

OMEGAS OF OLIVER CREEK

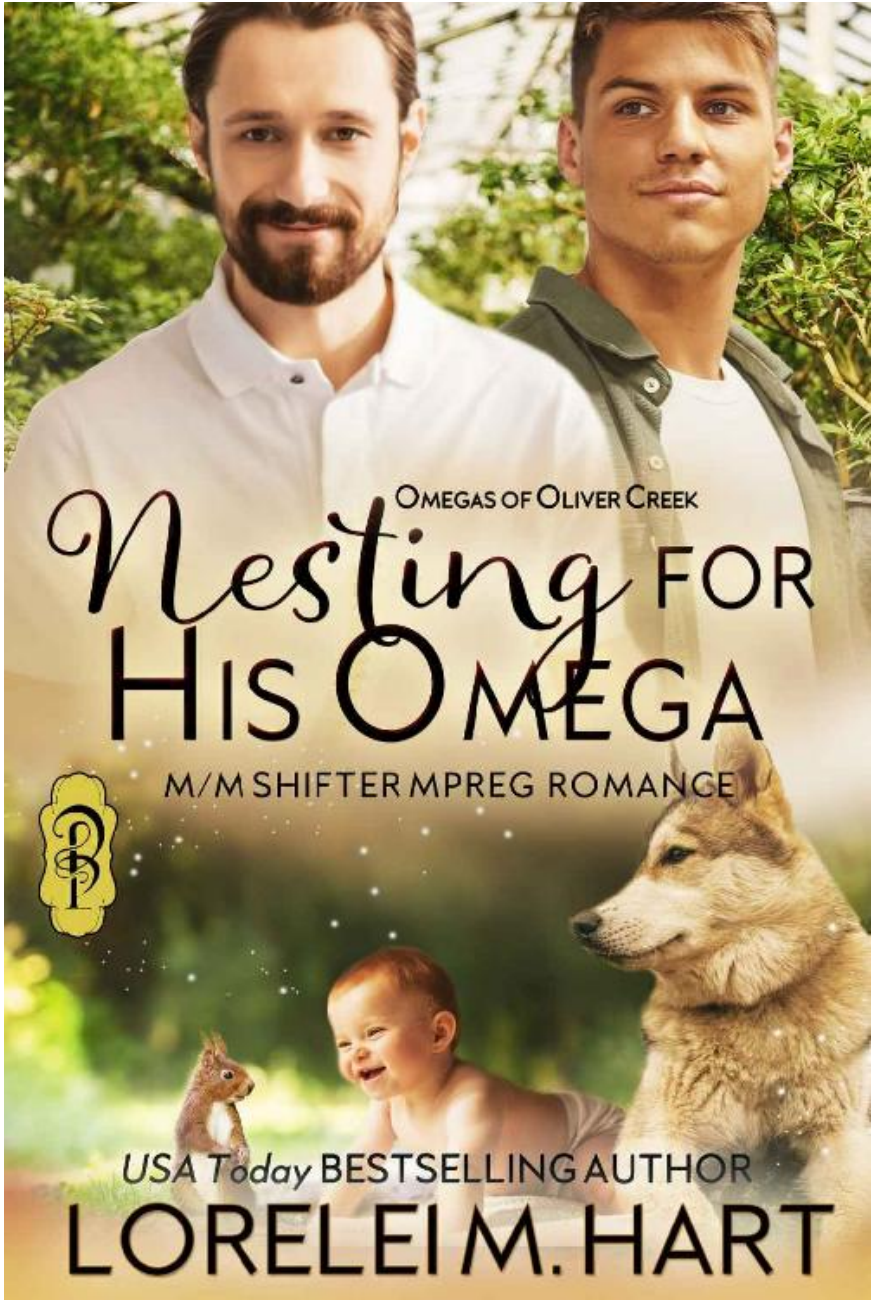
Nesting FOR HIS OMEGA

M/M SHIFTER MPREG ROMANCE



USA Today BESTSELLING AUTHOR

LORELEI M. HART



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Nesting for His Omega

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Quinn

Aster has been my best friend since forever. He loves Oliver Creek and while we've lived in separate parts of the country since college, he encouraged me to come to his town. He thinks I came all this way for a business opportunity but really...I'm here for him. I've always loved Aster but never had the guts to tell him.

Now is my my chance.

Aster

I knew Quinn would fit in here, not only as a healer but as a part of this town. I've always admired him for his gentleness and care with his patients but that's not why I asked him to come here.

I'm in love with him. Always have been. But the timing was never right.

Now is my chance.

Nesting for His Omega is the sixth knotty heat mm shifter mpreg romance featuring a hardworking omega squirrel, with a gift for healing, an alpha wolf with a gift for growing grapes,

a yearning that has held up over the years, friend to lovers, friends from other stories of the Omegas of Oliver Creek, an adorable baby or two, and a guaranteed happily ever after. If you like your mpreg against all odds, your happily ever afters complete with a bundle of joy, and your mpreg with heart, Nesting for His Omega is the book for you. While each book in the Omegas of Oliver Creek series is set in the same world, they can each be read as standalones.

Hopping to His Omega
Omegas of Oliver Creek Book 5

By

Lorelei M. Hart

Chapter One

Aster

A general sadness darkened about Oliver Creek the day that Rome, the healer, left town. He had just settled in and made himself a name here when his parents had fallen ill and needed him to come back home.

“Good morning, Kevin.” I waved at the waiter as I walked into the local diner, The Lot. It had all-American diner fare, but I’d tried some of their Aussie dishes and was always blown away. Coming here and to the other places in town on errand day was my only outing.

And now that my latest web design project was done, in the wee hours of the morning, I decided to treat myself to a huge breakfast and a large coffee before going back home and promptly proceeding to go to bed for a long, long time.

My last client was particularly picky, and I’d redone the website from scratch six times before he was happy.

It would be too soon if I ever heard from him again, but that was inevitable seeing as he had monthly and sometimes weekly changes to be made to keep his site up to date.

“Morning, Aster. You look...” The waiter cocked his head. “You look like a man who could use a big cup of coffee.” He laughed and put a glass of water and silverware on my table. The seat beneath me was still warm. I’d come just in time.

I chuckled and sat in the nearest booth. There were couples in others, and I realized it wasn't my usual errand day. A check of my phone told me that I'd managed to lose three whole days and it was Saturday. No wonder the place was packed. "That would be right. A huge cup of coffee please, but I'm ready to order if you don't mind."

"Nice. What'll you have?" He got out a small notebook and pen.

Breakfast was incredible at The Lot, and I looked forward to my once-a-week trip here. "Butter pecan waffle, extra crispy. Bacon and eggs on the side—scrambled."

"You got it. I'll put the order in and get your coffee right away. We have sweet potato and blackberry pies if you are interested."

I nodded. Sweet potato was my favorite, and I would definitely be taking a slice or two home.

My shifter ears picked up the sound of more than one baby in the place, along with the typical diner sounds—forks and knives clanking, pots being put on the stove, the bell above the door ringing as people went in and out.

As I sipped on my coffee, complete with too much sugar and cream, I listened to the gossip. This place was not only the best breakfast spot in town now, but, if you sat there long enough, you were bound to hear the latest local news.

This morning, the news was still Rome. He had delivered Hunter and Paedon's babe, and they owned this place, so I knew he had a special place in their hearts.

“Is there someone to replace him?” I asked as Kevin delivered my piping-hot breakfast and warned me that the plates were scorching as well.

“Who? The healer? Not that I’ve heard of. I wish we could find someone though. With all of the new matings and little ones growing up, there’s bound to be a need for a good healer. Do you know of anyone?”

“I think so. I’ll reach out to him.”

“That would be great. Anything else I can get for you?”

I shook my head, already drowning the sweet-smelling waffle in not-real-at-all maple syrup. Real was an option, but I craved the naughty stuff instead.

I knew a healer. A damned fine one, too.

My stomach rolled at the prospect of Quinn moving to this town, being so close. The old feelings came rushing back. They’d never gotten cold. I’d simply pushed them down to a place where I could successfully ignore them for a while.

Until I heard a song we used to listen to.

Or a movie we watched together.

I avoided nachos altogether because they were his favorite.

Quinn was my mate, something I’d known since we were in college and maybe before that. The timing was simply always off.

If I called him, I knew he would answer the phone just as I would for him. No matter where our lives had taken us, he would be my best friend. I had called him when one of my

dads died. He called me when he moved to North Dakota to take a healing position with a huge, prominent pack.

But we didn't keep in touch regularly.

Not nearly often enough for my taste.

I could call him and tell him about the position. He'd emailed not long ago saying that he was thinking of a change.

And maybe, for the first time in my life, I could gather the courage to actually tell the sweet male how I felt about him.

Maybe this was Fate throwing me a bone.

After filling my belly, I went home, showered, and changed into low-slung pajama pants. Then I paced the floors of my small but tidy cottage on the outskirts of town. My phone was already on Aster's name in my contacts. The only thing to do was to press the icon and get it over with.

"He's my best friend. It's just a call to let him know there's a job for a healer in town. No big deal. Just a phone call like any other."

Except it wasn't any other phone call.

This phone call could potentially change the trajectory of my future and his.

I could have a chance at having my mate by my side and starting a family with him—all the things I'd stayed up at night thinking of and fantasizing about.

This was my chance.

I took in a swift breath and pressed the button.

Here goes nothing.

Chapter Two

Quinn

When I received the offer to work as a healer for one of the largest packs in the country, it seemed too good to be true. Especially for a squirrel working at a wolf pack—not super common. Sure, I came from a line of respected healers and in addition to learning everything my father had to teach me, I went to college and studied basically what a human would for premed. There were many differences between the physiology of a shifter and a human—some of which nobody understood—but also many similarities. Many in the pack, and even other old-school healers, scoffed that I was at best wasting time and at worst learning incorrect information that could harm our patients, but I begged to differ.

Humans had gone to a lot of trouble to learn things about anatomy and how the systems of the body worked together. No, they did not know how that translated into someone who could turn into an animal. In our scurry, of course, that meant squirrel, but my father had been adamant that we should be able to take care of others.

So, I studied under my father and also under any other healer who was willing to let me shadow him for a bit, and I'd begun my apprenticeships very young. By the time I entered college, I knew what more I wanted to learn and took full advantage of the educational opportunity to carve my own path. Despite having been “homeschooled,” I did well enough in this new environment to receive an unsolicited offer to

attend medical school. No, it wasn't one of the best-known ones, but it was accredited and legit.

After seriously considering their offer, I wrote them a sincere note of thanks, but no thanks. I felt I'd already learned as much as the human world could teach me about my future profession. Shifters were, overall, a healthy bunch, and when they did need assistance, the intervention was quite different from what most hospitals offered. Instead, I accepted a position with one of the largest packs in the United States.

Their healer, an ancient one, was ready to retire, and after spending a couple of months with him, "learning the ropes," I understood why. They were determined to have only one healer, and even shifters' generally great health made that a stretch. For one thing, it seemed half the omegas were pregnant at all times. I'd studied extensively with a healer who specialized in these pregnancies, so I indeed did understand how to take care of pregnant omegas and new babies, but there for sure had to be a lot more hours in the day to do it. My request for a second healer or midwife or two were not rejected, just postponed until, "we have a chance to consider it." Which of course they never did.

After I'd been there for a while, I realized that they'd hired me because anyone else with the skills to handle this job would have cost them twice as much and had enough experience to insist on an adequate support staff.

I didn't blame the pack members for this. My patients were great, especially since my being understaffed meant extensive waiting and less time with me than I would have preferred. A low level of anxiety about what this might mean

in terms of care constantly buzzed in my veins. This was not how I wanted to practice, and as the end of the contract I'd signed loomed, the pack hierarchy was nudging me hard to renew. They implied that everyone was depending on me, and I would be leaving all my patients in the lurch.

It wasn't true, strictly, but my conscience insisted that they would probably end up with someone less qualified and what would that mean? All these people were depending on me. But my sixteen-plus hour days were not making me a better healer. Exhaustion weighed, and it was only a matter of time before I made a mistake that caused harm. My conscience wouldn't like that, either. I went back and forth over and over, wishing for a sign of what I should do. All of this upheaval was stealing what little sleep I could manage to squeeze in.

I finally took a day off to try to rest a bit before I went from iffy-exhausted healer to dangerously exhausted healer. But even as I sat in my recliner in the living room of the small house that came with the job, guilt assailed me. What if someone needed me and I was home goofing off? What if there was an accident and because my home was located inconveniently far from the clinic, it took me too long to get there? What if—

My phone lit up with a call but, instead of being summoned to work, the ringtone I'd set for only one person instantly took the edge off my nerves. We didn't talk often, but Aster and I had been friends for many years, and I grabbed for the device from the table next to me.

"Hi, friend." I pushed back in the chair, raising the foot piece and settling in for a chat. For the first time in a long

time, I had some stolen minutes to share. “What’s new in Oliver Creek?”

“Quinn, are you happy there?” he blurted without even a hello. “With your job I mean.”

“Wow. Talk about a conversation starter. Before I answer, why are you asking?” A tiny, tiny hope blossomed because there weren’t a lot of reasons this might come up.

“Our healer here has had a family emergency, and we have an opening for someone like you.”

“Pack healer?” Aster was a wolf, and Oliver Creek, from what I understood, was home to a large variety of shifters, but...

“Town healer. There’s a clinic already set up and patients waiting.” He exhaled sharply. “Quinn, we need you, and you could stay with me if you like. We need you.”

Of course, I had questions about how busy the practice would be and lots of other things, and he didn’t have all the answers, but he did have the phone number of the healer who had to leave, and after a short conversation with Rome, I learned that despite the fact I’d be working with all sorts of shifters, my patient base would be about 30 percent of what it was now.

Sleep would once again be part of my life.

There couldn’t be a clearer sign.

Chapter Three

Aster

As soon as I hung up, I fell down on my knees right there in the living room. It had taken a few phone calls over the past week to get things moving, but now, it was happening.

The owner of the building where Rome had set up shop was more than happy to let Aster take over the lease. Everything was in place for him to run his own clinic in town, since Rome had done the heavy lifting and the landlord was happy not to have to remodel for a different kind of business.

All of those things were good news. Great news.

But the best part was that I was able to offer Quinn somewhere to stay while he settled in and found a place of his own.

Which I hoped he never did.

But that wasn't going to happen. If it was, it would have long ago.

Still, ready to enjoy his presence under my roof while it lasted, I'd gone to the store in the next town over and bought new sheets and a new comforter for him, making sure they were the softest of the soft, along with some new throw blankets since autumn was in full effect and winter would be here before we knew it.

I didn't need to, but I bought new towels and rugs for the guest bathroom as well. Candles oozing with fall scents were

in the bags on the table, ready to be put out and lit, hopefully making him feel at home.

Everything had to be perfect.

I made a deal with myself as I looked around, already listing things I needed to do before he got here.

Tell him that you belong to him. That you always have. That he is your mate, your omega.

My gut told me this might be my only chance at having Quinn be more than a friend in my life. And it was way past time. My wolf wanted a family. It was high time according to him and I had to admit, I wanted it as well.

But my mate was none other than my best friend. My wolf and I would have no other. Some shifters took mates that weren't their true mate for one reason or the other, and many of them built families and lives happily with the person they weren't fated for.

Not me.

It was Quinn or nothing.

Now to make everything perfect for him—for the potential us.

When I was working on big projects, my house became a bit of a mess, and that was being nice. Really it was a big ole disaster I had to clear up immediately. Quinn would be coming in only a few short days.

Maybe, with him in town, working at the clinic, I would find myself going in to the office more often. I worked for a tech company that had a building in town, but I usually

worked from home to avoid the distractions. Even if I worked from there, it was only for a few hours. There were staff meetings on Monday mornings, hence my day of errands. It all went together.

I stood, hands on my hips, in the middle of the kitchen, already frustrated and not knowing where to start.

The thought of Quinn propelled me forward.

Once the kitchen was clean, I moved into the living room, and a few hours later, the entire house was spotless.

I laughed, pulling out ingredients and making a list on the counter. I'd gotten the place clean only to make another mess. At least, this time, the disarray had a purpose. I wanted to make some meals for the freezer—have his time here be as peaceful and calm as it could be. Quinn would be busy with setting up a new practice and getting settled in the town and here. The first few weeks would be the most hectic, so, if I could create a calm atmosphere here, in my home, then maybe he would stay. An alpha could dream.

I put the ingredients in the slow cooker for my easy potato soup and started on the rest of the food.

Quinn loved my food. Always had. My dad, Arlo, taught me how to cook when I was little, jump-starting one of my passions, while my other dad, Thad, brought me with him to work and helped me learn to code.

I'd gone to the PBJ place in town and bought some raspberry white-chocolate macadamia butter to swirl into a batch of blondies. Quinn loved all forms of brownies and blondies. All flavors. I went home one day after school—I

must've been about fourteen or so, after finding out that Quinn had said something at lunch about loving brownies and insisted my dad teach me how to make them.

I brought him a different flavor of brownie every Friday through high school. It did take some stretching to have such a variety, but I took it as a challenge.

We'd gone together to the prom—as friends, of course—but even that night, I'd wanted more. I'd wanted to lean in and kiss him while we danced. Take him by the hand and lead him to a car and drive us somewhere private where I could explore his body and tell him how I felt.

But none of that happened. I'd clammed up. Kept my mouth shut. Sealed my fate with my cowardice.

We went to the same college, but with Quinn studying biology and physiology while I learned about computer science, our schedules hadn't been compatible. We made other friends. Had classes on opposite sides of campus.

And once we both graduated, we went our separate ways.

I had major regrets about that time in our lives. I could've made an effort to see him more. I could've asked him out on a date. Told him how I felt.

The timing never was right.

My excitement sparked and popped inside me. I didn't have the courage back then to tell Quinn that I was in love with him, but I was a different man now. If there was even a slight chance he could be mine, then I was going to take it.

But first, more brownies.

Chapter Four

Quinn

When I accepted the position in Oliver Creek, I wasn't even thinking about how far away it was from my current location. Somehow, in my mind, we were never far apart. Which was ridiculous considering we didn't talk or even text all that often. And the fact that I was humming, something I only did when very happy, could have had other explanations than pleasure at going to stay with my old friend.

Like relief. After my last day as healer here, it took a little time before I realized the phone wasn't going to ring or texts come through demanding my presence at any time of day or night. In fact, the phone that did that was no longer in my possession because it came with the job. I'd made a quick trip into town the day before to set up a personal account and get a new device that was all mine. I'd added Aster's contact info as well as that of several members who really wanted to stay in touch. That made me happy because I'd felt like such a machine racing from patient to patient, I hadn't had time to build many relationships beyond the end of my stethoscope. That some of those I'd helped or even just shared a short conversation with in passing wanted to be friends now—that felt good. Not gonna lie.

The healer's house had also come furnished, so other than my personal items, my desk chair, and some other oddball things, I didn't have a lot to take with me. It all fit in my car. Tightly...and it might have caused illegal mirror blocking, but it would do.

To my amazement, when I showed up at the dining hall where any member who wanted could find a meal—and where I ate just about all the time because cooking did not fit in my schedule except when I had to take my “official” turn—something even my job as healer did not relieve me of—I was greeted by a loud cry of, “Surprise!”

The hall was strung with streamers and balloons, and long tables groaned under the weight of food and drink. There was even a huge cake. Tears stung my eyes at the sight. I made my way in, everyone I passed patting me on the back or expressing their best wishes for my future endeavors. Lucky they didn’t do this to try to get me to stay because just the sight of all the omegas holding their babies I’d delivered might have done it.

If not for Aster, of course.

But plans were made and my car was loaded. Tomorrow I’d be on the road. I might never see these people who had been such a big part of my life for so long again. Their kindness in setting up this party for me, to thank me for my time with them, was something to enjoy and appreciate for sure.

I don’t know why I hadn’t smelled the barbecue because the array of smoked meats laid out on the table were nothing short of awe-inspiring. Everyone urged me to eat more, and I piled a plate with brisket and ribs and chicken and other meats as well as homemade potato salad and beans and Waldorf salad. It seemed everyone had contributed to the side dishes with their specialties, and if I didn’t at least eat a bite or two of each, I’d offend someone. So I did my best, eating until I was

stuffed, taking a break, and gobbling a little more. In the end, I had to ask for my slice of cake to go. It would make a nice breakfast in the morning.

After our meal, a run was announced. I wished I'd eaten just a bit less, but I was still capable of shifting and joining these people for one last race in the nearby forests and fields. They owned thousands of acres, a real plus in choosing to work here. If I'd ever had time to enjoy it. Which, I realized, I did, this evening.

I had gotten out a bit but not for very far or long, and my squirrel was beyond excited for a chance to run and leap and play with the others. This second part of the party was in his honor. If only I'd had enough help, it could have been a good posting, and I hoped that the pack leaders would realize what their cheapness? Hesitancy to act? Whatever it was, it cost them me, and I hoped it would help them to make better decisions for their pack in future. Not that I was the be-all and end-all, but I'd done my best, and I was vain enough, or maybe self-aware enough to know I was better than many.

We ran for hours, my squirrel racing from tree to tree while the others ran along the ground. We loved every moment, stopping to drink at the sparkling streams that bisected the property, watching the wolves chase a few small animals in play only. Apparently, they were full, too.

And then, when that was all over, we ended up around a bonfire with s'mores, which I found room for after all the exercise, and everyone telling stories about how I took such good care of them.

I got hugged and squeezed so many times, I felt like a loaf of white bread, but it was fine. Instead of leaving feeling a bit resentful and unappreciated, I glowed under the kindness of the members of this pack. I would never forget my first real job as a pack healer.

And it was in this warm, happy mood, with just a touch of nostalgia, that I turned my car toward Oliver Creek and the alpha who my squirrel wanted for his own.

He was more than just a friend. But could I make him see that?

Chapter Five

Aster

The meeting on Monday afternoon was absolute hell. Josh moved our morning meeting several hours, something he'd never done before and picked the absolute worst day to do.

I was sure that my boss was saying things that were needed and pertinent, but his voice droned on. I checked my watch every three seconds. My knee bounced under the table while I eyed the agenda for the meeting. Usually, I was fine with these once-a-week catchups but not on the day Quinn arrived.

Josh needed to hurry the hell up so I could get home. Quinn had gotten up early and was making one long drive for the last stretch so that he could arrive at my house tonight. He wanted to get a jump on working and get settled in as soon as possible.

According to his location, which he had shared with me, he was arriving in less than a half hour.

“Okay, any questions?” Josh asked.

I let out a breath and wished pain upon anyone who asked a question, but thankfully none did. I was out of that conference room faster than a jack rabbit.

I rushed home and made sure everything was ready. I lit scented candles in the kitchen, living room, and Quinn's bedroom.

I stirred the butternut squash soup in the slow cooker and threw the cheesy garlic bread into the oven.

Then I paced the floors, nearly wearing them out before my wolf picked up on the sound of a car coming down my gravel road that led to my house.

Quinn was here.

Mate is coming.

My animal had been particularly talkative since the healer had taken the job in town. He knew that Quinn belonged to us and had been waiting all this time for his fated mate.

And now, the wait was over.

I went outside, standing on my porch while he drove up. He was here.

“This place is great,” he said, getting out of the car. It took everything in me not to run to him. Not to cross the distance and wrap him up in my arms.

“It’s pretty great. You look amazing.” The words slipped from my mouth, but friends said that, right? It was nothing shy of the truth. Quinn looked incredible. His hair was longer than before. Strands of it danced across his forehead as the wind blew around us. His dark hair had always set off those crystal-blue eyes, but they seemed brighter. His skin more tan. His smile reached his eyes.

He wore jeans and a T-shirt and flip-flops. Some things never changed. I had a similar outfit on, minus the flip-flops, since I’d stepped out of the house barefoot.

“You look great, too.” He bounded up the steps and enveloped me in the hug I’d been waiting for all this time. He’d always been a great hugger, but this was different, more. His tangerine and vanilla scent overpowered my senses and took me by surprise. Of course, I knew his scent, but it was stronger now, taking over everything and threatening to make me melt.

“Something smells amazing,” he said.

I pulled back, thinking he’d somehow reached into my head and was reading my thoughts. Instead, he ticked his chin toward the house, and I realized he meant the food. “Soup, salad, and bread. Your favorite meal,” I murmured and put some distance between us to keep from leaning forward and kissing him.

“You cooked for me. Thank you.” He wrapped his arm around my shoulder as we walked inside, making remarks about getting his stuff from the car later and how starving he was.

He talked about his trip and all the mishaps while we ate. We quickly fell into a natural flow. No matter how much time had passed, it was always the same. Like it had only been days instead of years since we were in the same room.

When we finished, he sat back, patting his belly. “I missed your food, Aster. Damn, that was good.”

My wolf growled low and slow inside me. Quinn liked our food. We had the honor of feeding him something we made ourselves.

Omega is fed and happy.

My animal really needed to get a grip.

“How about a quick tour of Oliver Creek? We could stop by the clinic? I have the keys. Picked them up for you this morning along with copies of the lease agreement.”

Quinn stood. “That sounds great. Can we park somewhere and walk? I need some movement after all that amazing food and days of driving.”

“Of course. Oliver Creek was made to be strolled through.”

I drove us into town and parked near The Lot. It was the first thing I showed him then Table for Two, the peanut-butter-and-jelly place, and all the other unique places the town had to offer.

“And here’s your clinic.”

He stopped, a smile blossoming on those full lips, eyes twinkling. Gods, I wanted to put that expression on his face as much as possible. “Come in with me?” he asked. “I’m a little nervous.”

I would’ve gone with him anywhere.

I unlocked the door and waved him ahead of me. Once inside, Quinn noted how well the place was laid out. How everything he needed was there, and how nice it was. He wanted to redecorate and change a few things but nothing that needed to be rushed. He would get to that eventually.

We finished up with a stroll through the park, but he yawned when we paused to admire the metal sculpture. “Why don’t we go to bed. I’m exhausted.”

My stomach flopped.

He's talking about us going to separate beds and sleeping alone. Calm the hell down, Aster.

I cleared my throat. "Yeah. Let's get home. You've had a long day."

He started back toward the car but tossed a glance over his shoulder. "Home sounds fantastic."

"Oh, I forgot to tell you," I said as he got into my car. "I... I took the liberty of making you a website and sharing it on the Oliver Creek social media pages. I hope you don't mind."

He paused, the seat belt halfway across his body. "Is that why I've been getting texts asking when I was going to open the clinic?"

"I suppose."

"Quinn." He reached over and put his hand on my biceps. His touch shook me to the core. I wanted more of him. All of him. "I can't tell you how I appreciate everything you did to make this happen."

"You're welcome."

The funny thing was, what I'd done to help him was the least of what I would do for him. Given the chance, I would turn the world upside down for this omega.

Chapter Six

Quinn

I was up before the sun, ready to take charge of my new office. It had been a few weeks or so since the previous healer left, and even if there were fewer shifters than at my last job, they were still going to need some boots on the ground as soon as possible. And since Aster had his own work to do, I didn't see any reason to linger at home by myself.

Besides. My fingers were itching to get to work. My healer squirrel wanted to take care of people and he didn't care what kind of animals they might be. He just drew his life force from helping others. I grabbed several pairs of washed and folded scrubs to take with me to work. Although I didn't usually travel in them, I did find them the most comfortable and practical things to wear while tending to my patients. And I liked that I could get them in all colors. I wasn't much of a patterns guy, but I did like a variety of shades that reflected my mood.

I decided to order more so I wouldn't have to wash them more than once a week. A nice benefit of my previous job had been the pack laundry service. For a reasonable fee, an enterprising pair of omegas would pick up my clothes, wash, dry, neatly fold, and return them to me. I wasn't living on pack lands anymore, and I wasn't about to ask Aster to do it. So, if I could manage to handle my personal things on the one day a week I'd decided to take off, that would make life a lot easier.

But I would survive with what I had for now. And I was currently wearing a pair of ripped jeans and a T-shirt that had seen better days. I was still going to take my time with doing most of the remodeling I wanted, but the waiting-area walls were a dull beige, and I wanted my patients to find a cheerier color when they came in.

I shared breakfast with Aster and made plans to get together in the afternoon for some shopping. I wasn't the best cook in the world, but he'd always cooked for me, and it was about time I repaid the favor. I only hoped those in the other pack who said I'd done well learning were right.

But that would be later on. For now, I needed to find the paint and supplies I needed, and I thought I recalled seeing a hardware store somewhere on the main street. Most people would probably think that the town was small, but compared to the pack lands where commerce wasn't a thing, I thought it seemed lively and interesting. Aster had shown me a variety of interesting restaurants and other shops, and I looked forward to patronizing them all over time. To bringing Aster to them.

I found the hardware store and made my purchases, selecting a soft green for the walls and a bright white for the ceiling and trim of the waiting area. Excited about the project, about putting a stamp of my own on the business, I carried it back to the clinic and got to work. The furnishings were in good shape, but I wasn't sure if they were all included in the deal and would need to make sure. It seemed likely that the previous healer would have taken whatever he wanted with him, but I definitely wanted to be sure before I made any decisions. The more time I spent there, the more ideas I got about what I might like to change.

I no sooner had the drop cloth down than the phone rang on the reception desk. I hadn't realized it was still connected, but Aster had made so many arrangements for me, I suppose I shouldn't have been surprised.

“Hello?”

“Hi, is this the new healer?” The voice was young, too young to be making a call to a healer unless it was a prank. Still, I didn't want to assume.

“Yes, this is Quinn. How can I help you?”

“My papa is having a baby. Can you come?”

And so it began. “I can if you know your address. Or some other way I can find you?”

“I know my address.” His confidence was inspiring, and helpful. He gave me the information, and I set aside my project and got out my phone to input the address in GPS. I'd gotten to know the feature very well on my journey to Oliver Creek, but apparently this town had streets Google Earth or whoever had not yet mapped. I ended up having to stop and ask for help at a gas station on the outskirts of town. Fortunately, the woman behind the counter was able to get me back on track and I was on my way.

The family I sought lived a few miles outside of town on a farm, and when I pulled up in the driveway, I spotted a little boy sitting on the porch. My point of contact was glad to invite me in and introduce me to his omega papa who was indeed quite pregnant and in the process of baking cookies.

“Welcome.” He wiped his floury hands on the apron tied over his baby bump and came over to see me. “I'm Eliot, and I

see you've met Benny." But despite his friendliness, he looked confused, and I didn't blame him. "What can we do for you?"

"I'm Quinn, the new healer and..." Behind his papa, Ben was making big gestures that I took to mean "please don't tell I called you." Even not knowing the whole story, I decided to play along. "And I believe you're possibly one of my patients?"

"Oh, very glad to meet you. Do you make a lot of house calls?"

I shrugged. "Yes, I think I will, but I was just passing by and wanted to introduce myself and let you you know that if you need anything, the office number is unchanged from the previous healer."

"That is so kind of you." He beamed at me. "Can I offer you a cup of coffee and a cookie or two? Fresh from the oven."

I sat down and had a snack, using the opportunity to find out more about Eliot. His information would be available to me, but this face-to-face would really give me a head start. I stayed a half hour and, while I was still trying to figure out how to talk to Eliot about Benny's call, the little boy blurted out the whole story to his papa.

The omega made it a teaching moment, never chastised him, just explained when it was right to call for help and when not. Apparently, his papa had been having pre-labor pains and Benny had overheard his dads talking about whether that meant the baby was coming soon.

I returned to the office to find Aster waiting outside holding a bouquet of flowers to celebrate my start of business. At least, that was what I thought they were for. I was afraid to ask.

Chapter Seven

Aster

Before Quinn left that morning, he had said he wanted to cook dinner. He came home early, and we went together to the next town. The market there was larger than the one in Oliver Creek, and he had something in mind that he wanted to cook.

He had changed. The Quinn I knew didn't cook other than heat and eat things. Plus, he'd never showed any interested in learning. I had always cooked for both of us, while he was the one who had put salve on my injuries.

I continued to be surprised by how he was still Quinn but had clearly evolved.

“What's on the list?” I asked, grabbing the shopping cart.

“Chicken, wine, mushrooms, polenta. A few more things.”

I chuckled. “Who is this Quinn? You're making...chicken marsala, I'm guessing? Last time I saw you, you burned freezer-section taquitos.”

“That was a long time ago, Aster.” I gave him a look. “Okay, not that long ago, but once I was hired into the Crowned Alpha pack, things changed. Everyone in the pack has to take turns helping out with cooking meals since the pack is so huge. They have a book of set recipes—a hundred of them. They go through all hundred and then start over. It became easy to read the recipes and follow along with the others since there were at least ten people cooking at any given

time. The other pack members helped me, taught me, and laughed their asses off at me. Eventually, I got better. Didn't look at the recipes as much." He shrugged as though it wasn't a big deal. "Of course, I managed to avoid cooking too much because of my clinic hours and all the various emergencies, but I tried to do my part."

"Sounds like that part of your life was really good for you," I said, picking up eggs even though they weren't on the list. I added some other staples like bread, bananas, and milk, and he laughed every time I did.

"It was. I learned a lot. Helped heal a lot of people. Delivered so many babies. So. Many. Babies. But by the time you called, I was already feeling like that era of my life was coming to a close. Fate has a way for sure."

I hoped Fate knew how much I needed this omega. I hoped that was in their plan.

We shopped more, Quinn telling me stories from his old pack, when we noticed an older man staring at us. He smiled. "You two are so cute together. It's nice to see a couple in love."

I froze, and so did Quinn. But neither of us said anything.

We didn't correct him.

The man widened his eyes and then whistled as he walked away.

"Um, we need chicken, right? Otherwise, we're only having polenta and wine." I forced a laugh, trying to regain the easy feeling of before.

“Yeah. Chicken. We need chicken. You have wine from the local vineyard, right?”

I nodded. I always kept some.

The rest of the night was awkward at best. Neither of us spoke a lot. In the past, when we were together, there was no shutting us up.

Quinn took the lid off the pot, and the sweet, tangy smell of wine and the savory scent of chicken wafted through the air. It smelled delicious even though it was nowhere near as tantalizing as the pure scent of the omega cooking the dish.

I leaned against the counter, and sighed, taking him in.

He reached for something behind me, his hip brushing mine. His face was only inches away. Those lips that constantly beckoned me only a quick movement from being taken by me. “Sorry, I...” Quinn whispered. His squirrel was reaching for my wolf through the bond.

Or maybe I was imagining it.

We ate mostly in silence. I had put some background music on earlier but, other than that, only the sound of the wind outside kept us company.

“That was incredible,” I said. I’d finished two helpings and was already dreaming about having the leftovers for lunch the next day. “Any chance I can get my hands on that recipe book from the pack?”

Quinn nodded. “It’s funny you should say that. Every pack member gets a copy, and I was told I could keep mine. It’s in my bag. Maybe we could look through it together, later.”

“Sure. I would like that.”

We washed the dishes and cleaned up side by side. Perhaps it was wishful thinking, but it seemed like Quinn was accidentally touching me a lot. He put his hand on the small of my back as he passed me and bumped my elbow while he washed and I dried the pans.

I caught him blushing more than once.

At what, I didn't know.

The words I so desperately needed to say were a boulder in my throat. I needed to tell him, but my brain got in the way. If I made things awkward between us, where would he stay while he was building his business?

The last thing I wanted him to do was leave.

“How about a run? There's plenty of room here. Blow off some steam?” I suggested, not being able to take the tension any longer. Inside, I was dying at the lack of bravery on my part.

“Yeah.” Quinn beamed. “A run sounds fantastic.”

We walked outside. I had never shied away from shucking my clothes in front of him. I'd seen him naked a thousand times.

So, why did now feel so different?

He turned his back to me while taking his clothes off and shifted before I could see anything else.

Was there a chance Quinn was feeling something, too?

The not knowing was killing me.

I shifted and ran after him. He was fast and immediately scrambled up the first tree he came to, making his way through the branches before I could catch up.

I realized then how much I missed him.

I missed us.

And now I had him. Somehow I had to figure out a way to never let him go.

Chapter Eight

Quinn

Running with wolves...what a way to bookend my journey. One of the last things I'd done at my former pack and now one of the first here with Aster. Kind of appropriate, really, since we used to do it together in college quite often. Our school, while not specifically for shifters, had a larger population of us than most and was amazingly right next to a large woodland area.

As we set off in this new area, memories flooded me of those old times. Despite our differences both in size and speed, we'd managed to find a pace that worked for us.

Aster's wolf could run at about twice my speed, but he never left me behind or made me feel as if I was holding him back. Most times, just like back in the pack that night, I raced along tree branches, leaping from one forest giant to the next, while Aster loped along below.

And that was super fun, and my squirrel loved it.

But our favorite was when we dropped down to ride on our favorite wolf's back. Then he could step on the gas and really run. Our claws tangled in the thick fur of his ruff, face tipped up to catch the breeze; it was as if we were one creature, together, with no separation at all.

Incredibly magical.

Would we do that today?

I hoped so.

Setting off through the woods, we fell right into our normal mode of tree/ground. I had spent so many hours sitting in my car crossing the country that I still had kinks, and squirrel form gave me all the moves to work them out. It was weird because you'd never think that one body could help out with what ailed the other, and I had no idea if that worked for anyone else. But it did for me. The trees were tall here, gorgeous and full of handy branches that reached from one tree to the next, making it easy for me to transition with easy little hops, and we had probably been running for an hour or more before I saw Aster come to a stop below and a little ahead of me.

I hoped I knew what that meant...

He tipped his snout up and bobbed his head, sending my squirrel into spasms of delight. I took three steps and dropped, landing in the fur I wanted so much to rub against. The relationships between our animals was not something I fully understood. I didn't know anyone who claimed to be able to. But my squirrel adored his wolf and was never happier than when we were together.

The area was beautiful, the weather perfect, and for the first time in a long time, I could breathe deeply. I truly did not know what might happen here in either my business or personal life, but everything inside me said it was going to be better. And I trusted my gut—it had never let me down yet.

As I drew that breath, inhaled the fresh air, along with it came the sweet scent of the wolf whose fur I clutched. Even after the intervening years, I would recognize him in the dark with my eyes closed by that scent.

Once I was firmly seated, he took off, racing among the trees, fallen leaves crunching under his big paws, the landscape flying by at twice the speed I could do on my own. It was exhilarating, but never for a second did I forget who I clung to. Who I'd missed every day since we parted at the end of college.

The wolf who was my best friend and who had never indicated any interest in being more than that. Was I putting my heart at risk by coming here? It had been a good professional opportunity and the thought of staying with Aster for a while had been the cherry on top. So much so that I hadn't taken any time at all to consider not accepting it.

Pushing aside such negativity, I yanked myself back into the moment, my fur fluttering in the breeze, the moonlight casting everything in such a beautiful glow...everything. And that moment couldn't and didn't go on forever. Altogether too soon, we were making a sweeping turn and heading back to where we'd left our clothes.

When we got back to the house, I didn't say anything about my feelings for him. Friendship was important beyond anything I'd ever felt, but a teeny part of me whispered doubts into my mind, and in the end, I thanked him for his hospitality and we to bed. In the guest room. Alone.

I would either need to say something or get my own place very quickly.

Chapter Nine

Aster

“You know the new healer, right?” my coworker Michael asked as we sat down for our second meeting of the week. Josh needed a vacation. As usual, I suspected, it would be nothing that couldn’t have been expressed in a well-worded email.

My wolf reared up and roared at the question. We didn’t like his tone. Not at all. But I modulated my response. “His name is Quinn. And yes, I know him.”

The meeting started, and I never got to find out the whys of Michael’s inquiry. I listened to Josh voice some concerns over the growing list of clientele. He said we were either going to have to start taking on more projects individually, or he was going to have hire more help. Both, probably.

But, in the meantime, all of us were going to have to take on more work.

Then he announced a company lunch. Said it was good for morale.

It was good for nothing more than a tax write-off for the company and for people to gossip. The employees liked to work from home for a reason—to avoid peopling too much.

And here we were, being forced to people.

That, and I had planned on having lunch with Quinn. It was all I could do to keep my feelings to myself since he moved in. We sat next to each other and watched movies. He

waited for me to come out of my office before eating dinner, claiming that he didn't like to eat alone, which I knew was a lie. Or a little less truth.

I thought he was really wanting to have dinner with me.

Naive thinking on my part.

I was halfway through a double cheeseburger and fries, when the conversation turned back to Quinn. A little was said about Rome and how he had taken off so suddenly, but mostly they were talking about Quinn—gushing over him, actually.

One of the people who worked more in the office than not started, “I took my boy over there just yesterday. The clinic was closed but he answered his cell on the first ring and met me up there. He didn't try to rush us or anything even though it was a few cuts that started healing by the time we got into the office. Rome was great, don't get me wrong, but there's something about Quinn. A gentleness. I'm telling you, Sean was screaming until Quinn sat down in front of him to tend to those cuts on his knees. Even I was calmed by him.”

I listened on as the others agreed and shared their experiences.

Quinn had been super busy since the clinic reopened, and now I saw why.

I wondered what everyone did before there was a clinic and a healer in town.

“He's your friend, right, Aster?” someone asked. I didn't know his name, but I knew he was always earlier to the meetings and most times busier eating bagels than listening.

Didn't blame him much. The bagels were delivered from the next town over, and they were fantastic.

We really needed a bagel shop in Oliver Creek.

"Quinn is my best friend," I said. "We've been friends since middle school."

Michael elbowed me. "He lives with you, too...huh?"

Michael and his questions were really pissing me off now. It wasn't like he was trying to assess whether or not Quinn was with me. The thing was, I didn't want to answer. Yeah, I loved Quinn, but I couldn't exactly come out and tell Michael to back off without admitting that technically Quinn was single.

A fact I hated more and more by the second. "He's living with me while starting up the clinic and couldn't get an apartment last minute."

"So...you two are just friends?"

It was a question, but there was still nothing about his tone that I liked. My wolf didn't like it, either.

A growl ripped from my chest unbidden and unwelcome. Every conversation around us came to a halt.

"Be cool, man. I was just asking. He is new in town and he's not mated. If you are intending to be his mate, you'd better move on him. Everyone is talking about how gorgeous he is. Friends to lovers, huh?"

I cleared my throat. "Sorry about that. Um, yeah, something like that. I...I need to tell him."

I'd despised Michael, and now I was confiding in him.
The tables had certainly turned.

“Do it, soon, man. Do it soon.”

Chapter Ten

Quinn

Work was buzzing along, and although it was not nearly as crazy as at the pack, and I technically could handle everything, I decided to hire someone for the front desk. They could handle scheduling appointments and checking people in, help with recordkeeping, basic things like that.

But while I waited for responses to the ad I'd put on the local bulletin board—apparently the best way to find anyone or anything in Oliver Creek—I was handling it all myself. That was really adding to my business day, and not in a way that made good use of my time.

It didn't help that half my mind was usually locked up in wondering whether there could be more between Aster and me. My squirrel was positive there was, that he was our fated. I'd tried dating others over the years, but he'd been silent and sullen around them, and while he never outright said they needed to go, his opinion was pretty clear. He really had a whole different liveliness when we were in the presence of Aster. A vim I hadn't recognized as gone until it came back.

“Excuse me?” While I was woolgathering, someone had come in and was now standing in my office doorway. “Are you the new healer?”

“What?” I blinked at the man, wondering how deep in thought I had been. I prided myself on being alert to everything that went on around me. It was part of what made me good at my job. But apparently my infatuation was robbing

me of necessary awareness. Infatuation was not nearly a strong enough word. He was ours. “I’m sorry, did you have an appointment?”

“Um, no. I am a reporter with the local paper, and one of my jobs is writing a column about new residents of the area. Do you have a few minutes to speak with me?”

Surprisingly, I did. For the first time all week, the waiting room was empty. “I have a few minutes, but if any patients show up, I will have to go tend them.”

“Understood. Can I have a seat?”

“Right here.” I pointed to the guest chair in front of my desk. “I will give you what time I can.”

“I’m Elmer, and I’d like to welcome you on behalf of the *Oliver Creek Grumble* and all our subscribers.”

“The Oliver Creek what?”

He rolled his eyes. “Grumble. My uncle thought it was a cute name, or actually my aunt did.”

I laughed. “Unique, for sure.”

“Since I don’t want to take up too much of your time, I’ll get started. How did you happen to hear about our town?”

“Well, that’s an easy one.” And a story I was glad to tell. “My oldest friend has told me some wonderful things about Oliver Creek, made it sound like paradise.”

“It kind of is.” He grinned.

“I agree. Even after such a short time, but to continue, Aster—”

“I know Aster,” he said. “Great guy.”

I studied him for more than what those words said. Was he interested in Aster?

“But I interrupted you.” He chuckled. “You were saying?”

I shook off my questions and focused. “Oh, right. I was saying that Aster sent me a message about the opening, and since my contract at my previous posting was coming to an end, it was a good time to make a change.”

He asked me a bit about the pack, and I made it a point not to say a word against them. Overall, they were a pretty good group, and my eyes still teared up when talking about my farewell party.

“If they were so nice, what made you want to leave?”

I considered. “I think it was just what I mentioned. Time. And while I loved my patients there, they can hire just about anyone they want. And Oliver Creek needed me. Or at least I think you all do. I guess the idea of being a ‘small town doc’ is appealing. Not that I am what the humans call an official doctor.”

He looked up from where he’d been typing notes in his phone. “A healer is every bit as good as a doctor and, to a shifter, much better.”

“Thank you.” I gave a slight head bow in acknowledgment of his kind words. “I hope to always learn more and become a better servant to those who rely upon me.”

We talked for a while longer, but it quickly went from an interview to a friendly chat. He recommended some places to

run, told me about the local characters, and generally welcomed me to town. I'd made a new friend.

But when he left, I recognized that my worries, while groundless where Elmer was concerned, were valid in general. If I waited for Aster to say he wanted me, I might be waiting a long time. I had to state my case, tell him how I felt, and let him tell me whether he agreed that we were fated mates.

Or not.

I'd been a coward long enough. As a physician, I'd advise anyone who came to me for counseling—something that happened in my office more often than I'd like to admit—that they should not hide their feelings. Worst case, the other party would say they did not share the interest, and the one asking could move forward and make a life without futile hopes.

Please don't let mine be futile.

Chapter Eleven

Aster

Between Michael's advice over lunch and the connection between Quinn and me when we took a run, I couldn't deny or delay any longer.

I had to tell him.

A feeling down deep in my gut told me our friendship would never be ruined, but if there was a chance we could be more, then I had to know.

Quinn had taken my car to work that day since I had parked mine behind his and he was in a rush. I felt better with him in my car since it was more reliable, and it felt good that he knew what was mine was his. He didn't even have to ask. He'd simply grabbed the keys in the morning and took off.

Now, I was counting the minutes and seconds until he got home, even though I had no idea when he would walk through the door. His schedule wasn't set in stone. He had lots of walk-ins. One night, he didn't come in until midnight. He'd admonished me for staying up and waiting for him.

I huffed a laugh, thinking about it.

He didn't know that I'd waited almost my whole life for him. To hold him. To have him in my arms every morning when I woke up. To know that he was mine and to share love with him.

I'd wait another decade or a century if he only promised to be mine.

Moving to the kitchen, I wiped down the counters again and checked that the shepherd's pie in the oven was not burning. The cheese was melted on top and the edges were crispy, so I turned the dial to the keep-warm setting.

And resumed my waiting.

Minutes turned into an hour, and I decided to give up standing in the kitchen, craning my neck and bending my ear to every light and noise outside. It was clearly a late night for him. I knew that I could text and he would answer me unless he was dealing with in an emergency, but doing that, I was afraid, would tip him off that something was going on.

Something tumultuous was going on inside me.

Ready to burst.

With a groan, I made my way to my office. I had just began typing when I heard the sound of wheels on the gravel.

Quinn was home.

He was here.

It was time to tell him everything.

My stomach turned as I thought about the possible consequences, but it had to be done. I couldn't take the not knowing for one more second.

"Aster?" he called out.

"I'm here," I answered coming down the hall.

"Hey, I'm sorry I'm late. But I had to fix a dislocated shoulder. I'd never done that before. I watched Dad do it, but..."

The light in his eyes drew me in, and next thing I knew I had him wrapped up in my embrace. “I’m so proud of you.”

Maybe it was the moment or his excitement, but we stayed that way, holding each other for longer than I’d ever remembered us doing before. I kept my hips at a distance, knowing even a brush would reveal my intentions before I even muttered a word.

His heartbeat sped up as his chest pressed against mine. His hands splayed on my back, and his breaths were in my ear.

If I could’ve pulled back a bit and kissed him, this would’ve been a perfect moment.

“Um.” Quinn cleared his throat. “Dinner’s ready? I’m starving.”

Hearing his statement, my alpha instincts kicked in, overwhelming any other need or want. “I kept it warm for you. Sit down. You’ve had a long day.”

Quinn stepped out to wash up and change to comfortable clothes while I took dinner out and retrieved the salad and the garlic bread.

The only thing that wasn’t ready was me.

For this night.

To tell my mate how I felt about him. That I loved him. That I was in love with him and everything he was.

“You’re really quiet tonight. I’m doing all the talking,” Quinn said after eating two plates of my food.

“I don’t think you really want to hear about my coding. Do you?”

He cracked up. “Not really. But...is something on your mind? You seem a bit preoccupied.”

My heart came out of my chest and flopped onto the floor, or, at least, that’s what it felt like. “There’s actually something I wanted to talk to you about.”

In true Quinn form, he gave me all his attention, going so far as to push his plate back and put down his fork. “Sounds serious, Aster.”

“It is.” I blew out a long breath. “I’ve had something on my mind for a long time, and it feels wrong to keep it from you. It’s killing me, actually.”

Quinn reached across the table and took my hand in his. His touch ignited me, fueling me on, wanting to tell him everything. “Aster, you know you can tell me anything.”

“I’m in love with you,” I blurted, and once the train was on the tracks, there was no stopping it. “I’m in love with you, and I have been since we were in high school, and I wanted to know if there was a chance that you loved me, too.”

I knew my mistake when Quinn began to cry.

This was it.

My worst nightmare.

I had this perfect friendship and had sliced it in half.

Chapter Twelve

Quinn

In the end, he told me first.

And, not going to lie, it felt good. Felt fantastic, in fact. Which explained not one whit the tears streaking down my face than the sheer joy at learning my fated mate felt about me the way I did about him. My fears, hesitation, and lack of willingness to say anything all these years had cost us time, but we certainly could not go back, and there would be no more loneliness. From the moment we expressed those thoughts, that was clear.

And my squirrel was on board and then some. He didn't understand why we'd waited. Why we'd moved to opposite sides of the country from one another because that was not what mates did.

We'd known one another so long, been friends all that time, and really solidified that relationship. I'd have called him my oldest and best friend. Had, many times. But at some point in all that, I had come to the realization that we were one another's fated mates.

But neither of us had said a word about it, instead just bopping along through our high school and college years and then as if that wasn't bad enough, we hugged and parted ways then hardly ever spoke. If I were honest, I'd have to admit that on my part, it might have been pain avoidance. As long as my alpha was not showing any interest in me beyond friendship,

every message back and forth was a study in pain and pleasure.

But now?

Years of both of us fearing messing up a good thing by attempting a better thing were over.

“Quinn?” He patted my shoulder anxiously. “Don’t cry. You don’t have to love me, too. We can go back to being friends. It’s good. It’s enough. It will have to be.”

His words brought out a fresh flood of tears, and my throat was so tight I struggled to force the words I had to say from the cracked open wall of my chest. And the harder I tried, the worse the emotional storm became.

Aster’s worry grew, his expression tight and tense, and I had to make him feel better quickly. Especially since what I had to say, if I could manage to say it, was guaranteed to wipe that expression from his face.

“A-aster, I love you, too. And I have for as long as I can remember.”

“Really?” He swiped at my tears and kissed the spots he’d wiped. “Do you mean it?”

“So much and more than so much.” I was becoming borderline unintelligible but didn’t care. I tipped my face up and welcomed his lips landing on mine in a definitive closing of the deal. He loved me. I loved him.

Shifters were known to meet, recognize fated status, and leap straight into bed and life with one another. I didn’t know a single person who grew up with their fated, were best friends

for decades, knew that they were in love with them, and just drifted without saying a word.

What did that say about us?

I had no idea, nor did I care particularly what anyone might say about it because my mate was stripping me of my clothing, kissing every inch he bared, and whispering things I'd only heard him say in my fantasies until now. His scent wrapped around me even before I managed to get my hands moving to undress him as well.

Part of me wanted to make this last forever, the moment we finally came together as mates, but as he took my hand and led me to his bedroom, my heart was hammering loud enough it could probably be heard in town by my patients.

"I can't wait," he growled, pressing me down onto the bed and dropping to his knees between mine. "I have to taste you, have to suck you, to lick you, to drink you down before I... well make us one."

We were already one, as far as I was concerned, but I had no problem with his mouth closing around my cock and his palm cradling my balls. So while I didn't answer, I did not protest, merely stroked his hair, marveling at its softness while he did everything he promised and more until my cry rang out across the room and my cum poured into his throat.

"Mate," he growled, rising to wipe the back of his hand across his mouth. "Mine."

"Yours," I agreed. "Always yours."

Aster, my mate, my alpha, eased me up to lie on the bed then came over me and lowered his face to mine. We kissed

long and sweet, his lips everything I'd dreamed of, his tongue exploring my mouth with ease. A hint of salt from my cum remained, teasing me with a reminder of what he'd done, what he'd do next.

Easing my knees to my chest, he helped me wrap my arms around them and kissed each kneecap. "Hold them there, mate, while I see if you're ready for me."

More than ready, but who was I to deny him the pleasure of finding out. Or me. Aster reached down and found my slick, growling again, and I shivered in response. "You're ready," he asserted.

"Yes. I need..."

But I didn't need to finish because he had replaced his fingers with the thick, rounded head of his cock, breaching my hole and drawing a groan from deep inside me. He was almost too big but just perfect at the same time. Filling every inch of me with every inch of him, I swooned. Then revived as he began to move, driving deep inside me.

In and out, faster and faster, he thrust and retreated while I held on and murmured encouragement, told him how good he made me feel, and when he poured his cum into my hole, and his knot grew, I tipped my head to the side, waiting for the sharp piercing of his fangs.

Binding us together, making us one, confirming what we both knew to be true and leaving a mark that anyone could see. Stronger than a wedding ring and irremovable.

"I love you," I cried.

He lifted his head, teeth red with my blood. “And I love you, omega mine.”

Chapter Thirteen

Aster

I refused to open my eyes. Flat-out refused. I wanted to soak in this moment. Have it seep into my pores and brand myself with it.

I had Quinn in my arms. Every inch of the back of his body was flush against the front of mine. His head rested on my biceps. One of my legs was wedged between his. That perfect, firm ass rested right against my cock, and it was awake and ready for more of my omega.

Gods he was my omega now. My mate. His little squirrel belonged to my big bad wolf. We would hold him and protect him and cherish him as long as he let us.

“I know you’re awake,” Quinn said, laughing while nestling farther into my embrace.

“Be careful, omega mine. Unless you want round three, I would stop squirming like that.”

In seconds, he was on top of me, holding my wrists down and kissing my neck. “Maybe I want round...I think it’s four. Four? Maybe five. You were insatiable last night.”

He sat up, straddling me. “Really? I don’t think it was me begging for more at the crack of dawn. Was it? Was it me? Nope. Don’t think so, alpha.”

One word had rocked my world. “Say it again, Quinn.”

“Say what? That you begged for my...”

“No.” I grabbed his hips. “You know what I want to hear, omega.”

He moved his pelvis. “Oh. You are wanting me to call you alpha. Is that what you want to hear?”

I chuckled. Gods, how things could change in a matter of moments. Or overnight. “Less teasing and more love but yes. I want to hear it as much as possible.”

One side of his mouth rose in a smile. “How about this? I’m feeling like we might need that next round.”

I pulled him down for a kiss and then growled in his ear, “Ride me, omega.”

And he did, until he collapsed after we came together. I caught him—carried him to the bathroom where we got clean.

“You have to get to work. I hope I didn’t make you late,” I commented while raising the carafe of the coffee maker a few minutes later.

“Aster, it’s Saturday. I want to enjoy a leisurely cup. Where’s your head?”

I turned and caught him up in my arms. Despite the incredible night we’d had, I thought the bubble would pop at any minute and he would realize that our friendship was more important or he wanted to go back.

And going back with Quinn wasn’t an option anymore. I’d tasted him. Been inside him. Watched as he called my name in the peak of climax.

There was no going back for me—ever.

“Go sit down. I’ll bring it to you.”

“Not until you tell me what’s going on in that head of yours,” he said and grabbed my ass with both hands. “I know you, Aster.”

I kissed his temple and then the other one. “You do. You are my best friend.”

He stared into my eyes. “Your best friend, yes. Is that what you’re afraid of? I smell the fear coming off you, alpha.”

I blew out a breath. The only secret I’d ever kept from him was that I was in love with him. Big one, I knew, but he knew me by heart. “I’m afraid you will regret this and want to be only friends again.”

He rested his head against my chest. “That’s what’s going on? And here I was thinking that most couples have to get to know each other, but you and I already do. You’ve seen me at my worst, my best. You’ve seen all my failures and successes. There is no one in the world I’d want to spend my life with but you, Aster.”

I kissed him long and hard before lifting him, setting him on the counter. I stood in between his legs and pulled him close. “I love you, Quinn. I always have.”

“And I love you, Aster. I’m not going anywhere and after last night, there’s no way in hell you’re ever going to friend zone me.”

I threw my head back and laughed. “Me? Not a chance. Last night and this morning were incredible. I wish I had told you years ago.”

“I wish I had told you on prom night,” he admitted, reaching for my coffee since I had gotten distracted.

“We have each other now. That’s what’s important.”

He nodded. We touched foreheads and breathed each other in. I smelled like him now and my scent was buried in his skin. “Can I admit one more thing?” he asked.

“Anything. From now on, we tell each other everything.”

He took a long breath. “This morning, I was lying in bed, and you know what I wished?”

“Tell me.”

“I wished that at least one of those times we made love last night that you put a babe inside me. I don’t want to waste another minute with you, Aster. I want it all. The family. Coming home to you every night. Waking up with you every morning. I want it all.”

“Do you mean it?”

He kissed me gently. “Every damned word.”

Chapter Fourteen

Quinn

When we finally got out of bed after the first night of the rest of our lives, and after we had coffee and kissed a whole lot more, we set out to make breakfast for each other because, as my alpha said, “We burned a lot of energy last night, and I hope we’re going to burn a whole lot more.”

Once we’d decided to cook, we went to town. Scrambling eggs, frying bacon until the edges curled up and the smoky scent tickled our nostrils, making toast and topping it with a scraping of real butter. He even had some jam from a fruit stand here in town.

“Alpha, have you really known about us since high school?” I knew that I had, but I loved hearing him say it, too.

“Yes, and aren’t we something to have waited so long?” He divided the mountain of yellow fluffy eggs between two plates and then put some extra on mine. “How many strips of bacon?”

“We fried twelve.” It was all that were left in the package, or we’d have made more. “Six each.”

“No, you can have more.” The alpha wanted to feed me. My squirrel was so happy inside me at this. “I only need three.”

“No way. I can’t eat that many. We’ll share equally.” I forked six slices on each plate. “And we have toast and coffee. What a feast.”

Sitting at the table, we didn't talk a lot, just ate and enjoyed the moment before standing to clear everything away together. We moved like people who had one another's rhythm memorized. As, of course, we had, once, and it warmed my heart to know that while some very important things had changed, others had not. He washed, I rinsed, and nobody put anything away until it air-dried in the dish drainer.

When he voiced his fear that I might prefer friendship to being mates, I had realized something very important. I put my hand over his soapy one and patted, sending bubbles into the air. "You are my friend, you know."

His gaze came up to mine, wariness evident. "Yes."

"And I meant it when I said I'd never friend zone you, but it occurs to me that when we talk about being friends or mates or lovers that those things don't have to be exclusive."

He narrowed his gaze. "What are you saying?"

"That you aren't one of those things to me. You are my best friend, the one I always have fun with and think of when I want to talk about something happening to me. Good or bad. I know I haven't been doing that in the past few years, but I always think of you and want to share with you."

"You can every day from now on," he said, stroking my fingers.

"And my squirrel chants 'mate' at me every time I think of you, so there's that."

"There is that."

"Then it comes down to that last part." I licked my lips.

“Lovers?” He lifted our linked hands out of the soapy water and turned me in to his body. “Are you saying we can be friends, mates, and lovers?”

“Unless you disagree?” I rested my forehead on his. “I mean, maybe I’m greedy.”

Aster kissed me, taking time to make sure he missed no part of my lips with his before answering. “If you’re greedy, I’m twice as much. I just don’t understand why I didn’t think that way before. It’s perfect. The happiest couples are always friends as well. On some level, I have noticed that, just not really processed it. And of course, we are fateds, mates destined for one another all our lives, even before we realized it.”

“And lovers?”

“I think our actions speak for themselves.” He kissed me again then turned away from the sink. “The dishes can wait. There’s something more important to do.”

“What?” I still clung to his hand.

“If we’re going to fit all these parts of our relationship in, we’re going to need to be together as much as possible.” He towed me out of the kitchen.

“I’m all for that, but where are we going?”

“We’re going to need to share a room.”

That shouldn’t have been such a surprise, but I hadn’t really thought about it. He had a room and I had one, but the idea of being together full-time had me beyond excited. “What a great idea, alpha.”

We went to my room right away and filled our arms with clothes and shoes and all the other things that had filled my car as I drove across the country to join my mate. I'd been so afraid to hope that all my dreams could come true.

When we went into the master bedroom, Aster opened one drawer after another, consolidating the contents and making space available for my things. He stepped into the walk-in closet and slid the hangers to one side before rearranging his shoes on the floor to make room for mine. Within a few hours, we had put away all my clothing and sundry items and were looking around for something else to do.

“If we're sharing a room, maybe we should take a nap together?” I suggested.

“Are you tired, omega mine?” Aster asked. “We should lie down and rest.”

“Of course, alpha mine.” I yawned, stretching my jaw. “In our room. Together.”

Chapter Fifteen

Aster

After I stayed up until four in the morning, trying to get a project done and completed it only a few minutes before the sun rose, I'd cuddled up to Quinn in our bed. When I woke, he was already gone to work. Things had been busy at the clinic. It seemed like every week another couple was having a baby.

Sometimes he was up in the middle of the night delivering, and some days he didn't get home until midnight.

It wasn't that Oliver Creek had so many accidents or illnesses, but word had spread across the entire county about Quinn and his bedside manner. Places with their own healers were now flocking to Oliver Creek to be under the care of Quinn.

My omega was just that good.

Everyone was at ease around him.

This morning, I missed him. We had been missing each other this week, and I craved more time with him. So, I decided to pack a lunch and meet him at work. Everyone had to eat, including him. He usually just snacked all day, munching on things here and there like a...well, like a squirrel.

I would have to make him stop and have a meal.

He was dedicated to his job. More than a career for him, it was his passion, and he was born for it.

One day, he would make an incredible father.

I walked into the clinic to find all of the chairs full, but Quinn was nowhere in sight. “He’s back there with someone. Broken arm from the looks of it,” a man said as he scrolled his phone, never looking up at me.

Instead of interrupting him, I took a seat at the desk and answered his phone. It was ringing nonstop, and someone had to do it.

I made appointments for him for an hour, writing them all down on the calendar in front of him.

He’d only been here going on three months, but from looking at the paper in front of me, I could see that a vacation was already in order.

My omega needed a break.

And we kind of needed a honeymoon.

“Who’s...oh hey, Aster. What are you doing here?” Despite the people in the chairs, he came over and sat in my lap, kissing me as though it had been weeks since we last saw each other.

“I came to have lunch with you.”

“What did you br... What is that smell?” he asked and put one hand over his stomach.

“Sandwiches. Chicken salad. Your favorite.”

My omega got off my lap and ran to the bathroom, slamming the door behind him.

“Quinn?” I got up and, once I heard him heaving, there wasn’t a door in the world that could’ve kept me out of there.

“Don’t come in here.”

I entered, ignoring his protests. I got a paper towel from beside the sink and wet it so he could clean himself up. “Are you okay?” I asked, kneeling beside him while he flushed the toilet and slumped beside it.

“It’s been happening for a week now.”

I gasped. “You didn’t tell me?”

“Actually, I did, but then I realized you were asleep. There hasn’t been time, and I thought it was something that I ate. But now, since it’s only at the smell of things, I am thinking it’s something else. I was going to tell you about it tonight, I swear.”

I believed him. There was no lie in his tone. “What is it?” I asked, pulling him into my lap right there on the floor.

“I think I’m pregnant. I’m actually pretty sure. I was going to bring a test home tonight. It’s just been so busy. This town needs two healers, at least.”

I didn’t speak for a full minute. My omega, this man I had pined for, for so long, was having my baby. As I pushed my nose into the area under his earlobe, I knew it immediately.

He smelled sweeter, like he’d been drizzled with honey.

“Aster?” he asked, giggling.

“You smell like honey, omega. You don’t have a test here?”

He shook his head. “Not here. Tonight, okay? This place is for other people getting well and healing. I want to take the test at home. I know that makes you wait, but...”

I pulled him into my arms. “I’ll wait. I’m very good at waiting.”

“Okay. I’m going to take care of the clients in the waiting room and put the Closed sign on the door. Can you wait for me here? Maybe an hour?”

“Anything you want.”

After he cleaned up a bit more and brushed his teeth, he went out and called in his next patient from the waiting room. He kept a hygiene kit here at the clinic.

I plopped down behind the desk and went online to shop for baby clothes. I didn’t need a test to know.

My omega was having our baby.

How in the world I didn’t notice the difference before was beyond me.

I was so caught up that by the time the last patient left, I was still scrolling. “What has you so enthralled, my love?” Quinn locked the door then leaned over my shoulder. “Aster! It’s too soon for that.”

I chuckled. “You think this is the first time I’ve looked, omega mine? This is my guilty pleasure now, looking for all the things for our baby. I have wish lists?”

“You do? I do, too.”

We stared at each other. We had always been so in sync, but now it was uncanny.

“Let’s go home and see for ourselves.”

We didn’t speak on the way. We held hands, and I moved to kiss the back of his neck several times, making him blush.

When we arrived, he went straight into the bathroom and came out, turning the knob on the kitchen timer for two minutes then came and wrapped his arms and legs around me, facing my chest, sitting in my lap.

The alarm went off, startling us both. Quinn sprinted to the bathroom and came back, tears streaming down his face.

No. Gods, no, don't disappoint us like this. “Sweetheart, it's okay...”

“I'm pregnant.”

You are? You have my babe inside you?”

He nodded, more tears coming by the second.

We spent the rest of the day and into the night celebrating.

Quinn and our family were worth the wait.

Chapter Sixteen

Quinn

I'd prayed for this. From the moment we were first together, I'd hoped to become pregnant, but somehow when it happened, I was as surprised as if I'd never thought of it for a moment. Maybe it was just too big and too significant and my mind couldn't take it in.

But whether I could completely wrap my mind around it or not, it was a fact that the pregnancy test gave us the results I wasn't prepared to see. And my body wasn't really saying much, either, with few symptoms yet. When I began to swell, I thought that might change, but for now, I kept repeating it to myself softly when there was nobody else to hear.

A baby. I'd never have guessed how happy that would make me. As a healer, I saw pregnant omegas every day, listened to their concerns, prescribed exercise and a healthy diet as well as medications where needed. Not a lot of those, since I believed natural ways were the best whenever possible, particularly for shifters because we responded better to those sorts of methods.

As the only healer in town, I was going to have to take care of myself, which should be no problem. In theory. As long as the pregnancy had no major blips. I'd dealt with all sorts of problems in other people, of course, and knew how to handle them, but when it was my own body that could become a problem...

I tried not to think about that too much.

My office was coming along, although pregnancy had shut me down on some things I'd wanted to do with the office. Like strip the wallpaper in the bathroom. It was some weird old-fashioned kind that required a semi-toxic agent to take it down, so it would have to be done later.

I really hated that wallpaper. It had giant bloated flowers in shades of orange and yellow and gold all over it, and Aster said Rome, my predecessor, had hated it, too. He'd had it installed, but not on purpose. The contractor had mixed up the item number that Rome had selected and when he returned from a weekend away, he found it a done deal.

An attempt to correct the problem had led to being ghosted by the contractor, along with the 50 percent down he'd paid in advance, and before he could have it redone by someone else, he had left to care for his relatives. I hadn't been in the bathroom on my initial tour, and when I stepped inside for the first time, those flowers had smacked me in the face with their gaudiness. I was pretty sure they'd made at least one pregnant omega lose his cookies as well, although he'd blamed it on a breakfast burrito.

If I was going to have the joy of giving birth to my alpha's babe, then I was going to have to suck it up and deal with the inconveniences, too. Just like I told my patients, I needed to look at the whole picture. The inconveniences were for the short haul, but in a matter of months, the baby would be here, and the joy of that moment and the lifetime to follow would outshine any silly things now.

Like nauseating wallpaper.

On the way to work one Monday, I stopped for muffins at PB&J. They were featuring a muffin with layers of peanut butter and strawberry jam that sounded amazing. The specials were different every day, and I had been stopping there all-too often lately.

Sometimes I tried to talk myself out of it, wanting to keep track of my eating. A book I'd started was all about a very controlled diet, one I tried to follow with varying success, something my alpha supported me in. Speaking of Aster, I pulled out my phone and sent him a quick snapshot of the muffins.

Stop by if you have time? I got extras.

After a pause of a minute or so, I got my reply.

Resting up after my long weekend. How soon will you be at the office?

I'm going to stop at the post office then head right in.

He'd been working all day Saturday and Sunday at the office. Still preferring to work remotely, he had to go in when called upon for a special project—as had occurred this weekend. Of course, he was home at night to sleep, and usually we were apart because of my work, but it had been rough for me to be in the house all day both days after looking forward to being with my mate all week. Still, he'd promised me that next weekend, we'd do something fun to make up for it, so there was that.

The post office was about a block past my clinic, so I headed there right away, wanting to pick up a package I'd received a notice about. Sometimes when I was out on a house

call—yes, I had fallen fully into the idea of being a small-town healer—I missed a delivery, but it was no big deal at all to pop in and pick things up. I rather enjoyed visiting with the postmistress who had lived in Oliver Creek for over fifty years and always had an interesting anecdote to share with me. However, this time, when I got there, a sign on the door said: *Out for Family Emergency. Be Back at Two.*

Worried about what emergency took the postmistress who never missed a day for any reason away, I fished out my key and started back down the sidewalk to open the clinic. It was a particularly beautiful day, the sky deep blue and dotted with puffy white clouds and all the birds singing at the top of their lungs. It almost seemed like a shame to go inside, but if I didn't, there would soon be a line around the block. Maybe Aster and I could go for a walk later on?

When I went inside the office, juggling my bag of muffins, medical bag, and tea, I noticed something was off. Or rather on. A light shone from under the bathroom door. Had I left that light on all weekend?

Pregnancy brain was really kicking in if I did that. Always trying to save energy, and not throw money away as well, I was extra careful when I went home at the end of the day to turn off everything, including most surge suppressors, the copier, and the lights. My dad had always been insistent on things like that, at his clinic way back when I was growing up.

But it could happen to anyone, I supposed, making a mistake, and I couldn't be too hard on myself. With everything I had to do in a day, all the people depending on me, so I left a light on. Worse things happened every day.

Setting down everything I carried, I stretched out my back and started for my office before veering off toward the bathroom to turn off the light. I opened the door and gasped.

“Surprise!” Aster stood inside. “I was hoping I’d have a chance to get in here before you got back from the post office.”

“They were closed.” I turned in a circle taking in the amazing sight. “What did you do?”

He grinned. “I knew you hated that wallpaper so I spent the weekend here changing it out for you. Remember how I got you to show me some patterns you liked a month or so ago?”

“On that website, but I didn’t think you wanted it for this...for anything really.” We’d actually been looking at things for the baby’s nursery when this happened, and I hadn’t paid a lot of attention. But now, I knew he had been. The soft green vines against a gray background were gorgeous. I launched myself at my mate. Or at least I tried to, but he caught me before I could fall over.

“I’ll never get used to this center of gravity thing,” I grumbled before kissing him over and over on the nose, cheeks, lips, mouth, and the side of his neck. “This is beautiful, and you are the best mate on the planet.”

He didn’t argue.

Chapter Seventeen

Aster

Quinn's new word was neutral. It made sense, honestly, since we had chosen not to find out the sex of the baby, but when he said neutral, I thought he meant yellows or mint greens.

He meant neutral as in creams, shades of white, and grays. There were some faded blues and plums, and browns as well, but most of our babe's things were cream. Lots and lots of cream.

Of course, I wouldn't have it any other way. Quinn was happy. He hadn't complained once, mostly because he was his own healer. He took ginger drops to quell the nausea while it lasted and increased certain vitamins in his diet. We had a new book in the kitchen that laid out a diet for pregnancy that promised a healthy baby and healthy papa.

I had learned to cook all kinds of things for him.

"Do we have any more of those black bean sweet potato burgers?" he asked as he folded clothes on the couch. They had already been folded once but on the weekends, he would refold them, cooing over every piece. He was downright adorable when he did that.

I nodded. "I froze about a dozen of them since you plowed through the ones that I made before. You want me to get them out for dinner?"

I was playing with him, of course, but it wasn't until I looked up from my book to see tears welling in his eyes that I knew I had struck a chord.

Crap. Now, I'd done it. "Omega mine, I'm sorry. I was just joking. You ate those burgers slowly and gently and with the best manners I've ever seen someone eat. Oh gods. Look what I've done."

I put the book on the table and moved the clothes basket out of the way to get to him. I bundled him up in my arms at once and whispered all the sweet things he loved to hear. He was extremely sensitive lately. In all ways, but especially emotionally. I never thought of myself as a harsh speaker, but it seemed even my kidding around got to him.

"I know you didn't mean it. I'm feeling all this weight gain, and I'm always starving. How is that even possible?"

"Because you're growing a human inside you, mate. I can't imagine all the systems in your body that have to make that happen. It takes calories. Besides, some of your hungers, I quite like." I leaned back and wiped the tears that had escaped.

He chuckled. "Plowed. Ugh. Never say that word again, please."

Scratching at the back of my head, I chuckled. "Not my best moment." I leaned forward and laid my forehead against Quinn's belly. "Your papa is a mess sometimes, kid." I sighed. While Quinn was having issues of his own, I was dealing with some things inside, things I didn't tell him about.

He had enough with the clinic and the constant barrage of patients, along with being pregnant. The last thing he needed

was me fussing over things.

But it went against our pact not to keep secrets.

“What are you talking about, Aster? You’re not a mess. You’re the best thing that’s ever happened to me.”

I swallowed as prickles ran down my spine and fingered through my chest. “And you are the best thing that’s ever happened to me. I’m...I’m having doubts about being a father, Quinn.”

“And you’ve been holding this in for how long?”

I shrugged, my head still on his belly as his fingers threaded through my hair. “Since you found out you were expecting, omega mine. I’ll get over it. It’s nothing you have to worry about.”

He coaxed me to sit up as he moved a bit so that I could sit behind him. I wrapped one arm around his waist and the other beneath his belly. Holding both of my loves. “You have nothing to worry about, Aster. Nothing. You already take care of me like no one else could.”

“And you take care of me.”

He nodded. “Right. We take care of each other and we will be great papas. I know it.” We lay like that for a few minutes before his stomach ended the silence. “Hungry. Again.”

“That’s okay. I’ll get you some of that pumpkin pie you love and a hot tea. Sound good?”

I was getting up when I brushed his pelvis, revealing another hunger he hadn’t voiced. “And after you eat, we’ll

take care of that, too.”

“Promise,” he asked in a husky voice.

“Promise, mate.”

Chapter Eighteen

Quinn

Aster didn't really believe I was "plowing" through the burgers. And I didn't believe he was accusing me of overeating or eating like a piggy. It wasn't his opinions or judgment that really caused me problems right now. No...it was my own.

As I grew larger, the knowledge and advice I so easily dispensed to others served me not at all. How many omegas had I told to stop calling themselves fat? Obese? How many complained to me about appetites that had them "plowing" through all sorts of foods, some of which they would never have eaten before they were pregnant?

And I sat here on my ivory tower explaining anatomy and reassuring them that everything happening was natural and beautiful, inside, their swelling bellies grew a baby, sometimes more than one, and there were bound to be changes. I had a whole speech that varied according to the shifters involved and what their emotional state was.

Giving the talk usually produced good results, so one morning as I forced my swollen-ankled self to my feet and stumbled into the bathroom—my belly arriving a good five minutes before the rest of me—I decided to give it a try.

"Good morning, Quinn." I studied the pregnant omega in the mirror. "I understand you've been having some issues with feeling unattractive."

“Yes, Healer,” I replied. “That is very much the case. I have a giant belly”—*point to belly*—“swollen ankles and feet, and even my nose is puffing up.”

Leaning in closer, I couldn't decide if that was true or not, but perception is everything.

“I understand you and your mate had a talk?”

I nodded.

“And he told you that he finds you attractive and, in fact, is in awe of your ability to grow this baby for your family?”

I nodded again.

“And you did a good job reassuring him about his doubts regarding upcoming fatherhood?”

The image in the mirror grimaced. “He is the best. He's going to be an amazing and spectacular papa to our baby.”

Studying that reflection, I could see what all my patients did, or at least the ones who had trouble recognizing the beauty of their state. Their mates were mostly like mine and not the problem at all. But for omegas with changing bodies, there was so much more to the mind state than I had ever recognized. Sure, I could speak to them from a place of sympathy, with a healer's knowledge of the processes they underwent to get to this point. I could explain to them how incredible it was that a whole person was forming and growing, a person who when they were born would not only be human but two-natured. Their body would have the ability to change to their animals and back again.

But while I had explained those things and had good results for the most part, I did not have the personal experience

that could create true empathy. The bloated body and tired eyes gazing back at me were so familiar. I'd seen them in my practice every day, and while I wanted with all my heart and soul to help them to feel better when they cried in my office, and had indeed done my best to do so, my best was now better.

When an omega told me that they ached, that they were sad and wept for no reason, that a flower could make joy surge through them. I "knew" that it was part of the process, hormones and other physical factors weighing in, I wasn't able to speak from the place I could now.

If someone said they were so tired of peeing they wanted to just start staying in the bathroom full-time, I got it. Many of them complained that they hadn't seen their cock in weeks or months. Or that they couldn't get comfortable at night. They wanted not to be a burden, but they found themselves leaning on their partners more heavily than they preferred, both figuratively and literally.

What I heard from them were complaints. And as my father demonstrated, I had the words to make them feel better. But thinking back at my training with him and other healers, they were all either omega dads who had been through this themselves or alpha fathers who had helped a partner through it. Their words were more than words.

I lifted my chin and offered a tremulous smile at the face in the mirror. "And now so will mine."

"Mate?" A tap on the door followed. "I hear voices in there. Are you alone?"

Chuckling, I turned away from my therapy session and twisted the doorknob. "No, and I'm glad to say I won't be

alone again.” Flinging my arms around him, I gave him the biggest kiss in recent weeks. “It’s good to be a family, and you’re just about the best part.”

“Just about?” He thrust out his lower lip and pretended to pout.

“You’re awfully cute, but I have a feeling that the person in here”—I patted my belly—“will be even cuter.”

“I can’t argue that.” He bent and kissed my bump. “But I was hoping to lure you into the bedroom so I can show you how cute I think you are.”

“And I can’t argue that.”

Chapter Nineteen

Aster

Quinn was late coming home again. And while that usually wasn't a big deal, tonight it was. It was my birthday.

And I missed my omega.

I'd made a fabulous dinner and even baked a cake for myself. If this was a new relationship and he and I hadn't known each other all our lives, I would easily be okay with Quinn forgetting or not even being aware of when my birthday was.

The thing was, Quinn had always called me on my birthday, or we celebrated in person, just as we did his.

My birthday actually wasn't the issue. I was a big boy. I could put up with anyone forgetting my birthday. After all, for me, it wasn't that important.

Quinn's schedule was the issue.

He was going on being seven months pregnant and working like he was a teenager. He was so popular that his clinic and his schedule remained jam-packed. He'd even started opening the clinic on Saturday mornings to keep caught up.

The changes in him hadn't escaped me. My omega was always tired. He was running on empty, even though his appetite was voracious. I'd noticed his feet were swollen at night.

The night before, I'd run him a bath to help him relax but before he got in the tub, he fell asleep in his work clothes on the couch.

I didn't have the heart to wake him, so I slept on the floor next to him.

Something had to give. I sat in the kitchen, waiting on him. My mate and I needed to talk. It was already after ten.

The night before, it was after eleven.

I couldn't even count the times I'd stayed up until midnight or until the wee hours of the morning, tapping my foot, awaiting the sound of his tires on the driveway.

The leftovers had been put away. My cake was in the fridge, untouched. I was irritated but not because he'd missed my birthday—it was because he wasn't taking care of himself, of both of them.

“Hey, I'm sorry I'm late,” he said as he came in. Dark crescents hung below his eyes, and he'd lost some of his luster. He was doing too much and it was high time I let him know.

“Hey,” I said, not moving. I would've normally gotten up and made him a plate, but he scented like a burger and fries, so I assumed he ate out.

“I'm gonna grab a bottle of water and then go straight to —” He opened the fridge and froze in place. “Oh no.”

I said nothing. My heart beat so loudly that I was sure it was interrupting time or space or something.

“Aster...is it...your birthday cake. I missed your birthday.” Quinn checked his watch as his shoulders slumped.

“It’s not a big deal, Quinn. But if you have a moment, I’d like to talk to you.” My tone gave me away. I was concerned beyond measure about my mate and our babe and their health. Mostly my mate. He was giving everything he had to his patients and our baby.

But, eventually, he would run out.

“Sounds serious.” He came around the table and instead of taking the seat next to me, he opted to sit in my lap. My wolf rumbled with pleasure at having him so near. The only time I got to hold him was in the middle of the night when he was sleeping.

“I’m concerned about you,” I started.

“I’m so sorry I missed your birthday—” he started, but I put a hand up to stop him.

“I already said it’s not about that, mate. You’re exhausted. Remember we had this talk about a month ago? You were going to slow down and cut back your hours? For the rest of the pregnancy?”

He nodded but looked at his belly. I took the opportunity to rub his roundness while pulling him tighter. The things I was going to say to him were out of love. He needed to feel that so neither of us got defensive. A smile formed on his lips. “Instead, I opened up the clinic on Saturdays.”

I shrugged one shoulder. Perhaps this would be an easier conversation than I thought. “You’re not sleeping enough. Sweetheart, look at your feet.”

He huffed out a laugh. “I can’t see them.”

“Well, let me tell you what I see. They are a bit swollen.” I took off his shoes to get a better look while he clung to my shoulders. “They hurt, don’t they?” I asked, rubbing them. He nodded.

“I can’t stop taking patients,” he said, his posture stiffening.

“You are in charge of your life. Period. But I’m going to ask you one question.”

“Shoot.”

“Quinn, if an omega presented with dark circles under their eyes, swollen ankles, hurting feet, and told you they were working twelve to fourteen hours a day, what would you tell them?”

My omega melted into me, laying his face in the crook of my neck. He inhaled deeply before turning and wrapping his arms around my waist. “I would tell them to back off the work. Eat better. Rest. Spend more time with their alpha. Not forget their mate’s birthday.”

“I’m gonna need you to take that advice, my love. Please. If not for yourself, for our babe.”

He nodded against me. “Can we go to bed? I’ll take the morning off, and we’ll figure this out, but I’m so damned tired, Aster. So damned tired.”

“I can do that, sweetheart.”

Chapter Twenty

Quinn

Partial bed rest sucked donkey balls. Big ones. But Aster had come up with a compromise that worked for me and somewhat worked for my patients. They would much rather see me in person, but this way, I was giving myself more of a chance to rest while making sure my business didn't completely go under while I was out.

Everyone understood, of course. And the community had been incredible during my time at home. We'd had deliveries from Table for Two, The Lot, and almost every other place in town. My favorite was the smoothies though. I may or may not have sent my alpha to the smoothie truck at least once a day.

The alarm on my phone beeped, pulling me from my newest Netflix binge-watch. I had some afternoon video appointments. I saw patients in the office mornings then did video calls from home in the afternoons. Honestly, I'd been concerned about the whole video appointment thing. I couldn't see my patients during these calls. Couldn't let my nose pick up some of the symptoms. Couldn't touch their arms or pat their hands, assuring them that everything was going to be okay.

Still, I tried to be as nurturing as I could be through the computer and see the ones in person I felt needed me most. No one had complained. Of course, there were some things I simply couldn't handle at the moment, and so we had referred

the patients to the healer in the next town until I was postpartum and could go back to work full-time.

Something Aster and I needed to talk about.

Once my appointments were done for the day, I made my way to the living room. I gave myself the leeway to get out of bed and go to the living room or for a short walk around the house, but now that I was in the last few weeks, I had cut off my hours at the clinic entirely.

It sucked, but not as much as having something happen to me or this precious babe inside me.

“We’re waiting on the rolls, but then it’s time to eat,” Aster said, already fluffing the pillows on the couch so I was comfortable. I knew he was an amazing best friend and mate but, these last couple of months, he’d treated me like royalty. I felt like his prince. “How’d the appointments go?”

“Good. Speaking of, I was wanting to talk to you about something.”

He nodded once. “Shoot.” Sitting down beside me, he took my feet in his hands and rubbed them. A moan came from my mouth. “Well, that doesn’t sound like you want to talk, omega mine.”

I tucked his suggestion away for another time. “Can we talk about what’s going to happen once I have our babe? I don’t want to put him or her in daycare, but I don’t want to give up my business, either.”

“I’ve been thinking about it a lot.”

“Tell me,” I said.

“Looking over the books, we make plenty of money. The mortgage on this place is paid off. We don’t have many bills. I was wondering if it would be okay if I stayed home with our babe. Be a stay-at-home dad.”

I’d known Aster most of my life, but this time he shocked the hell out of me.

“You want to stay at home with our baby? You’ve put a lot of thought into this, haven’t you?”

My love blushed a bit as though he’d been caught doing something naughty. “I have. I don’t want anyone else raising him or her, and I don’t want to miss a second. Plus, I’d be cooking at home and saving money.”

“What about your career?” I asked.

He sighed. “I could still do some freelancing here and there, but I’m tired of the hours. When I was single, it was fine, but now it takes time away from our family. What are you thinking, Quinn?”

I smiled at him. “I think you will be the best stay-at-home daddy there ever was. Our babe is going to be so lucky to have you.”

“Here I was thinking the same thing about you.”

Once we ate dinner, we watched a movie and cuddled for the rest of the night. Aster read me some chapters from his latest favorite book series, and I couldn’t help but imagine the future. Him reading to our baby. Taking care of them the way he always took care of me.

My alpha was the best thing that had ever happened to me.

Chapter Twenty-One

Aster

“We’re gonna have to practice the wrap for sure,” I said as Quinn and I sat next to each other and flicked through pictures of the Pacific Northwest on my laptop. He had always wanted to visit there and, since we never had a honeymoon, we decided it would be our first vacation as a family. By the time we took it, our little sprout would be almost six months old, give or take.

Hiking with an infant didn’t seem like a good time to me, but watching my mate’s face light up when I talked about it absolutely did. He loved the rain and the big trees, the almost gloomy atmosphere of it all.

I had a list on my phone of all the places I wanted to take him. The restaurants. The sights. The hiking spots. The romantic cabin I’d booked for us.

It was also our first trip together as a couple. We’d taken a few trips together, mostly road trips in college, but this would be our first real romantic and family vacation.

“Don’t worry. By then, we will be pros at carrying around the little guy or lady. Don’t you think?”

I huffed out a laugh. “I’m not planning on letting him or her go unless you need to feed them or they need to be changed.”

Quinn snuggled against my side as I raised my arm to cover his shoulders. The laptop rested on my lap, since his was

nearly nonexistent, which was only right considering there was a human inside his belly. “They will always be warm with their papas.”

He put his feet on the coffee table, but I glanced at them right before he put them back down.

“Ah, omega, look at your feet.”

I put the laptop and all my daydreaming aside and picked up Quinn’s feet after moving away from him a bit. While he had slowed down quite a bit, since this was his last month of the pregnancy, he was still working mornings and it showed.

“They’re not that bad tonight.”

I rubbed circles into the bottoms and gave him a telling look. “Tonight, I’m the healer, and I’m telling you that these ankles and feet are much more swollen than yesterday. You were on your feet today?”

He was supposed to try and sit down as much as possible, but my Quinn was a mover and a shaker, always had been. It simply wasn’t in him to sit and work. He even talked with his hands. He was movement. He was grace.

Sighing, he leaned his head back and moaned before speaking. “That feels so good.”

“Gods, omega. I bet you are achy all over, aren’t you?”

He nodded.

“That’s it. To the bed. Clothes off and no funny business.”

He lifted his head and smiled. “No funny business? You’re telling me to take my clothes off but no funny business? I bet I could get you to change your mind.”

“Come on, now. You always change my mind but...”

Quinn stood, with his hands in mine but, as soon as he reached his full height, his eyes went wider—wider than I’d ever seen them. “Aster,” he said and looked down.

His gray pants were now soaked.

“Quinn? Is this? Your water broke?”

He put his hands on my shoulders. “Yes. Everything is going to be okay. I’m going to shower while you get the bags and put them in the car.”

My heart was beating hard in between my temples.

Gods, how had it gotten there? It was so loud. So damned loud.

“Aster, look at me, alpha.”

My wolf snapped me back to reality and demanded that I knock all of my introspecting off. “I’m here. I’m sorry. It was—a bit of a shock. I’m on it. You shower. I’m packing bags. Let’s do this, omega.”

He laughed hard and loud. “There’s my man. Let’s go have ourselves a baby.”

Chapter Twenty-Two

Quinn

I had a lot of skills as a healer, and I was fairly sure I could instruct my mate enough that he could help me have our baby at home, but it was not going to happen. He was a pretty easygoing alpha for the most part, but in this case, he put his wolfy paw down and held his ground.

“We’re going to the birthing center, and that’s that.”

“I want to have the baby here. In our bed, with just the two of us.” I was whining, and I knew it.

“No.” He continued packing my bag, ignoring my spluttering protests.

Since I had made the mistake of sitting in the chair in our bedroom that I had lost the ability to get out of without assistance two months ago, there wasn’t much I could do besides whine. “I have to pee.”

“Are you sure?” He glanced over from where he was folding a T-shirt and tucking it into my duffle. “Because I kind of like you trapped there where you can’t stop me from getting this done.

My cheeks burned, and my gaze darted away from him. Damn tells. His laughter confirmed that he’d seen the obvious signs of lying. Although, why he’d questioned it in the first place when I peed about every two minutes...ugh. “You’re too dang smart, alpha,” I grumbled.

“I know, right?” His smile lit up the room. “But I’m almost done. Is there anything else you need to take?” He enumerated what he’d put in, and, against my will—trapped in the chair—I listened. Pregnancy brain was not my friend, however, and I lost track about halfway through and couldn’t remember what he’d said at the start of the list.

“You’re really going to make me go, aren’t you?”

“Of course. I have to do my job as an alpha and ensure my omega’s safety.” He waved at the bag. “Anything else?”

“Music is on the phone, you have the baby things... snacks?”

“Right here.” Aster lifted out a plastic bag filled with all my favorite tidbits and treats. “And I have a couple of changes of clothes for you and one for me and all our toiletries.”

We’d paid a visit to the birthing center a few weeks before because they wouldn’t let me make use of it without one of their admitted healers giving me at least one exam. It wasn’t my first trip there. Although most of my clients preferred home births attended by a healer, if there was any level of risk, they had the tools needed to keep both daddy and baby safe. And my suggestion that I examined myself had brought on laughter from the healers there. I’d even joined them in the chuckles because once I said it, I knew how ridiculous it sounded.

But somehow we’d come around again to my saying I wanted to give birth at home. I probably could have gotten assistance from the healer who was backing me up with my patients, but he was very busy partly due to that. My mate felt that added a risk element in itself. He would feel better with

me in the birthing center. Why was I being such a big PITA about it? If one of my patients were in this situation, their mate really wanting them to go to the center, I'd encourage them to do it. It was a lovely place with kind staff and all sorts of amenities.

But I was being stubborn to an extreme degree that I hoped I could blame on hormones because my brain was not in agreement with my arguing mouth.

Aster zipped the bag and carried it out of the room. "I'll put this by the front door." He disappeared down the hallway, and I overheard him saying something to himself about *stubborn omegas who should know better*.

And then, while I sat there like a beached whale or a turtle on its back, unable to do anything but wait for his return, it happened. And when my water soaked through my paternity pants and the chair and probably the floor underneath, everything changed.

"Okay, omega, do you need to—" He stopped in the doorway, jaw hanging open and eyes completely round.

"I need to change before we leave, alpha mine. It's a good twenty minutes to the birthing center and this little one is on the way."

Years later, he'd probably still be teasing me about how I changed my mind when the moment arrived, but for now, there was no joshing. All I had was a completely supportive and loving alpha helping me up, helping me change, and almost carrying me out to the car while insisting that we could clean up the water later or just throw the chair away. He had at least used my T-shirt to wipe up the floor because I insisted.

And then we were driving, and the pains came out of nowhere and fast. Again, as the patient, I learned more that would help me be a better physician, even while everything that could go wrong flashed through my mind.

But when we got to the center, I went right to a birthing stool, and a half hour later, it was done. Nothing tragic or terrifying, just the reassurance that I was surrounded by people who knew what to do in a crisis, had one occurred.

Home births were fine, and I would continue to allow my patients who had no risk factors to choose them, but I could also share this experience.

Chapter Twenty-Three

Aster

Quinn had taught me some things about having a baby and, of course, I'd read all the books, but nothing prepared me for the moment when I held our little one in my arms.

I'd never fallen in love with someone or something instantly, but this little guy...like lightning. My love for him shot through me the moment he cried out, coming out of my omega.

He grunted a bit, and Quinn's eyes flew open. He was so in sync with him already. "My turn. You can't hog him all the time, Aster."

I walked over to the bed from where I had been standing in front of the window, rocking my little one. "Here you go, Papa. Oliver, your papa is going to feed you now."

We decided to name our babe after the town that brought us together. I knew the place was magic when I moved in but now, it was the place that had brought my love to me. And now, it was where our babe was born.

"He eats like a champ," Quinn said. I nodded, as I sat on the bed next to him. Quinn had handled everything like a champ. This was all so natural for him, whereas I felt like I was fumbling around, putting out fires.

"He does. Do you need some water? Something to eat?" I asked. I could change diapers and rock the little guy, but the feeding was all my omega.

“I could use a cup of coffee,” he said, winking at me.

“It’s okay for the baby?” I asked, looking down on our son.

“Yeah. As long as I don’t overdo it. It’s too bad there’s not a sushi place. I would die for a dragon roll right now.”

He wasn’t wrong. Oliver Creek did need a sushi place and a bakery while they were at it. “Coffee I can do. I…”

It was the first time since Quinn had given birth that I even stepped out of the room. It felt like I was abandoning them in some way.

“Um,” I started.

“Alpha mine, look at me.” I did. How could I not? “I’m going to be fine for a few minutes. Your mate needs some coffee, and I think you could use a cup as well. Go on. I know that wolf of yours wants to take care of us.”

Again, he wasn’t wrong. My wolf demanded I fall before anything Quinn wanted.

I got him a vanilla cappuccino and, when I returned to his bedside, he was nursing our babe from the other side. All of Oliver’s grunting had long subsided, and he was pressing his hands into Quinn’s breast, making more milk come forth.

Gods, what had I done to get so damned lucky.

“He’s all full now. Can you take him? Put him in the bassinet?”

I hesitated, not wanting to put the baby anywhere but in my arms.

“Lie with me for a while? I miss your arms around me.”

“Only because you said that, my love. By the way, it’s only been a day since you were in my arms.”

He smiled. He was exhausted. We both were. More than me, of course. “Too long, in my opinion. I spent a lifetime loving you from afar. I’m going to spend the rest of my life loving you from very, very close.”

“I’m going to hold you to that,” I said, gently moving to lie in bed beside him. He curled up into my embrace. “Please do, alpha. Never let me go.”

Epilogue

Quinn

All too soon, my paternity leave was over. I'd gradually eased back into my work with the online visits, but eventually I had to either go back to the clinic and do my job or find another healer to take my place. And as hard as it was to leave my little family behind, Oliver couldn't be in better hands.

Aster had actually not given up his job, finding that when he worked at home full-time and didn't go in at all, he got way more done. Also, he was putting everything he earned right into a college fund for this baby and any others we might have down the line. But I made sure he knew that he could quit at any time if the dual roles became too much.

My first day at the clinic was busy enough that I actually didn't think about Oliver and Aster every minute, just probably every other one. Which was bad enough. I missed them so much, and I was already considering hiring another healer to work with me. For sure, a front desk person. I wanted my work but also my personal life. It was better here than at the pack, but still a very busy job.

When I finally got home, the windows glowed with light, and I hopped eagerly out of the car, anxious to get inside and be with my little family. I caught sight of them in the living room window beside the door, and my heart swelled with love. Aster sat on the couch with Oliver in his lap, and he was reading a book. Oliver probably wasn't getting every word,

but he loved the tone my alpha used when reading to him, and it always resulted, just like now, in coos and giggles.

I paused there, outside, and remembered what going home had been like not so very long ago. It was a place where no lights greeted me, where I only went when I was so tired I couldn't keep my eyes open, and where no scent of delicious food crept out to greet me.

It was a house, but it wasn't a home. Not because it wasn't nice. It was fine and actually newer than this one that we really needed to get painted next year. But it didn't have heart. It didn't have love.

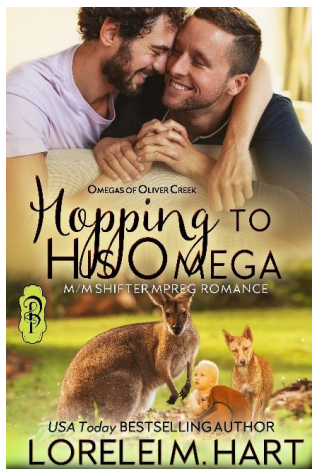
It didn't have Aster and Oliver. They made it home, and it was almost worth leaving just for the sheer pleasure of returning. While I was getting all sentimental, Aster glanced up and spotted me in the glow cast by the porch light. He smiled and held Oliver up, pointing and saying something to him. Oliver stretched out his chubby arms, and I unlocked the door and got inside as quickly as possible. Arriving at the couch, I plopped down beside them and took them both in a big hug.

"I missed you guys."

"We missed you, too, didn't we, Oliver?"

I'd swear the baby nodded, but it was probably just Aster giving him a little bounce. He was already a big fan of being given gentle bounces on our knees. He was a big fan of his daddies. The luckiest daddies in the world. We had him, and we had each other. So much love. Fate had been kind to us, even if it took us a long time to accept the gift.

An Excerpt from Hopping to His Omega



Chapter One

Hunter

Oliver Creek was changing all the time. I hadn't been here terribly long, but long enough to recognize that fact. And I hoped it wouldn't grow too much because I liked it very much as it was. The complete antithesis of the city where my creativity had been stifled by the constant noise and chaos surrounding me.

I came out this way to visit a winery with some friends, a simple day trip for tasting and a tour of the vineyard. It was nice, very nice really. The sky was so blue, white puffy clouds sailing through its expanse. We had lunch at a restaurant that served mostly PB&J sandwiches in the most creative way possible and then, as we were driving out of town, I saw the barn. It was red, just like the ones in so many stories, although faded, and I wanted to explore it. My friends thought I was out of my mind, probably because the dilapidated structure looked, to them at least, as if it was about to fall down into a pile of boards. They did stop the car, but managed to convince me not to get out and wander through the structure.

The For Sale sign had a number on it, and I scribbled it down before we drove away.

Two weeks later, I closed on the sale and moved into the house that was about a fifth the size of the barn. As a metal sculptor, a lot of what I do is noisy, and my property not only had acreage but was surrounded by other agricultural property, and there was nobody to complain about my banging and clanging.

Before there could even be any of that, though, I'd had to make repairs on my new studio, a process that took nearly a year, used up most of my savings, and resulted in the beautiful space where I now created my art. It was not a neat process, but at least from the outside, my red barn with its new hex symbol copied from ancient barnwood I'd bought to patch some spaces, was perfection.

My house needed work, but I spent very little time in it anyway, mostly just sleeping and making scrambled eggs or ham sandwiches. When I got tired of my two recipes, I could hop on my Harley and take the short trip to town. I had the pickup as well, that I used for delivering my pieces or shopping trips, but on a nice day, the bike was the best.

Today, after getting up early and finishing a piece, I drove to the shipping center an hour and a half away with it carefully wrapped and crated for its journey to New Zealand. It would take a long time to get there and cost the Earth, the moon, and about three stars to ship, but the collector didn't mind paying for it, so off it went.

I always had a little sting in my throat and maybe a blinked-back tear when I said goodbye to something that held a part of my heart and soul. But unless I wanted to starve to death or go to work for someone else doing something I liked a whole lot less, I had no choice. Driving back toward Oliver Creek, I daydreamed of the gallery I wanted to build at the front of the barn. I'd been drawing up plans for a long time, but until recently had strong doubts that enough people would come way out here in the country just to visit my little place.

Arriving back in town, I noted that even this late in the afternoon, the sidewalks were far busier than they had been a year or two ago. As the once-empty storefronts filled and some new businesses came into play, more travelers were enticed to visit our small town. Would it be possible that I could display my own work locally?

I loved doing large pieces, and those took time, and were usually sold before I finished them, or sometimes were on commission to start with. But the city gallery had been requesting smaller ones that I could complete much more quickly. They sold them almost as soon as I sent them, and I thought perhaps I could do that from here.

Only a short distance out of town and not far from the winery, maybe I could try? The profit from the piece heading halfway around the world added to my savings would cover most of the renovations I had in mind...

I got to the grocery store shortly before closing time—they do indeed roll up the sidewalks early in this small town, but not quite as early as they used to. With my few perishables in the cooler in the truck bed and the other things in the passenger seat, I saw the smoothie truck and decided to treat myself. They were featuring a mango, pineapple tropical variety I hadn't tried yet, and turned out to be a great choice. Refreshed, I pulled into the small public lot off Main St. and made my way to Table for Two. The place was full, not a table for anyone available, but I placed an order for a steak dinner to go.

“Hunter, how are you?” Wylder, one of the partners came out of the kitchen and spotted me. “It’s been a while.”

“Did you say Hunter?” The chef, and Wylder’s partner in all things, followed him out. “Is that steak for you? I’ll double the mushrooms.”

Small town...they would make everything just the way I loved it because they knew and remembered. “That would be great. How are you guys?”

We chatted a bit. Wylder didn’t spend most of his time at the restaurant, having some other business that I never remembered, but he popped in often and usually with... “Is Phoenix here?”

“He is,” Khai said. “But he’s napping in the office.” Their baby was adorable. “Want a peek?”

“Can I? I’ll be very quiet.”

“Sure.” Wylder flashed a grin at me. “We never say no to a quick, quiet look at our spawn.”

The little guy was curled up in the crib they kept there, a hand-knitted blanket kicked away by his feet, and one fist in his mouth. After we tiptoed out, they took me in the kitchen and poured me a glass of wine. “You’ve got to try this one. Tell me what you think.” Wylder’s eyes held a spark of mischief.

“Ah, okay.” I sipped. “Ohhh, the latest from our friends at the winery. Jett and Macsen were becoming famous for their radical new flavors. Remembering how much he’d enjoyed wines made with things like strawberries and apple as a young man, Jett was recreating them in a way that a more refined palate could appreciate. “Is this nectarine?”

“Wow. Macsen will be impressed.”

Jett's mate had taken over tasting for him when the omega was expecting, and it turned out he had a gift for it.

"It's really good." I inhaled the bouquet. "I hope they didn't sell it all to you. I need to stop by and get a bottle."

"Say hello if you do. They've been so busy lately, we haven't seen either of them."

"Jett isn't making the deliveries to you?"

"Nope. Harvest and grape stomping season for them."

"They don't really stomp...not with their feet." I'd never thought that was a great idea.

"Only for the tourists."

While we talked, Khai was finishing up my meal, and by the time I sipped the last bit of wine, he was done packaging it to go. These visits to town made it possible for me to be fine by myself a good deal of the time. I wasn't a social butterfly, but neither was I a hermit. And after finishing a big project, I needed to see people.

Driving out of town, I noticed that the For Sale sign was no longer in the window of the diner. Hmm...if whoever bought it reopened it as a diner and didn't change it to something else, that would be cool.

Diner food was the best. Not that I'd tell Khai whose steak was making my truck smell like heaven that.

No. He'd never give me double mushrooms and a perfectly rare steak if I did. My dingo would also be disappointed if there wasn't a piece of honey cheesecake in the bag.

Chapter Two

Paedon

This would be a new life. A good one. That's what Neil would've wanted for me. My alpha had always wanted me to pursue my dream of owning a restaurant but, I had been happy to cook for him, spoil him rotten.

It was enough for me.

Until he wasn't there and left me adrift with no real tether. It took an intervention of good friends pointing out that it would break Neil's heart to see me like this before I even tried to live again.

"And right here, sir," the man in the suit across from me said, pointing to the already obvious yellow flag. I didn't miss the flag. I just hadn't signed yet. No one on earth could miss those things. I sighed and signed my name again. The negative thoughts were starting to stream in, but I did the best I could to push them out.

Another thirty minutes of signing, and I was done. I was the proud new owner of a diner in the town of Oliver Creek. The Realtor handed over a large basket with champagne, cheeses, summer sausage, and all kinds of other goodies to congratulate me.

I thanked them and took the basket to my truck. It was brand new, like my life here. America had always been my dream, along with the diner, and, on days like today, it was equally as heavy as it was hopeful, this journey of mine.

Neil had left me more than enough in insurance money to cover what I might need, but I wanted to make a living on my

own.

Maybe he'd known something I didn't when he bought that policy. My alpha had always taken care of me.

It was hard to be alone now, especially in this country and town where I had no friends and family.

Oliver Creek didn't have an escrow office, so all of my paperwork was done in the next town over. While I was there, I stopped by a restaurant supply store and picked up several things that caught my fancy, even though the place I'd purchased was "fully equipped." But some of the cookware and utensils were outdated and in short supply. I also wanted to revamp the decor, but that would come much, much later when I was in the green.

The faster I opened, the better for the bottom line. With my purchases in my truck, I drove to Oliver Creek, enjoying the backcountry roads and expanses of fields and grass. I'd never been a city guy. I craved the small town and intimate population. I came here to find a family in the people of Oliver Creek. And if I knew anything, it was that the way to people's hearts was through their stomachs—preferably stomachs that wanted an American and Aussie mix of foods.

Following GPS directions, I pulled up to a small apartment building and spotted the sign that led to the manager's unit. I had paid my deposits and such online, so the place should've been ready to go.

"Good afternoon," I said when the man opened the door. "I'm still getting used to the time change."

“Hey there! You must be Paedon. The accent gave you away.”

I nodded, returning his smile. “I am. Is my place ready? I was hoping to get moved in tonight. The hotel life isn’t my cup of tea.”

“Absolutely. We inspected it yesterday.” He reached for a brown envelope. “Here is your move-in packet and the keys are inside the envelope. Welcome to Bayside Apartments. I’m Jesse. I’m the owner, maintenance man, and the landscaper, so if you need something, just holler.”

Holler. That was a new word for me.

“Thank you.”

I took the keys and left. Outside, my apartment was only three doors down and close to the laundry room. It would do until I was more secure in the restaurant and felt comfortable buying a home.

Technically, I could’ve bought a house and the restaurant with the money Neil left me, but I didn’t want to spend more than half of it before more money was coming in. And if things didn’t work out, it would be easier to move out of here than sell a house.

The apartment was clean and furnished. I unloaded the few things I had, things I’d brought—sheets and a comforter, basic kitchen needs, and a shower curtain. The rest would have to wait until I settled in a home. I had sold all of our belongings back in Australia, deciding on a fresh start.

Once my things were inside, I decided to take a stroll around the town. Oliver Creek struck me from the first

moment I drove onto the main street. Everything was in walking distance, except for some small businesses on the outskirts. The businesses were well-taken care of and painted in bright colors. The streets had sidewalks and bike lanes, conducive for walkers and for everyone to be active. I heard the sounds of people laughing and others greeting each other with smiles. Couples could be seen in the park, sitting at the benches, sharing kisses or watching their children play.

“Afternoon,” someone said as they passed me. Others nodded or smiled. Such a friendly town.

I had researched the food options before buying, and they were amazing but limited. There was a place for what seemed to be peanut butter and jelly dishes and also some other nut butters—that was a surprise to this Aussie. A smoothie truck and a fine dining restaurant.

But nothing like the diner I intended to open—or reopen. Every small town needed a greasy spoon. They were good for the soul.

Intrigued by the PB&J place, I stopped and ordered a classic on wheat before visiting the grocery store. I got some items for a quick breakfast and some things to keep at the restaurant. Opening that place up would be an almost twenty-four-hour job until it was ready and the menu was perfect.

I stopped in front of a park and decided to spend some time there and enjoy my sandwich.

This was my life now, in this beautiful place.

Thank you, alpha, for taking care of me so well.

About the Authors

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

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