.

“Is that you?” Channon called out as I opened the front door.

If he hadn’t been pregnant, I’d have responded with snark. Instead, I raced up the stairs two at a time. Our omega mate was lying on the carpet, his eyes closed and his hands cradling his cute baby bump.

“Time for a break.”

“Can’t. I’m meditating. It’s good for the baby.”

I got on the floor beside my mate. “I’m so proud of you for carrying and looking after our little one. It’s a huge responsibility bringing a baby into the world.”

Channon opened his eyes and looked at me. “Thank you, but I worry I’m not doing enough or doing something wrong. Should I have one cup of coffee a day or give it up completely? Does the baby like Mozart or rock and roll? Will I do irreparable damage if I stay up late, jog, or cry because I’m overwhelmed?”

Gods, Troy and I thought we were doing our fair share by looking after Channon, but the poor guy was burdening himself with what-ifs.

I shuffled closer to Channon and took him in my arms. “The three of us need to sit down and work out how we can relieve your stress.”

“That’s easy. One cock, two cocks, two cocks and a dildo. I can take them all.”

If it were that simple, Troy and I could fuck our mate in shifts. But while Channon fell into a sound sleep after sex, when he

woke up, often in the middle of the night, he'd be on his phone, checking messages and writing emails.

"Take a break for an hour and let's go outside."

He scrunched up his adorable little nose. "But I have to get dressed and—"

"Humor me, okay?"

He rolled his eyes. "Fine."

I texted Troy, hoping he could get away at lunchtime—he often worked through the lunch hour, but he replied, "Forty minutes tops."

After tapping the phone and ordering food to be sent to Troy's office, I stood at the front door, waiting for Channon. Twenty minutes later, he tucked his arm in mine, and we wandered along the sidewalk toward the local park.

"Remember the day we first saw our house?"

"Mmmm." He giggled and rested his chin on my shoulder. "I fell in love with the wall in the bathroom."

That one wall was still pink. While I called it garish, it brought Channon joy, and we all needed more joy in our lives.

"Maybe we can bring our little one here, and when they're older, they can play on the swings and kick a ball with us."

He nodded, and I steered him toward a picnic table where Troy sat. The table was laden with food. I hadn't been able to replicate our first picnic, but it was close enough.

"Oh my gods, you did this for me?" Channon grabbed a mini quiche and took a bite. "Yum."

"Our first picnic was the happiest day of my life." Troy took a bite of a cracker with cheese. "You both said you loved me."

Channon sighed. "But before you reached that happy place, you were peeved and scared, thinking we were going to rob you, or worse."

Our omega mate and I had always regretted those minutes of terror Troy experienced, even though what followed was more

than we'd dreamed of. I carried that tiny sliver of guilt with me, and it would probably never be erased.

"True. But I can hardly recall the uncertainty, the fear. What I remember and carry here..." he tapped his heart "...is the joy that came afterward."

"Awwww." Channon reached across the table and took Troy's hand.

"Want me to make you a ham sandwich?" I reached for the bread because our omega mate never turned down anything with ham.

"With pickles?" He clapped and bounced up and down on the hard bench.

Making Channon happy with food, sex, a foot rub, or a simple "I love you" was my purpose. The same for Troy. Channon and I had been overprotective of our human mate at the beginning of our relationship. But all relationships ebbed and flowed, and sometimes one mate needed extra attention, other times it was someone else. And both my mates were attentive to me when I was down.

"With extra pickles."

Channon bit into his sandwich. "Mmmm. So good. You know me so well."

"What about me?" Troy teased.

"You give great blow jobs." He shoulder shimmied and lowered his voice. "The way your teeth graze over my shaft... mmmm."

Troy saluted him. "Glad I could be of service." He stood up. "I gotta go." He waved his hand over the table. "Can you take all of this home?"

I assured him we could.

Channon and I sauntered back to the house, and he skipped over the lines in the concrete, saying we couldn't stand on the cracks. While I lugged the remains of the picnic, my mate chatted about wallpaper for the nursery, how he was going to cook the pork for dinner, and a work project.

He was busy, as we all were. Life in the twenty-first century was a constant juggle, but the frantic energy which was bubbling out of him earlier had vanished, and he was juggling and catching all the balls. He'd miss one eventually, as we all did, and Troy and I would be there to pick it up.

"Thank you for the picnic." Channon hugged me. "Maybe the three of us could get together for lunch once a week. It doesn't have to be a picnic." He wriggled his hips as he strolled up the stairs. "It could be a lunchtime delight." He tittered and scrambled up, saying he'd just come up with a solution to a work problem.

"Glad we could help."

I flung myself on the sofa and flipped through TV channels. Nothing caught my interest, so I wandered outside, planning on doing thirty minutes of gardening. Being on my knees and putting my hands in the dirt was one way I eased my stress after a difficult day. Troy exercised his stress away, and Channon, as well as loving a picnic, enjoyed foot rubs and massages.

A tapping on glass had me glance up. My omega mate was smiling and waving while balancing his computer. Gods, I loved him and Troy. How lucky was I finding two mates? Some people never found the one.

Twisting around, I wiggled my butt for Channon's benefit, and he yanked his pants down, revealing his gorgeous rounded ass. Thank gods the trees and shrubs at the back of the property shielded us from prying eyes.

When Troy arrived home, Channon and I were both in the kitchen. He kissed us and washed up.

"Did anything odd happen today?" he asked.

"Depends what you mean by odd." I glanced at Channon, and he shrugged. To humans and even some shifters, the three of us being in a relationship wasn't the norm.

"An elderly couple walked past me as I got out of the car. The woman swore she'd seen a guy wiggling his naked butt when she looked out her window. But the guy said she was

imagining it. His exact words were, ‘Who’d be doing that in the middle of the day in this neighborhood?’”

“We would,” Channon and I said in unison.

TWENTY-TWO

TROY

“We can go now.”

Channon was propped up on the couch, a bunch of cushions behind him, while he nibbled grapes from a bowl resting on his enormous bump.

“I don’t have any shoes.” He concentrated on one grape before popping it in his mouth.

His feet had been swollen for a few weeks, but as he was on paternity leave, he spent most of the day on the couch or the bed with his feet up. I strolled into the bedroom and came out with three boxes containing pairs of slip-on shoes that I’d bought online, hoping one would fit.

My omega mate had been so excited about choosing onesies and cute little tees for the baby, until both his belly and feet were so big, he didn’t want to leave the house. I’d suggested we shop online, but he protested that buying baby clothes in person was a rite of passage for all newbie parents.

Zeeve planned to meet us at the store after his first ever dentist appointment.

Channon giggled when our alpha mate said he had a cavity, but I was aghast and told Zeeve he should have taken better care of his teeth. He was partial to freeze-dried Skittles and often ate them while watching TV. Those candies were his downfall.

But my omega mate had explained that shifters rarely got cavities, as their teeth were much stronger than humans’.

“Oh, this is your first visit to a dentist.” Most humans either got clammy palms or butterflies in their belly when going to the dentist, no matter how kind that person was.

“Why the ‘Oh’?” Zeeve had asked as he examined his tooth in a mirror.

“No reason.” I’d shrugged and rearranged books on the coffee table.

“I know why.” Channon had grinned from ear to ear.

My mouthing, “Stop,” didn’t deter him, and he regaled Zeeve on the horrors of humans and dentists. But our alpha mate was made of strong stuff, and he shrugged off the information and headed out.

“Modern dentistry has come a long way since I was a kid,” I’d shouted after him as he climbed in the car. That much was true.

“I only have one pair of feet.” Channon’s voice brought me back to the present.

“I can return any that aren’t suitable.”

Placing the boxes in front of my mate, I hoped my choice of colors would meet his approval.

He opened the first box and squealed. “Pink. They’re hot pink. I’ll make sure they fit, even if they kill me.”

“No one’s dying today, and especially not over shoes.”

As Channon opened each box, he squeed louder. The shoes were various shades of pink, and he hugged all six to his chest.

“Are they expensive? Can I have them all?”

“Of course, but let’s see if they’re the right size first.”

“Even if they’re not, perhaps I could keep them anyway because they’re so pretty.”

I agreed, because I’d do anything to make my pregnant mate happy.

Zeeve messaged. He was finished at the dentist.

Don't understand what all the fuss was about. It was easy peasy.

Lucky you. I shuddered as I recalled the drill grinding into my tooth. It was that sharp shrieking sound that was embedded in my memory.

Channon took an age deciding which pink shoes to wear, but once he was in the car and buckled up, he hummed and bounced his feet while admiring them.

There was a parking space outside the store, and Zeeve helped our mate out of the car.

“Did you have a cavity?” I peered at his brilliant white teeth.

“Nope.” He bustled around Channon, grabbing his coat and admiring his new shoes. He jerked his head toward our omega mate, and while I didn't understand, I took the hint I should shut up until Channon was out of earshot.

The instant we walked in, Channon oohed and ahed about every item in the store. He rubbed every fabric between his fingers and, much as he adored his pink shoes, he slipped them off and waddled over the plush carpet.

“These are adorable.” He pointed to tiny tees, each with an animal on the front. There was a bunny, a kangaroo, and an elephant. “No wolf?”

The sales assistant shot me a look before replying, “No, I'm sorry, but we could order one especially for you.” He hesitated. “It would be a little more expensive. We don't get many queries about wolves.”

“How long will it take?” Channon wasn't far from his due date.

“About ten working days.”

Our omega mate was thinking ahead and ordered two, but not in the smallest size. Instead, he got one for a six-month-old and a twelve-month-old. But we bought onesies in many sizes, plus cute toys. Again, there was no wolf, but there was a dog which, if we squinted, it kinda looked like a wolf.

Armed with sleep suits, stuffies, tees, socks, and hats, along with a pile of onesies, Zeeve and I staggered to the car. The nursery was already complete with furniture, books, a changing table, and diapers, which Channon had agonized over for weeks. Today's shopping expedition was our last, unless our mate read a blog late at night that said blah blah blah was essential to baby, omega, and alpha dads.

"I don't want to take you off," Channon spoke lovingly to the shoes.

"Do you want me to bring you tea in bed?" Usually after an outing, our omega mate was exhausted.

"Nope, I'm in nesting mode. Come on." Zeeve and I marched in formation behind our mate. "I know what you're doing," Channon sniggered.

"Your wish is our command."

Our mate sat in the rocker and instructed us to pull all the goodies out of the bags. "How was the dentist? Was it as bad as Troy made out?"

"It was fine." Zeeve busied himself by folding onesies and arranging toys on a shelf. His body language and his earlier reaction outside the door told me he didn't want to talk about it. But Channon wouldn't let it go. He reminded me of a neighbor's dog with a bone.

"I watched a video online. It's different now, but the old-style drill was scary as fuck."

"Mmmm." Zeeve gave me a "Help me" look.

"Oh, this pink sleep suit is adorable." I held it up, hoping it'd distract our omega mate.

"Show me your filling?" Channon leaned forward and put a hand on Zeeve's shoulder.

"I didn't get one. It was nothing."

Channon put down the stuffed elephant and screwed up his nose. "Then why did you go?"

Our alpha mate sat back on his heels. “The pain I’m experiencing isn’t a cavity.” He rubbed his jaw as if to make a point. “It’s because I’m grinding my teeth at night.”

Furrows appeared on Channon’s brow. “But grinding results from—”

I cut him off. “Stress.”

Zeeve rolled his eyes and hissed, “Thanks, Troy.”

“It’s me and the baby and the mortgage and the new life and having two mates.” Channon’s voice rose until he was at Screech Level 10. His clenched hands, an additional signal of how stressed *he* was.

Zeeve shuffled over the floor and clasped Channon’s hands while I stood behind our pregnant mate and massaged his shoulders. We’d had such a great day, but that counted for nothing now that tension was rippling off Channon in waves.

“I’ve always ground my teeth, even as a child. My parents didn’t understand why and my wolf hated it—hates it. My folks thought I’d grow out of it and said it was a human affliction.”

“Oh, Zeeve. Have you been in agony all these years?” How did our mate sleep if he suffered excruciating jaw pain?

“It comes and goes.” He held up a small case. “But I now have a mouth guard I’ll wear at night.” He grinned and gave a thumbs-up. “No more jaw pain.”

Channon ruffled Zeeve’s hair. “You should have told us. If we don’t share our problems, they’ll fester.”

“Ewww. That’s a terrible word.” I gagged, imagining an open wound with pus oozing out.

Channon’s eyes grew wide, and he nudged Zeeve. “I forgot our human mate gets queasy at the mention of what he calls ‘yucky words.’”

I clamped both hands over my ears as I ran out of the room. “I hate you. Don’t you dare.”

“Pus,” Channon yelled.

My mates wouldn't stop at one word. They loved teasing me.

"Pustules." Zeeve was right behind me, Channon on his arm.

"Rotting."

"Decay," our pregnant mate yelled, but he wasn't frantic. His voice was light, a barely disguised laugh hovering just below the surface.

Flinging myself on the sofa, I shoved cushions over my face.

"There's only one solution to this problem," Zeeve said.

I lifted one cushion. "What's that? And don't say tickling."

Zeeve tapped his chin. "Ice cream. I picked some up earlier and snuck it into the freezer.

"And you didn't tell me?" Channon plonked himself in an armchair and crossed his arms, shoving out his bottom lip.

Zeeve stroked Channon's chin. "For a very good reason."

"I would have eaten it."

TWENTY-THREE

CHANNON

It was baby time. I sensed it at midnight when I woke up feeling like someone punched me in the gut. But at that point, it was only paternal intuition. Now that I was up and trying to make a start of the day, I'd moved past the initial discomfort and into contraction time.

The contractions were still weak. Had I not been dealing with Braxton Hicks for the past few weeks, I'd probably have assumed it was that. These were different, though. They were also consistent. It was go time.

Only it couldn't be. I had too many things to do before our little one arrived. My due date was next week, and I left too many things until the last minute, the major one being baby laundry.

We'd been gifted a ton of baby clothing, and my mates and I were horrible about leaving cute onesies at the store. If we saw them, one, if not all of us, caved and home they came. That was great and all. Our little one was going to be the cutest baby on the block. Who was I kidding... in the state. Except if they joined the world right now, they would be good and naked because every article of clothing still had tags.

I grabbed my scissors and went to the closet and began cutting off the tags. I knew I had a ton, but once I sat down to deal with it, the sheer volume of clothing overwhelmed me. Why did I wait until the last second? Why?

If my doctor hadn't warned me of the dangers of new unwashed clothes on a newborn's fragile skin, I would've

thought nothing about tearing out a tag and slapping an outfit on them on day one. But they mentioned it and follow-up Google searches brought up similar notions.

“Past me was a dick.” I bent over as best as I could as a contraction built. Today was going to be rough... and not even for the pushing-out-a-baby phase, although there was no way that wouldn’t be rough. I was more bitching about the mass quantities of adorableness that had to be washed and dried. And not washed only one time. Nooo. That would be easy. No, I had to read an article that said a minimum of five washes were necessary and suggested 20.

There was no way I could get to 20. That number wasn’t close to attainable. But five? Five I could manage. Once the tags were all removed, I waddled down to the laundry and filled up a load, not wanting it to be too full.

As it ran for the first time, I attempted to vacuum and gave up after a quarter of the smallest room in the house was done. I didn’t know if it was the actual task that caused my contraction to triple suck or if it was the normal progression of things, but I didn’t care. The rug could be dirty.

I paced for the rest of wash cycle one, two, three. Walking did pretty well at keeping my pain at bay, so it made sense to keep doing so. Once cycle four came, I slowed down, and by the fifth one, I was sitting on the recliner. The recliner wasn’t that great a place to sit, but it rocked, and I figured it gave me the best chance of getting up when it was time to switch the wash.

My phone buzzed on the coffee table, and my theory of the recliner helping me to stand was put to the test. It wasn’t the easiest to get out of, but given I was contracting, I called it good.

I’m taking a few hours off. Need anything from the store? Troy was so sweet.

I don’t think so.

He was going to be less than thrilled I didn’t let him know about being in labor. So was Zeeve, but having them around while I was trying to walk the pain away wasn’t ideal. Troy

would be worried about me, and I'd feel bad about worrying him. It wasn't as if I was in the *be here now* part of labor, the part where the birth was imminent and I had to push.

He told me he was on his way, and I decided it was best to ask Zeeve to come home too. He'd not be happy if I was laboring with Troy without telling him. Or at least I'd have been mad if I were him. I sent him a text, telling him I missed him and asking if he could come home soon. And because he was such an amazing mate, he immediately said that he would.

I had the baby clothes in the dryer and the machine ready to start again when the first vehicle pulled into the driveway. I pushed the button on the dryer and attempted to go out to meet them, a contraction leaving me leaning on the wall and panting. It was by far the most painful one I'd had.

It was weird being giddy that I was having uncomfortable cramps escalate into downright awful.

Troy arrived first, but before he got inside, Zeeve was right behind them. I waited until they were both beside me to explain the situation. Zeeve was going to be fine—or at least could pretend to be fine-ish. But Troy? He still wasn't quite used to the *shifters don't do all things like humans*. He was going to drag me to the hospital, and I wasn't about that.

Had I been going to my old doctor, the one I loved, maybe I'd have called her just to be sure. But she was no longer with the practice and the only one on staff who had been a shifter. I didn't trust the others to know what was best for an omega shifter. And besides, I did have a midwife. I planned to call once things got closer. We weren't there yet was all.

"You're in labor!" Zeeve fished out his phone. "I'm calling the midwife."

"Call 9-1-1," Troy insisted. "Get him a ride to the hospital. I'd say it was better for us to drive you, but I saw a video the other day of a woman giving birth in the passenger side of their car while their mate was driving. Big old hard pass on that."

I snatched the phone from him. "My pregnancy is not a medical emergency, and I'm giving birth here." There was

zero room for arguing. “The midwife can come.”

“On their way,” Zeeve said.

“I think we need to clean up and put me to bed.” I pointed to the floor, which was now wet. Not as wet as my jeans, but still...

Once my water broke, things progressed quickly. I went from tolerable to full-on feral screams with my contractions, and I felt the urge to push just a minute after the midwife came in. Perfect timing.

My mates stood on either side of me, both holding one of my hands and praising me for being strong and brave. I didn't have the heart to tell them I was neither.

“You're doing well,” the midwife looked up to tell me. “If it's not burning now, it will be the next push.

They weren't lying. I felt like my entire nether region was on fire; the scream coming from me was worse than all the others combined. I pushed, and I pushed, and I pushed. And just when I feared I had no pushes left, our baby boy entered this world, kicking and screaming.

The midwife cleaned him up and then placed him on my chest. Our sweet little one rooted around, and when I brought him to my chest, he latched on like a boss.

“He did it!” Chest feeding had been one thing I'd been low-key worrying a lot about. It didn't help when I used the internet to look up fatherly things. The horror stories... oh, the horror stories.

“He's smart like his daddy.” Zeeve kissed my brow.

I looked over at Troy. “Yes, he is. Both of them.”

The two of them joined me on the side of the bed. The midwife had stepped out, telling us they'd be back in a few minutes and to enjoy our first moment together.

“Or maybe all three of them?” Zeeve looked down at me with such love in his eyes. “What shall we name him?”

We had picked out a bunch of names, but none ever felt right.

“I had an idea,” I said, looking down at our sweet baby.
“Remember how I was researching apps when we met?”

They both nodded.

“What about Colin for a name? He is why we’re here, right? If it weren’t for his app, we’d have never met.” Although fate had a way of working situations out. “Or is that too weird since technically he is my boss’s boss’s boss’s boss?”

“I think it’s perfect.” Troy kissed my cheek.

“Agreed.” Zeeve did the same on my other cheek.

“Agreed.” I pressed a kiss to our Colin’s head. “I love you, alphas mine.”

“As we love you, mate. As we love you.”

TWENTY-FOUR

ZEEVE

“Shhh,” I held my finger up to my lips. “Daddy’s sleeping, and we don’t want to wake him on his special day.”

Colin nodded in understanding and tiptoed across the room instead of the running he’d been doing only moments earlier. He was just as excited about Channon’s birthday as he usually was about his own. It was adorable.

Troy and I had the whole day planned. We were letting him sleep in, at least as long as his bladder would allow him to. Channon was nearing the third trimester of his pregnancy, and with twins, that equaled a lot of trips to the bathroom.

When he woke up, Colin and I were going to make him breakfast. It was Colin’s idea after seeing it on a sitcom he had grown to love. Being only seven, it was going to be a simple meal of cereal and toast, but it would make Channon happy.

“I hear Channon.” Troy came in. He was just as excited about the day as Colin was. “You two should probably start breakfast. I’ll call Penelope’s and let them know an approximate time now that I have a better idea.”

Penelope was a woman we’d met while at the park one day. She had struck up a conversation with Channon about her dog, and the conversation turned to Channon always wanting a dog. Neither Troy nor I had known that about him, and when she mentioned her dog was currently expecting an unanticipated litter, Troy got her number on the sly.

Having the pups ready on our mate’s birthday felt like a sign.

“Sounds good. Colin and I will get working on breakfast.”

What should've been a five-minute breakfast ended up taking closer to fifteen and included a piece of toast that probably belonged in the trash, given how dark it was. But Colin insisted it was how daddy liked it, so on the plate it went.

"Your Happy Birthday present is ready." Colin carried the tray of food over to the table. I followed behind him with the drinks. Colin was getting big and responsible, but he was still young, and there was no way he was going to be carrying two drinks plus the food without something spilling. Heck, I wasn't sure if I could manage.

"You're the best."

Colin took the tray and set it on the table in front of Channon.

"Ohhh, my favorite. Burned toast. How did you remember?" He picked up a piece and nibbled on it as Colin puffed up his chest with pride.

"Told you." He looked back at me and then sat down beside Channon. "Papa told me I burned it too much and you wouldn't like it. Papa doesn't know you very well, does he?" I couldn't tell if he was teasing or not.

"He knows me very well. We just disagree about toast." Channon took a full-on bite. "Thank you for breakfast. Why don't you get ready? We have a lot going on today."

"Okay, Daddy." Colin started out of the room, then turned back and said, "Happy birthday!" before bolting to his room.

"You don't have to eat that," I said. "I can make sure he doesn't see that it was tossed."

Channon chuckled. "You really don't know how I like toast."

"I guess not." I sat beside him. "You ready for a birthday extravaganza?"

"That depends. Is there a lot of walking? Because my shoes are too tight." He let out a long sigh. "I don't remember being this swollen with Colin."

"Every pregnancy is different. And this one includes two babies. It makes sense that your body experiences pregnancy differently with them," I repeated the doctor's words. "But to

answer your question, there's nothing as intense as a hike or anything like that, no. But we will get out of the car, so walking isn't fully off the table."

I offered to help him get ready, and he insisted he was fine. And as huge as he was, our omega was quite agile. He didn't even need us to help tie his shoes, shoes he couldn't even see thanks to his belly. I brought his now-empty tray to the kitchen while he got ready.

"Does he suspect anything?" Troy came up behind me, his front pressed against my back, his arms wrapping around me from behind.

"He knows we're doing birthday fun, but I don't think he suspects the puppy." I turned in his arms and kissed him deeply. "I hope he loves it as much as we think he will. We need to make sure he knows he doesn't need to accept the gift." No one should keep a puppy they don't want out of a sense of obligation.

"Agreed. But I am sure he will. We need to stop by the pet store too." Troy pressed his forehead against mine. "I ordered all the necessities and they're in the garage, but he'll want to get the pup a fancy collar or cookies or something."

"Agreed." I nibbled on his bottom lip. "Let's go get our omega."

It was a pretty big ordeal getting everyone in the car. Colin still needed a booster seat, but we moved it to the back so that the captain's chairs could be available for the twins' car seats. He was getting better at getting himself buckled in, but it took a bit. And having to squeeze my ass back there to sit beside him wasn't exactly what I would call the easiest thing to do.

I buckled my belt, letting Colin do his on his own. Channon was already in the passenger seat, and Troy was behind the wheel.

If you had asked me eight years ago if I would ever be the proud owner of a minivan, I'd have instantly said, "Never," without giving it a second's thought. But now? Now I couldn't imagine not having one. It was the one vehicle that easily fit

our growing family. Sure, there were some SUVs with a lot of seats, but they were higher off the ground. No, I was a minivan convert through and through.

“I know this is my birthday surprise, but we’re in the car now. Anyone want to give me a hint?” Channon asked.

“It’s for your birthday,” Colin called from his seat beside me in the back. “That’s my hint.”

“That’s my hint too,” Troy said.

“Same,” I piped in.

If we were traveling more than a few minutes, I’d have caved, but he could wonder for the few miles we had left. I couldn’t wait to see his face when he saw the pups.

Troy took us straight to the house. There was nothing about it that would help Channon figure out what we were up to. He’d simply met a woman in the park one day. Nothing came of it, and this neighborhood would be as new to him as it was to us. Still, I worried a tad that the surprise would be ruined.

“This is us.” He pulled to the curb. “Ready, mate?”

Channon’s buckle was already undone and the door already open a crack. Safe to say he was more than ready.

“I am. But for the record, guys, I like our house. I don’t want to move.”

I was confused as to what he meant, and then I saw the for sale sign on the neighbor’s lawn and it made sense.

“We aren’t buying a house.” Colin climbed out the side door. “It’s way better than that.” He grabbed Channon’s hand. “Ready?”

“Ready.”

Penelope had the door open just as we arrived, and Channon’s face bloomed into a smile upon seeing her. The cat was out of the bag... or was it the puppy?

“How?” He turned to look at both Troy and me.

“Troy is magic.” I shrugged. “You ready to pick out your new fur baby?”

“Are you sure? They’re a lot of work, and I’m not great at bending down at the moment. The clean-up will be on you three.” His excitement was rolling off him, and yet he still took the time to think about us. It was reason number 762,394,297 why our lives were better for having Channon in them.

“I am a good helper,” Colin insisted.

“As are we,” Troy said.

“In that case, let’s go pick my puppy.”

Only we didn’t pick one puppy. Nope, we left there with two and went straight home, the two of them far more energetic than any lengthy car ride could handle. Thankfully, we were close by.

“What are you going to name them, Daddy?” Colin sat on the floor as the two pups used him as a jungle gym.

“I was thinking of maybe two opposites. Like Sun and Moon or Night and Day or I don’t know... do you have any ideas?” He bent down to pet the puppy currently nipping at his ankles. The fur ball was a walking cliché.

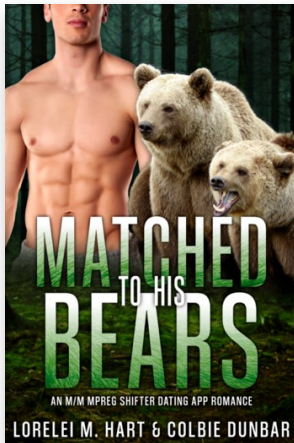
“I was thinking...” I said. “What about Rose and Daisy? The two flowers that grow in the front bed.”

Channon had planted them both the first year we were here, and they continued to thrive.

“I love that idea.” Troy took both of our hands. “And I love you both.”

“Funny coincidence, I love you both too.” I gave both their hands a squeeze.

“I love you all, too. ”



Sometimes the mate you've been looking for is only an app away... times two.

Human Alpha Anson is boring. Everyone says so. He can't help it if he's not into the club scene and would rather stay home reading a good book or watching a movie. And what's the point? To hook up with a random stranger. He doesn't want that. Anson longs for the complete package; true love, marriage, and a family. And he's not willing to settle. Maybe this hot new dating app his neighbor keeps raving about might be worth a try. It has to be better than a night on the town.

Alpha bear shifter, Hector, hates the city. His beast longs to be in the mountains, not surrounded by concrete, but when his boss sends him to a week-long training he has no choice but to comply. If only his beast weren't antsy AF. When Hector gets a notification from his dating app saying there are matches nearby, he decides to go for it. Maybe time with another shifter will sooth his animal.

When omega bear shifter, Travis, gets a call from his grandfather asking for help with his move to a senior living community, he drops everything and heads to the city. Moving sucks, but spending time with his beloved relative makes it worth it. When he wakes up one morning to see notifications on his phone for an app he never downloaded, he just rolls his eyes. Of course his grandfather is meddling in his dating life. It's what he does.

Travis decides to go on just one date, but which one? Two intrigue him. Maybe one of them might be a match?

Spoiler alert: They both are.

Matched to His Bears is the fifteenth book in the sweet with knotty heat Dates of Our Lives series, an M/M/M mpreg shifter dating app romance brought to you by the popular co-writing duo of Lorelei M. Hart and Colbie Dunbar. It features a city

human who loves his low-key life, a country alpha bear shifter who's ready to settle down, a visiting omega bear shifter who never signed up for the app but gets matched anyway, two dates that should always have been one, fated mates, true love, an adorable baby, and a guaranteed happy ever after. If you like your shifters cuddly, your alphas hawt, your mpreg with heart, and your HEAs complete with true mates and a bundle of joy, one-click today.

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