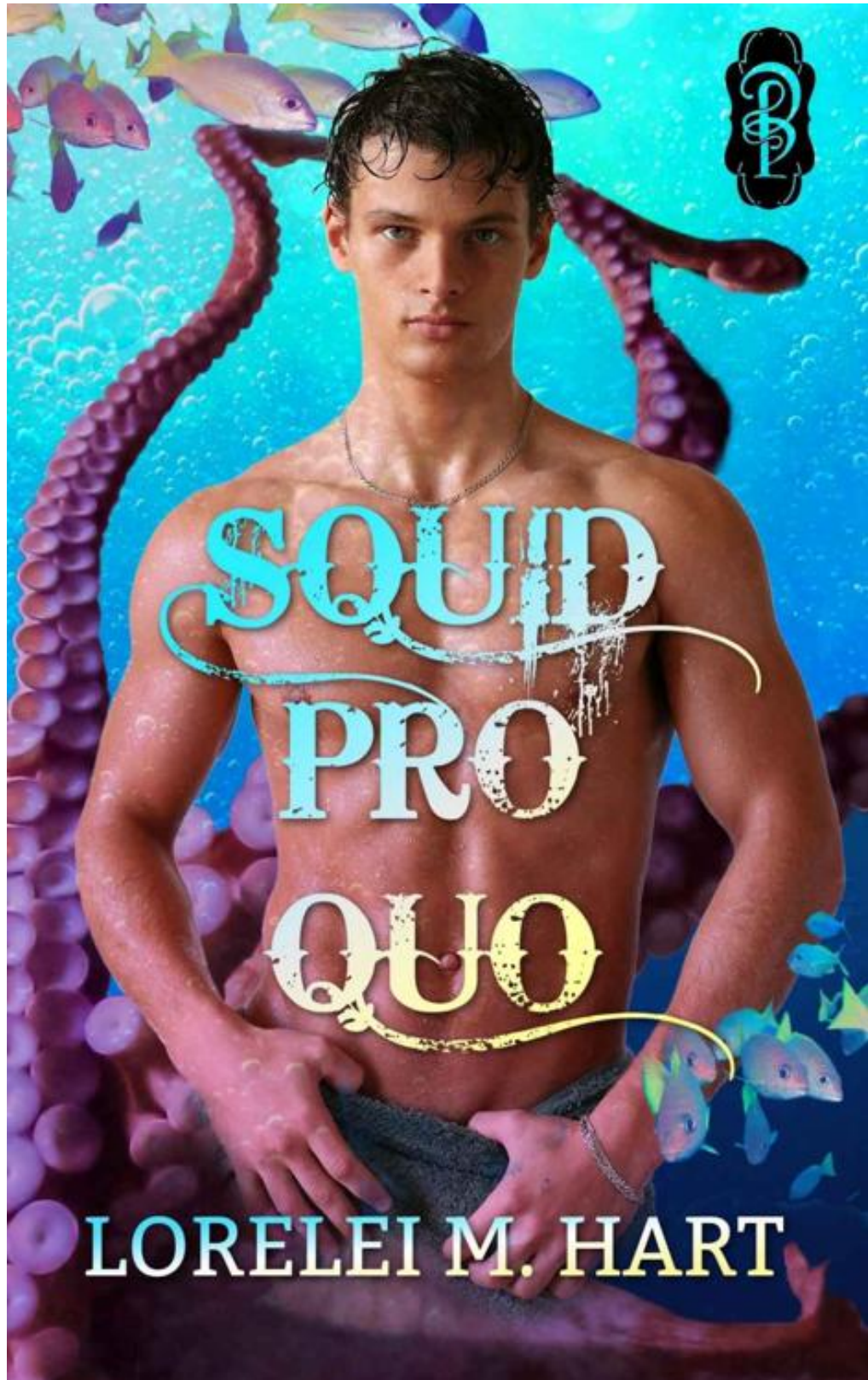




SQUID
PRO
QUO

LORELEI M. HART



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Squid Pro Quo

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Human omega Wade finds more than he ever dreamed possible when he falls in love with octopus shifter Hurley. Eight more things to be exact.

Squid Pro Quo is a sweet with knotty heat M/M romance featuring an alpha squid shifter who spends his days in the ocean and his nights longing for a mate of his own, an omega human lawyer looking for a new beginning, eggs, an aquarium on wheels, some tentacles, true love, fated mates, some legal bologna, and a guaranteed happy ever after. If you love your mpreg sweet enough to give you cavities and your HEAs complete with adorable babies, download your copy today. Squid Quo Pro was originally part of Tentacle Tales, a tentacle-rific anthology that is no longer available.

Chapter One

Wade

“It’s not much, but the rent is cheap, and it’s available right away,” my Realtor, Lisa, said as she put the key in the front door of the small cabin I was considering renting. There weren’t many places in town with availability and the advantage of being not quite in the middle of everything. Not that everything was much. The downtown was only three blocks long.

“The location is great though,” she added, probably so as to not completely dissuade me.

And she was right about the location. The small cabin sat a short distance from the shore and only a short drive to town. It wasn’t the most desirable of locations as far as oceanfront property was concerned. Zoning wouldn’t allow for anything much bigger than what already sat there, but the view was everything.

“And it’s month to month?” I clarified.

“It is, but I don’t expect you’ll be asked to leave anytime soon. The place has been for sale going on two years.” She let out an exacerbadated sigh. “The owners are sure it will one day fetch as much as the places other side of the sound.”

Lisa rolled her eyes, and I didn’t blame her. It was frustrating having clients who didn’t listen to the expert they hired. I knew this all too well from working at my current firm.

The short distance around the sound made a huge difference in everything. Shoreville was a tourist town, had less restrictive zoning regulations, and was close to the highway. Clamsdale, where I was moving, was the opposite. I still chuckled at the very not-creative names the founders of the local towns created.

As a young child, I used to visit here every summer. My grandmother ran a small hair salon in town, and she set up a little play area for me to hang out in while she worked. My fathers' careers both kept them near our home in the city, and the options were paying for daycare or sending me to Grandma's, and Grandma's won.

Or really, I won. They were some of the best memories of my childhood.

“Okay. Here it is.” Lisa swung the door open after fumbling with the lock.

The musty air slammed into me. Not only had no one lived here, no one had been here, which eased my concern about being displaced before I found my forever home. I had a tentative plan of looking for a place to purchase after I completed my first year in the area. That seemed like enough time to be sure that I made the right decision leaving a partner track position at a huge law firm for a tiny firm that mostly did wills and basic contracts and the such.

I hadn't even started my new job, but deep down I was planning to be here forever. The one-year plan was me trying to be logical, not because I necessary thought it was essential.

Clamsdale felt like home. Missing it, even after all these years, was the main reason I approached Mr. Horton instead of

just throwing back a whisky after my stressful day like the partners tended to do.

Mr. Horton had been a friend of my grandma's, and I figured the worst he could say was no. I had a half memory of him complaining to Grandma that he had too much business for one man and figured why not approach him and see if he had meant it, if he truly would consider taking on another attorney to pick up the slack. I'd just gotten out of a less-than-fun consultation with a potential new client and questioned if that was the life I wanted to live. I knew one thing—I didn't want to be like my dads who let work become their everything.

To say I was shocked to learn Mr. Horton was wanting to retire and hoping to bring someone on with the hopes of transitioning them into his role would be a ginormous understatement.

“As you can see, there's not much space, but they designed it well.” She walked me through the living room slash kitchen combo and into the bedroom. “I know this is a unique choice, having the back of the cabin facing the water, but I think you can see why they made it.”

And I could. Huge windows filled the back wall, and from the most logical place for the bed, I'd be able to watch the sun come up over the water.

“The other bedroom is much smaller but has a similar view. Shall we go look at it?”

It took me half a second to realize why she was pushing me to leave. I was mesmerized by the view and more time had probably lapsed than I realized.

“Yes, I’d love that.” The next bedroom could be the size of a refrigerator box and it wouldn’t have swayed my opinion. This was home.

“I’d like to put in an offer,” I blurted out. There was zero chill in my game. I wasn’t even there as a potential buyer, I had no clue how much they were even asking other than too much. But I wanted to buy it. I had enough inheritance money banked to at least put down a generous down payment. And being the new local lawyer would certainly bring in enough money to cover the remaining mortgage. If not, I’d figure something out. Because this was home. Every fiber of my being felt it. So much for my wait-a-year plan.

“The rent is set in stone, I’m afraid. I might be able to get them to agree to a pet,” she offered hopefully.

“I mean to purchase,” I clarified. “That view stole my heart.” Which wasn’t far from the truth.

“Umm, okay. Let’s go back to my office and draw up the paperwork.” I’d clearly caught her off guard, but by the time she sat behind her desk, she’d gone into full-on sales mode.

While it was true that the sale price was more than a home with that size footprint should probably be, it was not nearly as bad as I feared. It wouldn’t be too big of a stretch for me to be able to purchase it.

I submitted a full-price offer and, by the time my new job began, I’d closed, and my home was officially mine. My savings was nonexistent and any repairs that were needed would have to wait, but it was officially mine, and I couldn’t be happier.

After three days of cleaning and painting, the moving van driver called to say they were almost there. It would've been easier and cheaper to buy all new, but many of my furniture pieces had once been my grandma's, and I couldn't bear to part with them.

I stood out on the tiny porch, inhaling the briny air. Something was different about it today. I couldn't pinpoint exactly what, but it was definitely not the same.

Grandma used to say the sea air was a messenger. Was this what she had meant? Was this subtle difference trying to tell me something? If it was, it was something good. I hadn't felt this at peace and calm since long before I went to law school.

I heard the van long before it came into view, the hardpack driveway crackling underneath its wheels. I still had my clothing and such at the motel I'd been staying in as I transitioned to my new job, but that would only take me throwing a couple of suitcases into my car to complete my move.

It was nearly sunset when they pulled away, and I settled in to watch the colors blend in the sky.

"I don't think I'll ever get used to the gorgeousness of this place." I leaned against the corner of the building and just stared in awe at the brilliant display before me.

I decided then and there my first project, after getting the roof repaired, would be to build a small deck or patio back here, possibly adding a hammock. The bathroom sink replacement could wait.

Chapter Two

Hurley

The currents were swift on this sunny day, and I rode the tides in and out, loving the waves that were part of my home. The water was warm on the surface but cooled as I sank down a foot or two. In this form, I was aware of the sensuality of life in a way my human body could never be.

Oh, there were advantages and disadvantages in both. My communication skills while in the ocean were more limited, with verbal abilities suppressed. And I somehow did not have all the skill of others who traveled the seas only as an octopus. My type was a rarity, and the “natural” version wasn’t all that interested in hanging out with me. But that was not a terrible thing. Once I assumed my other form, I could talk until I turned blue, and that option was open to me at any time.

And my family had history on the land and in the sea. It was our heritage, and I was the only one left in this area to inherit that joy. I rode the waves out again as the tide rose higher, but time was not my friend. If I waited too long, it would carry me out far and make it hard for me to get back to land and do what I had put off for as long as I could.

So, I let the next swell lift me onto the beach and, with a quick glance to make sure no one was strolling along picking up shells or running their dog or anything, I shifted quickly into the form whose responsibilities sometimes weighed heavy. I had lingered in the water until the sun sank nearly to the horizon and dusk made it harder for people to be sure of

what they could see. That was why so many traffic accidents occurred at that time of day, or so the state police statisticians claimed. But it worked to my advantage as I quickly trotted up the beach toward the home that had been in my family for over two centuries.

It wasn't big, and it wasn't fancy, but it had been well maintained by me and those who came before. The white paint glowed in the fading light, the dark-green shutters and roof shingles had been replaced just a couple of years ago, and overall, nobody could claim that the owners were neglectful.

They didn't even wonder why I wasn't home on a regular basis, seeming under the impression that I had a job in the city and limited time to enjoy the cottage. I saw no reason to correct them, just maintained a cordial neighborly relationship to those I met in town or who strolled by on the beach. I waved, I smiled, I shared comments on the weather, and all was well.

Or at least all had been until the letters started coming. The first one had been over a year ago.

In order to improve tourist relations, the town council has decided to improve beach access from the highway. The proposed and approved parking lot would lie on the site of your old house. From that location, a convenient staircase will be installed right to the sand. We would like to begin construction within the year, so please contact the township office of development to make arrangements to transfer the property. They will complete the paperwork and issue you a check for a fair value of your house.

That letter, I burned.

The second one was essentially the same with an opening paragraph indicating their certainty that I had not received the first.

The third letter listed some town ordinances I violated, and the fourth told me the penalties for my bad behavior.

The fifth was certified, and I only got it because I happened to be ashore that day. But that one I responded to. Especially because they said if they did not receive a reply, they would assume that the house was abandoned.

Really? My immaculate house with its gleaming windows and cottage garden full of flowers? That abandoned house? Rage had surged, and at first I wanted to march down to the development office or whatever it was and tell them how I really felt. This town was barely big enough to need a mayor and town council—all of whom worked part-time for a minimal salary and had other businesses. How on earth did it need a development office? Probably whoever worked there was also the local florist or something.

But in the end, I decided that being arrested for punching a hole in someone's Ikea desk would not resolve any situation, so I sent a letter—certified.

My house is not for sale. Please cease and desist immediately.

Hoping that had been it, I nonetheless approached my mailbox with trepidation. *Please let there be a letter in there accepting my refusal...or better yet, no letter at all.*

But of course, that was not to be. There were several pieces of mail inside: utility bills, cell phone bill, bank statements, circulars, and, at the bottom, another letter from the town. It wasn't certified; I guessed that once I responded and they knew I was alive, they didn't have to do it that way.

I climbed the three steps to the front porch and sat down with my pile of mail. Setting all the others aside, I tore open the end of the envelope and let the single sheet fall into my lap. I almost didn't need to read it to know what they'd try next; still it stung.

We have attempted to negotiate in good faith, but that failing will be forced to begin eminent domain proceedings. As a law-abiding citizen of Clamsdale, you will wish to avoid such difficulties which will only result in loss of property with perhaps less remuneration.

Sincerely,

Debi Harmony

Town Development Assistant Manager

Sincerely, my ass. I tried to think if I'd ever seen or heard of "Debi Harmony," but nothing came to mind. Probably someone moved here from the city to escape the rat race just to get it started in our town. And Town Development Assistant Manager? As if there were a manager she reported to? Not unless Clamsdale suddenly quadrupled its administration—and the funds it took to have such.

But now they were making serious threats, leaving me with no options.

Time to lawyer up. Too bad they were so expensive.

Chapter Three

Wade

As much as I loved my new home, my job was taking some getting used to. There wasn't much excitement in Clamsdale. Not that I needed excitement, but the boring paperwork that made up 90 percent of my day was not ideal, either.

The one bright side was that because this was pretty much the only law office in a decent driving distance, I got some pretty fascinating calls and emails. People wanting to get their neighbor's dog to the obedience school their dog went to because the dog barked, people who thought their neighbor's new paint color was too bright for the feel of the area. Someone who wanted to know how much it would be to represent them for their seven-dollar parking ticket...because it was the *principal of the thing*. It made the job far less boring, even if those inquiries were ridiculous.

My predecessor had all but stopped coming into the office, aside from the random checking in to see how things were going. He'd been so ready to retire. And really, it wasn't as if he'd left any cases I needed help on. Most everything that had occupied his time was what I considered form babysitting.

It was nearing noon, and I got up and stretched. It was time for my big excitement of the day: going to Mama Jo's for lunch. I grabbed my keys, turned the paper clock that I would hang on the door to twelve thirty, and headed across the street to the tiny cafe.

Bringing my lunch would be easy. I loved a sandwich and an apple as much as the next guy. But heading across the street gave me something to do and helped me stay in view of the locals. Hardly anyone recognized me from my time here years ago, and those who did still thought of me as a young boy. This was good for business.

And, of course, not at all because they made the best cookies on this planet.

“Hello, Wade,” Josephine, Mama Jo’s granddaughter who was close to forty greeted me as I walked in. “Chicken and gravy day.”

It made me smile that even in this short time, they knew me this well.

“I guess you know my order.” I headed to my spot at the counter and took a seat.

There weren’t many people there yet, but that would change. Within a few minutes, the regulars would start pouring in.

I drank my coffee, the coffee Josephine already had down for me, and looked around the small restaurant. There was nothing like this in the city. Even places with regulars didn’t have this homey feeling. Maybe coming here wasn’t all for work like I told myself it was.

I ate my chicken and gravy, chatted with Kyle the barber from next door, and drank more than I probably should’ve of coffee before taking out my wallet to pay and get back to the office.

“No pie?” Josephine asked. “It’s banana cream today.”

And just like that, I was eating pie. I had no appointments for the day, so why not indulge in my favorite pie.

The man pacing in front of my office when I walked out of Mama Jo's was why.

"Sorry," I called before I reached him. "I didn't mean to be late but...they had pie."

"Unless it was banana cream, I'm not forgiving you." The joke felt a bit forced, the man's body language shouting worry.

"It was. Should I grab you a piece? Odds are it will be gone within the hour."

He looked me up and down as if unsure of my intent. "You're the new lawyer?"

I nodded.

"And you want the appointment to go long?"

I couldn't tell if he was accusing me or asking me in good faith, so I answered him.

"No. I was being nice." And not because he was hot, which he very much was. But because I felt bad for keeping him waiting. "Did we have an appointment? I didn't see it if we did, and I'm extra sorry for being late."

"Banana cream pie sorry?" He quirked his eyebrow and, without asking again, I turned around and jogged across the street for his pie. Where did my professionalism go? I had not a freaking clue, but at that moment, I just wanted him to get his pie. One of the things some of the firms I explored working for when I passed my bar straight out said me being an omega was an issue for them. Which was illegal, but I guess they felt

that they could handle a court case, being a law firm and all. Not only was my designation a problem for them because I could get pregnant and need leave but also because I could be mesmerized by a sexy alpha and lose my focus. Fuck them for being right about the second part because I was indeed mesmerized by this man...almost unnaturally so.

I came back with the pie and all but shoved it into his face. "Here. It's the best." And then I unlocked the door for us, well aware that, given the first impression I gave, I would not hire me for even filling out the most basic of forms.

He came in and sat at the seat I indicated.

"What brings you here today?" I said. "I'm Wade, by the way. I'm not sure where my professionalism went. Can I blame being sugared up with pie?"

I could've sworn I heard him grumble, "I know." But when he looked back up at me and away from the to-go container of pie, he acted like he hadn't said anything, and I did the same. He set the pie on the desk, took out an envelope, and handed it to me.

"I don't know what to do to stop this."

I read and reread the papers he gave me. "Was this the only contact you've had with them?"

He shook his head no and told me the story of all the letters and the escalations. There were protocols to doing what they were trying to do to the man, whose name I now knew was Hurley, and they followed none of them. They were playing the bully game to get his land. And I couldn't quite figure out the whys. This was not a tourist town and, from

what I gathered, no one wanted it to be, but this shouted tourist development to me.

“I will start a formal *stop this shit* letter as your lawyer,” I said bluntly. Even if this hadn’t been the most stunning man I’d ever seen, I’d have felt that way. You don’t just try to forcibly take someone’s land in that way. You just don’t.

“Thank you. And ummm...I hate to ask you this, but what if they don’t agree?”

And I had a feeling they wouldn’t. People like that tended to dig their heels in.

“We’ll figure it out,” I assured him.

“I probably have enough money for today, but I don’t imagine I do for much more than a letter.”

“No charge. What they are doing is wrong and sets a bad precedent.” And it really did. A town could easily snag a bunch of oceanfront property with such flimsy reasoning.

“I can do some handyman-type work for you? Or maybe take you out fishing in trade?” he offered, as if not trusting my words.

“Not everything has to be squid pro quo,” I teased.

His eyes went wide.

“I should warn you, I tend to think I’m punny.”

“Oh.” He grabbed his pie. “Thanks for the pie. I need to... work. Yeah, I need to get back to work.”

And out he walked, taking more than just himself with him. I couldn’t quite place it, but things were just not as good with him gone. What a weird day.

Chapter Four

Hurley

I did have money...a little. It was stashed in the bank where the interest was just enough to maintain the house expenses and buy groceries and maybe even a burger at the little place in town that made them magical. Most people who visited were all about the seafood in our coastal town, but I got enough of that when swimming about in my other form.

Sushi, sashimi...were never going to be fresh enough for me. My standards for “freshness” were pretty high.

But back to the money thing. My grandfather had lectured me from an early age to never touch the principle in the account because it had to last...forever. If I never had a family, our direct line would die out and maybe the need to keep that principle forever wouldn't matter, but somehow that idea didn't sit well with me. Also, the family trust that held the funds would make it very hard to get to. Why the property was not in that trust I'd never know.

The new attorney in town, Wade, had shocked me when he offered to send a letter to the township for free. I'd protested and offered handyman skills, the ones I used to have a little money for extras, but he refused and sent a “formal *stop this shit* letter.”

I'd been out at sea for a few days and came back to find that they were at least slowing down on their pursuit of my house. Perhaps Ms. Harmony realized that they didn't have a

leg to stand on, or maybe she was just reassessing her options, but in any case, the ball was in her—in the township’s court.

While I loved being in the ocean and sometimes didn’t come home for a week or more at a time, a part of me enjoyed the comfort of my bed with its pile of quilts made by my ancestors and some of their landlubbing friends. It felt good to snuggle in the cozy warmth, especially on the cold nights of our northern winters. Which was not now, but the comfort factor remained.

With gratitude in my heart, I got up early the next morning and decided to head into town for a few groceries and paper products. The decision was made when I realized I’d run completely out of coffee—the one thing I truly missed while out on the tides. I considered just cruising in for a hot cuppa at the struggling Espresso Stop, but a quick scan of the pantry and freezer showed that I was out of essentially everything, so off I went.

Passing the office of my personal attorney—if having one free letter written allowed me to make such a claim—I was surprised to note that a car was parked out front. Did lawyers really come in at seven in the morning? And would it be a good time for me to stop and thank him for the help?

I cruised around the block twice before parking behind his car. His very nice, *worth ten times what my old rattletrap was worth* car. I’d just pop in and say thanks, if the door was unlocked. If it wasn’t, I’d take it to mean he was busy and/or came in early specifically not to be bothered, then visit another time. Seemed like a good compromise.

But my plans were changed when I approached his entry only to have the door open before I could reach for it. “Well, good morning.” Wade stood there, wearing a white button-down and pressed black trousers. His sleeves were rolled up to the elbows, and he’d paired the dressy outfit with bare feet. Bare feet I found myself staring at until he followed my gaze down and laughed. “I was only coming out looking for the paper. I didn’t expect to see a client, or I’d have put on shoes. Socks at least.”

I wasn’t a foot guy. It wasn’t a kink with me. But something about the fact that he was dressed so much more “lawyerly” than the last time I’d been in made his feet look, well, naked. Okay, they were naked, and they were sexy. Which made my mind go right to what else about him would be sexy naked, and probably everything would be. *Slow down, brain! You’re not going to see him any more naked than this unless you happen to find him sunbathing on the beach in his trunks.* He didn’t look especially tanned, but most people wore sunscreen these days and...yeah. Maybe I could spend more time on the sand than in the ocean in the near future.

“Hurley? Hello?”

My cheeks flamed, and I said the only thing that I could think of to change the subject. “You still have the newspaper delivered? You don’t just read it online?”

He chuckled and walked down to the sidewalk where I’d passed the paper we discussed without even noticing it. “Mr. Horton, my predecessor in this practice did, and I planned to stop it, but when the newsboy came by to get payment, he was

a little guy with freckles and a ball cap and a very efficient notebook where he was keeping track of things.”

“And you couldn’t do it,” I guessed. “If it helps, the online version of the local is really sketchy. I don’t think they have much idea how to set it up, and they have never wanted to be part of one of the conglomerates who do most of that for others like them. You’re smart to get the actual printed version. How else will you possibly know who won the softball game between the Elks and the garden club? Or whether Mrs. Andrews drawing got her the free drawing classes that company in Boston was offering to one lucky artist?”

He glanced at the headline and said, “Or how plans are coming to increase tourism.”

All thoughts of naked attorneys were gone when I heard that. “Is my house mentioned?”

“Want to come in and have a cup of coffee and we can read the article and find out?” He started inside without waiting for an answer because what could it be but yes? “I just made a pot. I have court at the county seat later”—he waved his free hand at a suit coat with a tie, already knotted, laid over the shoulder hung in the hallway—“in case you’re wondering why I’m so formal.”

“You do have shoes somewhere?” I was worried about my house, of course, and wanting to see the article, but his friendly, easy manner helped take the edge off my anxiety. “And socks.”

“Under my desk. Let’s get that coffee and find out what that city woman is up to.”

I couldn't suppress the grin that brought on. "And you're not a city man?"

"I spent a good part of my childhood here, and now I'm back for good. So, striving for local status."

As soon as we got inside, the scent of dark roast tickled my nose. I poured a cup and added half and half and one sugar before taking a seat in front of his desk. He joined me a moment later with his own mug. "If I'd known I was having company, I'd have brought donuts or something."

"I shouldn't be bothering you this early, but truth be told, you're a lifesaver." I held up the mug and took a long sip. "I ran out of coffee and mostly everything somehow and am on my way to the store to buy groceries."

Wade set his mug down and spread the newspaper out. It wasn't much of a paper and only came out twice a week, but they tried to cover as much as they could. I didn't subscribe because I wasn't home all the time and didn't want them piling up, but I donated to their fund for people who couldn't afford to subscribe because I thought it was very important that they stay around. Too many things were disappearing all in the name of big business. "Okay, let's see what it says here. Mmm-hmmm." He read in silence, his eyes flicking back and forth. "Well that's that then."

Wondering why he hadn't read aloud, I reached out. "May I?" And he turned the paper so it was right-side up for me. The article was short, only a few paragraphs and vague. "Well, at least they don't mention my house."

"No, just that the township is working on various plans for increasing tourism and...that's about it."

I leaned back in my seat and cradled the coffee between my hands. “I guess that’s all we have to work with, then. Nothing bad, but nothing good.”

“More coffee?”

“I’m not keeping you from court?” I did want a second cup. “This is very good. You’ll have to tell me what brand you’re buying. It can’t be available here.”

He smiled. “I buy it by the pound at the Espresso Stop. It’s their own blend.”

“That explains it. Their quality is good, but I didn’t realize they sold it by the bag.”

“They don’t. You have to ask, or beg a little. They figure if you have a whole bag, you won’t buy it brewed, but I did their LLC paperwork very cheaply. If you want, I can put in a good word.”

For all my love of the brew, I didn’t buy anything expensive and visited the shop only on rare occasions. Still... “If it’s not trouble, I—”

Just then the desk phone rang, and I stopped talking. “I should go and let you get that.”

“Don’t go. It’s probably a telemarketer worried about my auto warranty.” He lifted the receiver. “Hello?”

I tried not to listen in, but I was sitting right there.

“What do you mean you can’t get out there this week. There’s a storm brewing and my roof needs complete replacement.” He paused, his face stormier than what I’d

noticed in the paper was predicted for later in the week. “A tarp?” He spoke a little more and then hung up, but when he looked at me again, his expression cleared. “Now, what were we discussing?”

“The weather...wait, no coffee. Do you have roof troubles?”

“You could say that. When it rained the other day, I had more rain indoors than outside. I’ve got all my furniture in two rooms, and the roofer was supposed to be there two weeks ago. Now he says it’s going to be longer.”

“That’s Jerry. He is the only roofer in the area, and he might take a teeny bit of advantage of the fact. It is really supposed to be bad in a day or two. You can’t stay in a house that leaks like that.”

“Well, he’s going to send a guy to put a tarp over it, but it is a little crowded with everything piled up.” He sighed. “But it’s a temporary worry, and there are worse things going on in the world. Go ahead and have your coffee while I finish getting dressed for court.” He bent over and pulled on his socks and shoes under the desk then marched in his very nice lace-up leather shoes to the lobby and returned with the tie.

He slid it over his head and pulled on it, but it was all catawampus and uneven. He stood in front of a mirror hung to the side of his desk and fiddled with the knot. “I swear I hate these things. One of the great parts about working in a small town is that I don’t have to dress up most days. But my tie skills are still bad.”

“Let me?” Before I had time to think of the wisdom or he had time to answer, I was standing between him and the

mirror. “My grandfather wore one from time to time and he showed me how to do it because ‘all men need to know how to tie a tie.’”

Letting his hands drop to his sides, he looked at me in bemusement while I undid the knot and retied it in place. “Well I’m probably not a gentleman. Do you wear one often?”

“Myself? Never, not once.”

He leaned to the side to view the mirror. “Well you do great work. Consider us even for the letter. Can you come by whenever I have court? It’s only about once a month.”

“If I’m in town. I, uh, travel a lot. Hey, listen,” I began. “You can’t stay in that house where it rains inside. Why don’t you stay with me for the duration? It won’t be long, and I have an extra room.”

He narrowed his gaze on me where I stood about a foot away from him. “That’s very nice of you, but I can’t impose.”

“You shouldn’t be in the house right now, in case the roof entirely caves in.” He paled at that, but I blustered on. “I personally don’t think the tie is enough repayment for your kindness, and if you insist, you can write another lawyer letter for me sometime. Deal?” I thrust my hand into the narrow space between us and, after a short pause, he shook it.

“Deal. But I have to help in some way while I’m there. How about I buy all the groceries? And coffee?”

“I’ll take that deal.” And try not to focus on the fact that we were still holding hands even though we weren’t shaking anymore. At least, my hand wasn’t. My knees might have been a little bit. “If you’ll add in pie—on banana cream day.”

Chapter Five

Wade

Agreeing to stay at Hurley's was a bad idea on multiple levels. He was technically my client, and I had sent a letter to save the property I was going to be staying at. Was that against the rules? No, but it was not the norm, either.

And then there was the whole *Hurley has taken over most of my thoughts, my naughty nocturnal musings, and my alone time* thing. That was an issue even before the whole staying-together thing. Just thinking about the feel of his hand in mine two hours after he left my office had my cock stirring, which was very not appropriate for a day in the courthouse.

The whole court appearance was ridiculous. My client, Shiloh, ran a stop sign and got a ticket. They deserved the ticket by all accounts, including theirs. But they were adamant they didn't want it on their record in case they wanted to get a commercial license one day.

Was that license in their plans? Nope. Would one ticket for rolling through a stop sign make a difference if they were? Not even a little bit. Did that stop them from insisting on hiring me to right it? Of course it didn't.

Shiloh was counting on the police officer not showing up. But, of course, they did. What else were they going to do in Clamsdale? We were in and out in a half an hour and, shockingly, the judge had the citation dropped. They didn't give a good reason for their decision because there was none. But Shiloh was happy paying me triple the ticket fee for my

appearance, and the officer was pleased because it was their day off and they got per diem. Small-town life was different than what I was used to. That was for sure.

I didn't have any other appointments for the day and opted to go home early so I could grab a few things. It was a good thing I did because a huge chunk of the ceiling had fallen to the floor while I was gone. Hurley had been right on that.

There was no dillying or dallying to be had. I raced through and grabbed what I thought was necessary and got out of there, leaving a message for my roofer on the way. Had there been another game in town, I'd have called them already.

But Hurley offered to help.

Which was true enough, but I wouldn't take advantage of him. I got the distinct impression, however, he would refuse my money, and that was a big-old nope for me.

The coffee shop was empty when I arrived and it didn't take much convincing for them to sell me a few varieties. If I was paying with coffee and food, it was going to be good coffee and food. From there, I went to the grocery store. Hurley had insisted that anything was fine, and when I asked what he had in stock, it was basically nothing.

I loved to cook, and it was easy for me to fill the cart with lots of delicious food, including some locally sourced seafood. I might've gone a bit overboard—as in, I very much did, but it felt good to pull up to his home knowing I was contributing. I might be an omega, but that didn't mean I couldn't pull my fair share.

Hurley was outside cutting firewood when I parked. It would be a lie to say that watching him split wood wasn't right up there as one of the sexiest things I'd ever seen. I understood from a scientific point of view that a lot of breaking those logs up was physics and not brute strength, but still, watching him bring down that ax just did it for me.

Hurley looked up and waved right after the last piece of the log he was working on was split in two. Great. He saw me ogling him.

"I got the groceries," I shouted as I opened the door.

Hurley came over, sweat glistening on his brow, sweat I wanted to wipe away. This was not good. This was very not good. There was a motor inn close enough I could stay there and not be undressing the owner with my eyes.

I popped the trunk.

"I'll grab them." He walked past me and around the car where he looked inside. "Did you invite the town over?"

"No. but I like to cook so..." I shrugged and rushed around to grab some of the bags. "You were right, by the way. Part of my ceiling was not where it belonged when I grabbed my clothes."

He froze. "But you weren't hurt."

"No. It was already down, and I rushed to grab things. Hopefully I got them all."

"I'm fixing your roof," he announced and walked straight to the small home with most of the groceries in hand, groceries that would've taken me at least three trips.

I grabbed the remaining bags and followed him inside. The place was cute. Similar in size to mine. There was something welcoming about it, though, that I couldn't quite place my finger on. His property technically abutted mine, and I imagined that at some point in time, they had been the same parcel of land.

"You don't need to. I called the roofer again." I set the bags down where Hurley had set his.

"And he said?" He didn't even look up, instead taking out the groceries one by one.

"I left a message." I let out a sigh. "Fine. You can fix my roof, but I need to pay you. If not, I'll just feel shitty about taking advantage of you."

His head snapped in my direction. "Fine. But while we are making rules, let me be in charge of bringing home the seafood." He set a package of clams on the counter.

"Something wrong with what I got?" It was superior to anything I'd ever gotten elsewhere, but then again, I wasn't a huge connoisseur, either. I tended to be a chicken-and-beef kind of guy.

"No. I just like fishing."

"Oh, okay."

Thunder cracked.

"I didn't know it was going to rain again." My poor freaking house. "I'm going to grab my things before it's too late."

I was already too late. By the time I came back in with my bag, I looked like a drowned rat. Had the trunk been shut, I'd have left it until later. But it hadn't been, my crushing, or was it lusting, self rushing after my host instead of making sure things were sound.

"You look of the sea." Hurley handed me a towel. "Let me show you to your room and the washer and dryer in case you need them."

"You don't have to do all of this. There's no squid pro quo, remember."

"That's not why I'm doing it, omega." He started to walk. "That's not why I'm doing it."

Chapter Six

Hurley

My beast loves to get out but he can't get caught. My family hadn't survived all these years in this area only for me to have to leave because I couldn't keep my pants on and my tentacles dry.

When I invited Wade to stay with me, I blurted out the invitation before considering any of the possible problems his accepting might cause. He was living in a sieve instead of a house, and the roofer wouldn't likely show up anytime soon. If he considered Wade an outsider, it would be longer than that. Hopefully someone who knew him would remind Jerry of Wade's time growing up here and the fact that his grandmother was a long-time resident. Her whole life, if I wasn't mistaken. And her parents before her.

But even if the reroofing began in a couple of weeks, Clamsdale time, he'd be here for a month for sure. Not that I minded waking up to his smiling face in the morning, not in the slightest. I was a little concerned about keeping things friendly and not making a move he wouldn't welcome. Something that might make him feel as if I'd invited him here with less-than-honorable motives.

But since we'd come to the agreement where I was going to do his roofing, and he insisted on paying me, things felt a little more equal.

My eight-legged side was champing at the bit to have a swim. I rarely went long without a dip, usually one lasting a

couple of days at least, and with Wade staying here, that would be difficult without lying.

Where are you going for several days?

Uhhh...Six Flags?

No, and while many in town assumed I had some sort of job or something that took me away regularly, they didn't ask questions. And I didn't have to lie. Wade would very naturally want to know; not being nosy, just because it's a logical thing to ask. *And I am turning into an octopus for a while. Can I bring you any fresh fish when I come back from swimming?* while truthful would be such a bad idea. I had after all mentioned that I like fishing. The very hot attorney had most likely never heard a thing about this before, and our budding friendship would be at an end while he packed his bags and ran away from the delusional guy who thought he was a creature of the sea.

I understood some other shifters could go quite a while without changing, but that was not the case for me or any of my distant relations. In fact, it didn't take long before fighting the urge translated to physical pain that started small and grew until it made it nearly impossible to function. This had happened to me only once before when I'd traveled some distance from the shore, by bus, and a transport strike stranded me in the middle of the big city, but I did not relish a similar experience.

So, I had to find an opportunity to get my tentacles wet, and soon.

In the early evening, when my housemate was still at his office, meeting a late client, I strolled out the back door and

down the steps, headed for the shore. He'd sent a text to let me know he'd be at least a couple of hours and not to worry. With dusk upon us, it would be that ideal shadowy time when I might be able to get in the water for a little while anyway. The receding tide would turn before too long, so I could ride it out and then back in with nobody the wiser.

To be safe, I headed for the place where a rocky outcrop thrust out into the waves, and I could hide my swim trunks among the boulders, swim, then climb out and dress before returning home. That way, even if Wade got home a little early, he wouldn't be able to see me out the window. An excellent plan.

And one that fell through the minute I started toward the beach just as Wade came around the side of the house. "I forgot my key, and the front door is locked." He looked tired, but great, and despite the fact I'd be answering to my octopus and was even now feeling the first twinges of ignoring my needs, I was really glad to see him.

"Back is open. Why don't you just head on in and take a nice shower"—don't think about him in the shower, naked and even hotter than he looked in the shorts and snug tee he wore around the house in the evening. "I'll be back in a while." Maybe I could just shift behind the rocks, get wet, and climb right out again?

"Going swimming?" It took me a minute to put together how he knew this, but of course, I was wearing swim trunks, had bare feet, and a towel slung over my shoulder. I'd added that at the last minute for extra reality.

“Oh yeah. Just a quick dip. After you’ve had a chance to decompress, when I get back, we can throw some burgers on the grill and eat outside here.”

His grin was wide and white. “I think instead of a shower, I’ll follow your example and have a swim. I could use it.” He was already pulling his shirt over his head as he moved toward the door. “I’ll be out again in two seconds.”

“Sure.”

Something about my tone must have given away my reaction because he stopped and turned around. “Unless you’re meeting someone. I don’t want to be a third wheel if you have plans.”

“No,” I rushed to say, cursing myself for not figuring out a better way to do my shifting duty at another time. “Who would I be meeting? I’d love you to join me.” My forced laugh would have fooled nobody, but I didn’t want him to feel like a third wheel. To feel like I might be dating someone else. Not that I was dating him, of course, or that I ever would be.

Why did he have to be so damn hot?

He hesitated for only a moment before taking me at my word and darting inside the house. It took longer than two seconds, of course, but not that much before he emerged in a pair of aqua trunks that hung low on his hips, giving me a full view of his six-pack abs and trim waist. “Ready?” he asked, but his twinkling eyes told me he knew I’d been staring. “I’ll race you.”

He leaped to the ground, missing the steps entirely, and galloped toward the waves, leaving me to follow. If he looked

good from the front, the back was no worse, and the half hour we spent playing in the surf was the best half hour of my life to date.

Chapter Seven

Wade

Things were going well on my roof, maybe too well. I was starting to like being here with Hurley too much. He made me laugh, appreciated the little things I did, and listened to me vent about things like billing and bad filing systems. It was comfortable and easy.

Not too comfortable in the physical way. I had a raging boner more often than not around him, but he was gentleman enough to pretend not to notice. Or maybe he was gentleman enough not to look there in the first place. In any case, aside from the constant need to readjust myself, it was comfortable being here.

Even my dreams were invaded by all things Hurley. And what dirty dreams they were. At least, most of them. Some of them were just odd. We'd be swimming in the sea together. Only he wasn't human; he was an octopus. I stopped trying to figure that one out, instead enjoying the ones that had me waking with rock-hard erections. They were more fun.

I had all the windows open, taking in the briny scent of the ocean. Hurley had gone to get a tool he left at my place and meant to bring home, and I was cooking dinner. I felt so domestic, and I loved it.

Saturday was normally a day I ran errands. Even if I didn't want anything from the store, I had this need to go out. Or at least, that had always been the way pre-Hurley. Now I preferred staying in.

I tried not to think on it too hard.

The chowder I was making had been my grandmother's recipe, and in many ways it was basic. She always said it was the gifts of the sea that made the dish, and ruining it with too many added flavors should be a crime. As a kid, I didn't understand that. I put ketchup on everything. But as an adult, I got the wisdom of her words.

The crunch of wheels on hardpack signaled that Hurley was home. I put the bread in the oven to warm up and worked on the final touches of the chowder. I wanted everything to be perfect.

"Storm's rolling in." He set his toolbox next to the front door. "Best get these windows shut."

"It looks so nice out." I was used to seeing storms coming for hours, but here they rolled in so quickly, they often caught me off guard. "How do you know?"

He shrugged. "I can taste it in the air."

The timer for the bread went off before I could ask him to clarify what he meant, and by the time all the windows were shut, I had our dinner plated up.

"This was my grandmother's recipe." I set the bowls on the table. "She said the secret was not getting too fussy about things...and bacon. Because all the best dishes begin with bacon."

"It smells amazing." Hurley took his seat across from me, his hair tousled by the wind. "I love chowder."

"It's from your catch. Maybe I could go with you sometime and learn your tricks?" I asked mostly to make small

talk, but also because any time I spent with Hurley was amazing.

I'd already decided that once my place was fixed and he was paid and we no longer had to share a space, I would ask him out on a proper date. I wasn't one of those omegas who thought only alphas could do the courting. It just wasn't the time now. It would lead to awkwardness at best.

"Yeah. We could do that." He didn't sound overly excited about it, but then again, he had been busy fishing this morning, followed by some time working on the roof. He was probably tired.

I watched as he took the first bite, jealous of the spoon as he wrapped his lips around it and closed his eyes.

"This might be the best thing I ever put in my mouth," he said.

I could think of something better I wanted in mine.

"It's the fresh seafood. You're right. It makes a difference." I loved how he puffed out with pride at my compliment.

"I think the chef has a lot to do with it, too." He tore a hunk of bread off and dunked it in the chowder. "Is this homemade, also?"

"It's a cheat. I bought the bread dough from the freezer section, but I've always liked it. It has a nice bite to it."

Hurley pointed to my bowl. "Don't let yours get cold."

I hadn't even missed not eating, so focused on the sexy man in front of me.

We ate and chatted about the progress on the roof. It would be done soon if the shipment that was on back order made it when promised.

“It’s weird to me,” I said. “Having you as a neighbor but needing to drive there. It wasn’t like that where I used to live.”

“I wouldn’t like that...being on top of my neighbors...I mean, having people close enough I could see and hear them...I mean, I like it this way.” He was usually more confident in his words, and I felt like I was missing some hidden meaning in what he was saying.

“I suppose I could walk here.” I reached for a hunk of bread at the same time he did, and his hand brushed against mine, the touch too brief for my liking. “I mean, after I go home.”

The sound of lightning cracking nearby, the house shaking slightly.

“That was close.” Too close in my opinion.

“It’s my favorite weather phenomenon.” Hurley sopped up the last of his chowder with a piece of bread.

“It used to scare me as a kid and I guess in a way it still does.”

“Let me show you how beautiful it can be.” He got up and signaled for me to follow him.

He led me outside onto the tiny porch. The water was coming down steady, but the wind was driving it in the opposite direction, keeping us dry.

“Watch.”

I trusted him; he wouldn't have me there if it wasn't safe. That didn't stop me from throwing myself into his protective hold when the sky lit up only a few seconds later.

"Sorry," I mumbled against his chest, not letting go. "I know it's safe, or you...I..."

He tipped his my chin up with his finger gently. "You jumped to me, not into the house. If that doesn't shout trust, nothing does."

I didn't plan to lean in for a kiss; it just sort of happened, but once my lips brushed his, one kiss became two. He tasted like home, like a heady combination of the sea and warmth and safety, which didn't make sense because those weren't tastes, and yet somehow they were.

His hand reached up to the back of my head, and he held me in place as our kiss deepened, my body pressed firmly against his erection rubbing against mine through our denim. Stupid denim.

We had too many clothes on and, when his hand reached my ass, I took it as a sign to help remedy that, grabbing at the hem of his shirt, needing it off.

He snapped back from me, our bodies no longer touching. "I'm sorry. I can't. I'm sorry."

And into the storm he ran, leaving me on the porch pissed at past Wade for moving too quickly and ruining everything.

Chapter Eight

Hurley

After the night of the storm, I worried that our companionship might change, that Wade would not want to stick around with someone who gave signals then took them back. I'd behaved immaturely, and had regret, but wasn't sure what to do about it now. I should have stopped our kiss before it ever happened, but no, fool that I was, I allowed myself to step over the line.

An alpha should be better than that, but apparently I was not. Octopus shifters usually mated with others of our ilk or something very close, but it wasn't a rule, and even if it was, I wouldn't follow it. With so few around, I'd been very lonely for a very long time. But how would I explain to this human omega that I was something he'd probably never heard of.

And I wasn't one of the more storied versions of shifters. Even if many people didn't know that we existed as more than characters in romance stories, they might be excited to meet someone who could turn into a white wolf, with thick fur and golden eyes. Or a bear. Even maybe a fox with that lush tail.

Even a dolphin...people really loved those guys. I could tell them a thing or two about those bastards. Somehow, humans suffered under the impression that they were cute, cuddly, and kind to all, but my people avoided them like the plague. They liked nothing better than to play games with octopuses like catch or keepaway. And then, when the poor

victim was dizzy and exhausted, they began tenderizing it for a snack in the most brutal way possible.

Cuddly, my ass.

Of course, wolves and bears were far less adorable than they were portrayed as well. How many of those happy readers would truly like to come across one of them while alone in the woods?

We, the octopus people, got a bad rap. Nobody called us adorable, although even the non-shifter variety was more intelligent than almost any other animal, on land or sea. Scientific fact. But nobody ever seemed to want to find one and mate with them. I'd once heard someone call them "slimy." We are not slimy. We are muscular and intelligent and great problem solvers...able to escape from almost any trap.

It's science. Google it.

But to explain this to my houseguest...to tell him that I was very attracted to him and that my octopus was, too? When I didn't know if he even believed in intelligent life besides humans, much less shifters? One of the reasons besides freshness and preference I had told him to let me bring the fish was because if he turned up with an octopus? That wouldn't be something I could accept or forget.

But, he'd been glad enough to let me bring the fish and kept commenting about how fresh it was and tasty.

On that we could agree.

That did not, however, do anything to resolve my issues with the man of my dreams and telling him about myself. I should probably wait until I finished his roof and he was living

at home; but by the hour, the heat between us grew, and finally things came to a head.

Wade came home a bit early one afternoon and found me sitting on the back porch studying the ocean. “It’s warm today, isn’t it?” he said, stopping beside me. “Up for a swim?”

It wouldn’t be our first swim, so I don’t know why I hesitated.

“Hurley? Swim?” He was pulling his shirt off his head as he spoke, and I tried not to stare, rather unsuccessfully. “You know, my father always said it wasn’t safe to swim alone. What if I drown?”

Despite the fact I knew he was joking, alarm surged to my fingertips making them tingle, and I was on my feet before I had a chance to stop myself. “Of course you cannot go alone,” I blurted out. “I’ll change and meet you at the high tide line.”

“I’m glad you don’t want me to drown,” he said, but he was not mocking, just stating.

“Well, you’re not as strong a swimmer as me,” I pointed out, truthfully.

“No, that’s true,” he murmured, his gaze holding mine. “You swim as if you were born in the sea.”

My jaw dropped. What did he know? Or suspect? I went inside to change with my mind in an uproar, and although I decided about halfway through pulling on my trunks that he was simply joking or using an expression, something clicked in my mind.

We couldn’t go on like this forever. I was in an uproar, and I had caught Wade giving me odd looks from time to time,

as if he wondered why I was holding him at a distance. Eventually he'd probably just stop trying to be close to me in any way—decide I was cold and unfeeling.

So, it might not be a fabulous idea, but I was marching down to the surf and watching for an opportunity.

Five minutes later, I was drawing circles in the wet sand with my toe and coming up with great plans to put off the reveal until another time, when Wade came running down the beach to join me. He grabbed my hand as he passed and dragged me with him into the surf. Soon we were laughing and splashing and generally enjoying the afternoon, but the thought of what he needed to know never left my mind. Finally, before my brain exploded, I moved my arms in the treading water position and broached the subject.

“Have you ever heard of shifters?”

“Shifters like...what?” His arms were also moving in the traditional broad half circles, keeping his head above water. “Wait, you mean like in the movies? Where people turn into wolves at the full moon? Werewolves?”

I snorted. “Yes and no. First, wolf shifters are not werewolves, and it doesn't require a full moon for anyone I've ever met. Second, they aren't all wolves.”

“I think I've heard of bears? Or eagles maybe? Wouldn't it be amazing to be able to do that? If it wasn't just old wives' tales, things of legend. Do you think maybe once upon a time they were real?”

I bobbed up on a gathering wave. We were out beyond the surf, right where the water started to swell. “Uh...how do I say this?”

“Wait, are you trying to tell me something? Like...do you know a were—I mean a wolf shifter? You sound like you know a lot about it.”

I considered talking about wolves I knew, but that didn’t seem relevant. Instead, I reached down and dragged off my trunks then brought them above the water and tossed them to him. “Hold these.”

He gaped, and I tried not to chuckle at why he might be thinking I was naked, but before he could ask anything, I dropped underwater and bobbed up—as an octopus.

He splashed backward, his face running through a bunch of expressions from shock to fear to horror...to understanding. Far more quickly than I would have expected, he stopped swimming away and reached out a hand. “It’s not just legend, is it? You...that’s you? Hurley? Just like in my dreams.”

I moved closer and let him touch me, awe in his tone. “You are so smooth.”

We’d already been out here for a while, and I could swim all day and night, but he could not. So after he had a chance to feel me up, I laid a tentacle over his chest and playfully suctioned him. Wade shivered. “Wow, that’s...I like that.”

I shifted back. “Wait until you see what else I can do. But let’s get you to shore. We’re pretty far out.” Much farther than we had been when all this started, thanks to the receding tide. I

stayed beside him all the way back, in case he got tired, but Wade kept right up, and soon we were waist-deep.

Which was when I noticed he no longer had my trunks. We had a lot to talk about, but since the beach was not deserted, he agreed to go get me something to wear.

And he did it as if he hadn't just been groped by an octopus.

Chapter Nine

Wade

Hurley's body held mine against the door as he kissed... no devoured me. I was lost in the sensation of his mouth on mine, if someone had asked me my name, I'd have fumbled. The only thing that mattered was the two of us connecting like this.

Once the secret between us vanished, there was no longer a reason to hold back. Maybe it would've been more of a challenge for me to move past the whole shifter thing if I hadn't already known about it on some level. My dreams, the ones of us swimming together, he in his animal form, made so much more sense now.

But none of that mattered now. All that did was that we wanted each other—needed each other more than our next breath. I understood why he'd kept me in the dark about things. He had no choice. But now that that barrier was gone... it was just him and me, and nothing else mattered.

"Better than I dreamed," I said between breaths, Hurley's forehead pressed against my own. "I wanted this from the day I met you. Please take me—take me completely. I need you... all of you."

My arms were tightly wrapped around him, not risking him being even a centimeter apart from me.

"I'm not the same as you," he said.

I knew this. I'd seen him. We'd discussed it. Why was he bringing it up now unless...unless he meant in other ways.

“Do you not have a cock?” I hated myself for saying it the moment the words fell from my lips. “I mean, I care about you, not body parts, if that's what you are hinting at.”

And great, I was making it worse.

“No, what you feel pressed against you is my very hard dick, one I imagine is much like yours, although I would need to examine things more closely to be sure.” He nipped at my bottom lip playfully. “You know, just to be sure.”

“I suppose, seeing it's for science.” I went to go around him and race off to the bedroom, but as I tried, he scooped me up into his arms.

“I'm not ready to not be touching you.” He started towards the bedroom and once we were inside, he set me down gently on the bed.

“I suppose I need to prove to you, that my cock is the same as yours, now.” Hurley pulled his shirt up and over his head, letting it drop to the floor. He'd been in the ocean up to his waist after I lost his trunks in the water and hadn't emerged until he had on his spares I brought him.

“If you're going to knot me from somewhere underneath your shirt, I can categorically tell you that you are quite a bit larger than me.” My shirt was still on, and I wanted it gone, but tearing my eyes off of him long enough to make that happen wasn't going to occur. The muscles on his chest were like a freaking siren. “You're my siren.”

I licked my lips, wanting to trace his chest with my mouth.

“I promise not to lure you to your death.” He popped open the button of his jeans and slowly lowered the zipper.

“Death by orgasm doesn’t sound so bad about now.” My eyes were glued to his jeans and, as he pushed them down and his cock sprung free, any chance of having a coherent conversation flew out the window.

“I need you in my mouth. Please say you want that, too.” It was a needy beg and I didn’t even care. If it meant I needed to grovel to be able to swallow him down, I was going to get on my hands and knees and do exactly that.

“Let me unwrap you first, omega mine.”

Omega mine. He could’ve asked me to wash the bathroom floor first or take out the garbage, and I’d have said yes.

Omega mine.

This wasn’t just to nut off or to get rid of some sexual tension—I was his and he was mine.

“Yes. Unwrap me, see what’s yours.”

He held out his hands, and I took them, Hurley pulling me to a standing position, his lips slamming into mine once more. There was no slow build to this kiss; it was all passion and desire. I hadn’t even noticed he had my pants open and they were falling down until the cool air hit my ass. This was no sweet *let’s save the paper for next Christmas* reveal, this was *rip that paper and get what’s inside now*, and I fucking loved it.

I hated that we had to break our kiss to get my shirt off. I needed to wear button-down shirts from now on. I'd have put it on my mental list to remember had my brain been working well enough to file it away for later.

It was not.

"I'm unwrapped," I said before the shirt hit the floor or bed or I didn't even know where he tossed it. All that I could see, feel, scent, was Hurley. He was all that mattered. "Please. I need a taste."

"Whatever my omega mine desires." He went in for another kiss, but I wasn't willing to wait long enough for even a peck. I needed his cock in my mouth, and now.

I dropped to my knees with zero preamble and licked the precum from his tip. It was salty, just like the sea, and I wanted more...no, I wanted all of it. Would his cum be as delicious? I officially made it my mission to find out.

I grabbed onto his thighs, needing him to stay put while I worshiped him with my tongue, my lips, my mouth. Starting with a swirl around the tip, one that was rewarded with my name being whispered from his lips, I licked his shaft, loving the feel of his hardness against my tongue, knowing that I was the reason for its current state.

"You taste so good," I praised, releasing one of his thighs so my hand could help with the pleasure I was determined to bring him. "I hope you fit."

Before he could answer, I brought him in as far as I could, sucking deeply as I eased him out. It took four trips, but I

managed to get him all of the way to the back of my throat, ending with a swallow.

His hand came to my head, weaving fingers through my hair and, as I released him from my mouth on the next trip along his cock, I cried out, “Yes, control me, use my mouth, fuck me.”

It was so not like me to be bossy while naked. I had enough of that in the courtroom, but there was something about us together that had my dirty mind and mouth running.

I didn't have to clarify; he took control, holding my head as his hips bucked in and out of me. His other hand reached around and found my slick entrance, teasing it and then entering it as I swallowed around Hurley's length.

He fucked me from both ends, my body floating in a haze of passion fueled bliss and his fingers opened me, his hips bucked into me, he tweaked my nipples, and wrapped his hand around my cock and began to jerk me.

Not once had I stopped to do the math and see that what was happening to me was impossible. Nobody has that many hands. Only it was possible, and when his balls tightened up and he came down my throat, I orgasmed harder than I ever had in my entire life.

I finally understood the whole “seeing stars” thing and I wanted more.

Chapter Ten

Hurley

I could do a partial shift, something I hadn't mentioned to Wade before now. It was better demonstrated, and as we lay entwined after our first mutual orgasm, I also didn't tell him that I didn't need any recovery time—but was willing to be patient and let him have his.

I could fuck him now, but it would be much better if he was hard and flying right along with me. For now, I took the opportunity to study his body, something I had been trying not to do since we met—when it seemed rude. There was nothing rude about studying the body of my lover, and he was that now.

Mate.

Claim.

Mark.

My octopus was mostly a silent fellow, unlike the animals of other shifters, or so I had been given to understand. He'd been quietly urging me to move on this omega the whole time, but not in words so much as feelings. He preferred not to use human words even in my mind, so having him speak in this way was truly unusual.

Give him a little time. Humans are not like us, I told him. We'll have to be patient.

Silence, but that was what I expected. And it was fine. I returned my attention to Wade, stroking his chest with my

fingertips, teasing his nipples into peaks. His eyes were closed, but a groan emerged from between his lips, and his hips bucked, drawing my gaze to his already rock-hard cock.

“Omega, I thought humans needed a rest period.” I actually had a little experience in the past that showed me that, not that I’d mention it right now. Not when we were so much more intimate than I’d been with anyone else ever. “But you appear ready for a second round.”

He peered at me from half-closed lids. “Second, third...I think the readiness is in response to the company.”

I tried not to let that go to my head. “Then let’s see what else we can get up to.” I bent and closed my fist around his cock, my lips around the head. His groan vibrated all the way down his body to my mouth.

His fingers buried themselves in my hair. And tugged. I shuddered. “Alpha, please, I want you inside me. I can’t wait any longer.”

I chuckled and gave a hard suck, loving the taste of him, exploring his cock with my tongue. He pulled again, but I didn’t stop right away, instead reaching to cup his balls and check his slick to see if he was as ready as I thought.

He was.

Sucking for a bit longer, I teased us both before releasing him and twining one tentacle around the dick I’d freed. The suction cups fastened on, squeezing and almost releasing with each flex of my arm.

I moved between his legs and pressed them to his chest to expose his hole, slipping the tip of another tentacle inside and

using the suction again, hearing his moans with pleasure of my own. My cock was, as I'd told him, ordinary, if not on the small side, but I was taking him as high and far as I could before burying it into him.

Wade writhed under me, muttering words I could not understand. I was only partially shifted, but it gave me a few extra arms, and all that went with them. I withdrew the arm from his hole and replaced it with my cock, covering his nipples with the cups on two of my limbs and fastening them on.

He shrieked, and I plunged into his slick, waiting hole, so slick, so tight, and everything I'd thought he might be and more. "Omega mine," I breathed, "you are paradise."

Wade whimpered, shuddering and shivering under the multiple parts of my body guaranteed to bring pleasure. I had such flexibility in this partial shift that I could find every erogenous zone on him and give it attention, driving him higher and higher. His sac was the next thing I circled with an arm but handled gently. He was jerking so hard now, I feared he'd come right away, and I wanted to take our time, to enjoy one another, to come with him, and I was using everything I had not to come like a young man with his first lover.

Stopping, buried balls-deep, I spoke softly to him, soothing, calming, trying to bring him down, just a little, but he was having none of it, tightening his internal muscles around me and milking me of another few droplets of precum. "Omega, shh, we have all night."

"I don't want all night," he gritted out. "I want your knot now!" And despite my slowing down, he spurted his cum all

over the suction-cupped limb encasing his cock. I'm only human, or at least half of me is, and when that hot fluid poured over me, I didn't need to move to react. I followed him into coming, my balls tightening and releasing their load deep into his hot ass, filling him and making him, at least partially mine.

My knot swelled, and I gathered him close and rolled to the side where we held one another, panting and sweating, wordless. Never before had I felt anything like this, and I knew without a doubt that my octopus was right. He was the one destined for me, and me for him, and I only hoped he felt the same.

I'd been attracted to him from the first, but this was so much more than that. He felt perfect in my arms. Warm and human and trusting, and my knot bound us together in that aftermath that only alphas and omegas shared. Magical and surpassing ordinary sex. My octopus, ready to wait a bit for marking, although there were probably some red, circular marks on many parts of his body. Those would fade.

Would he be willing to stay with me forever? Humans, so far as I knew, did not mate in the same way we did. They married and divorced and walked away.

If he did that, I'd never survive it.

"Mmm," he moaned as my knot shrank and my cock came free from him. "Don't go."

"I'm not going anywhere, omega mine," I told him. "Not unless you ask me to."

"I won't do that," he said, and I didn't want to ask if he meant right this minute or forever. I'd take what I could get

and be grateful for now. With that in mind, I shifted him against me, spooning him with just one extra limb to hold him tight. And we fell asleep. Or at least I did, thanking the gods for this night and this man. I would have preferred to stay awake and just enjoy our togetherness, but I was worn out and weak. So, rest it was.

While my octopus hummed in happiness.

Chapter Eleven

Wade

Walking up in Hurley's arms thwarted my initial fear as I was pulled from my slumber; none of this had been a dream. Hurley was mine, and I was his and—yeah, he had a bunch of extra body parts when it came to naked fun. All of it had happened, the way he pleased my body as I sucked him off, the way he was able to tease every single erogenous zone I had, including some I didn't know about, the way he had me coming completely undone beneath him.

"It's real." I curled into him. "All of this is real."

He pressed a kiss to the top of my head. "Yes, my love. It was real. No regrets now that the sun is casting its light?"

"Only that I didn't tell you about my feelings earlier," I admitted. "It's Sunday."

"Am I supposed to know the importance of that?" he asked cautiously.

"I don't have to go to work today, which means we can —"

"Pancakes." He sat right up. "I know how to make pancakes, and they are delicious."

"Or?" I chuckled, climbing out of bed. "Or we can go take a shower together. But you know... whatever floats your boat." I made sure to shake my ass a little as I padded off to the bathroom, not at all surprised when he beat me there, setting up the shower for us.

Unlike last night which was all need and desire, our shower was more about taking care of each other. We took turns washing each other's hair and bodies, teased about some of the hickies his tentacles had left on my chest, and laughed at silly things. In some ways, it was more intimate than when he filled my hole and had me screaming his name.

"Now for the pancakes?" he asked, his board shorts hanging low on his hips, distracting me from his words.

"Umm, yeah. Sure." I pulled my bottom lip in with my teeth.

His rich laughter filled the air, and he kissed my cheek sweetly before heading off to cook our breakfast. I joined him right away and fried up the rest of the bacon because...bacon. And it wasn't long before we sat down to enjoy our midmorning meal together.

There was something so domestic and blissful about it. I wanted to bottle up the feeling to keep with me when I had to go back to work in the morning. It was going to be hard to leave him even for that short time, which was the opposite of what I'd felt in past relationships. I'd always wanted to get my own space, and now I dreaded it.

"Why are you looking so sullen suddenly? Did you get a mouthful of baking powder?"

"You are officially the pancake king," I assured him.

"Then what is it that has you fretting? Is it my *differences*?"

"Absolutely not. I was just...the roof is almost done, and I don't like that," I admitted. It would mean going to the place I

once thought of as home.

And the entire time it wasn't that place, or even that property...it was Hurley. He drew me to him even before we met. I didn't understand the whys or hows, but I felt the truth of it deep within me. We were meant to be together.

"Just because the roof will be fixed doesn't mean you need to live there. You could turn it into your office or rent it to someone or raze it to the ground. Nothing in owning the property deems you reside there." I got the impression that the words weren't just things he pulled out of the air. He'd been thinking about this, too.

"And you would want me to—"

"I want you completely. Do I love having you here under my roof and wish you were here always? Absolutely. But I would understand if that's too fast for you despite your longing to do so. Humans...you court and take your time. My kind? We don't do that. We find our mate and they are our one and only for life. There will be no other but you."

Joyful tears filled my eyes, and I got out of my chair and climbed onto his lap, wanting his arms around me. "I feel that, too. My brain says it's not possible. But my heart? My heart knows it to be true."

"That's because it is." He brushed a kiss to the top of my head. "Now let's eat. There's something I've wanted to do with you since that first time we swam together."

We ate the rest of our breakfast, leaving the dishes for later, and headed to the water for a swim. I wasn't sure if I was going to swim with his beast or just partially with his beast,

but I had a feeling it was one of those two options, and I was really excited. I loved that he could truly be himself around me.

“If we go around the bend, yours is a private beach,” he reminded me as he shucked his board shorts. “We can be as naked as we want to be.”

Hurley eyed my now-bulging swim trunks.

“You mean I could take these off and nobody would care?” I ran my finger along the waistband.

“Oh, someone will care all right, omega mine.” He closed the distance between us and brought his lips to my ear. “Me.” His teeth grazing my ear sent a delicious shiver down my spine.

I had those shorts off so fast once we got to his stretch of beach.

The water was warmer than I expected, and it didn't take me long to totally submerge myself in the salty water.

“I want to show you.” Hurley's voice hitched. “But only if you want. If not, I understand. It's a lot to take in. We can just swim and have fun.”

I took his hand in mine and brought it up to my chest. “Right in here—this is where you live—all of you. And I want nothing more than to see you the way you yearn to be while in the water.”

“The fates looked so favorably upon me the day you walked into my life.” A kiss and then he dove under the water, coming up a few feet from me. “This is one of my favorite ways to swim.”

“What do you mean?”

“Come closer, and you’ll see.”

I swam the short distance to my mate; from the waist down, he was no longer human. It was more of a shift than during our lovemaking, but not a full one, given his torso and up was all human. He was gorgeous. Absolutely fucking gorgeous.

“May I?” I asked, indicating his tentacles.

He gave me a nod and I reached below the water, giving the one closest to me a stroke and then reaching to the underside where the suctioning action took place. The feel was different than on land but still familiar.

“You are amazing.” I wrapped my arms around him, his tentacles and arms doing the same, ensconcing me in a bear hug—or was that an octopus hug?

“No, omega mine. You are.”

Chapter Twelve

Hurley

We were having such a great time living under the same roof and being naked more often than not that I almost forgot about how we'd met to start with. A factor that was brought back with a wham when a knock came on the door one day right after I got back from working on the roof. It really was almost done, and even though I'd told him he could stay here, and he seemed pretty likely to do so, I kept finding more things to do to finalize the job.

We didn't get a lot of guests out here, not even door-to-door salesmen. We couldn't even get food delivered, so I had no idea who it could be. Tired, sweaty, and ready for a cold drink, I answered the door. The young man who stood there confirmed my name and shoved a thick envelope into my hand before snapping a picture of me holding it and turning to march back to a Vespa parked by the gate.

"You've been served," he called over his shoulder just as dramatically.

Weird, and it couldn't be good.

I moved back into the house and sank down on the couch, and that's where Wade found me when he got home.

"Hey, alpha, where..." He came into the room and froze. "What's wrong?"

I held out the sheaf of pages, looking straight ahead and unable to meet his gaze. "It's okay. You did your best."

“What do you mean?” He sat down next to me. “Let me look at this.”

I tried to be patient while he read each page, each line, sometimes shaking his head and other times mumbling to himself. “Well, aren’t they adorable,” he said. “They really think we’re stupid, don’t they?”

“We aren’t? I mean...of course, you aren’t, but they sound very sure of themselves. They claim that the township has the right to make decisions for the good of all, and that only my home stands in the way of progress.”

“And they want to build a new road to the beach right through your house. Yeah. I’d feel a little better about their chances if they demonstrated any knowledge of existing laws regarding eminent domain.” He reached into his pocket and pulled out a pen then began circling things on the document. “They have so many things wrong. I would understand if they didn’t know you have an attorney on the case. Many times, government will take advantage of people who don’t know any better, but they received the letter from me.” He circled a paragraph. “They mention it right here on page three.”

After a while, I got up and went to the kitchen to start dinner. Wade was a better cook than me—after all, before him, I ate most of my meals raw and underwater—but I could throw together something simple like pasta. With a huge pot of water heating, I sliced onions and garlic and sauteed them before adding a can of Marzano tomatoes and some oregano and a pinch of sugar. A marinara would be fine. We could have that with salad and—

“Hurley, I have a question.”

I dropped the head of lettuce and hurried into the living room. “Yes?”

“When you responded to the other letter, did you say that you didn’t live in the house? They are saying it’s a rarely used building and that the owner lives out of state in another house.”

“This is my only home.” I was angry. “But even if it wasn’t, why would that mean they could take it away from me? It’s been in my family forever, and the only time I’m not here is when I am out at sea. I’ve told you about that.”

“You also mentioned that people in town think you have a business somewhere else or something, right?”

“Well, yeah, but you know why I haven’t corrected that. What am I supposed to do, put an ad in the paper announcing I am an octopus shifter, and if you don’t find me home, watch for me to ride in on the next high tide?”

“Of course not.” He was scribbling notes all over the margins of the pages. “But the thing is, it wouldn’t matter if you did have another home. This property is yours. How long did you say you’ve owned it? Longer than a century?”

“Well over.” I shifted from foot to foot. “Are you hungry?”

“Hmm?” He focused again on one of the pages and made more notes. “Okay, I think...yeah I can take a break.”

He settled at the table and ate a mountain of pasta and a hill of salad, full of compliments for my cooking. Undeserved, but it did taste pretty good.

“It’s nothing like you make,” I said. “Do you think you can deal with this latest shitstorm?”

“Let’s enjoy our meal, and then I’ll get back to it.”

“Okay, sure.” I didn’t want to ruin his meal, so I served us each a big scoop of vanilla bean ice cream topped with a squirt of chocolate sauce—homemade the night before by Wade—and managed to devour my share before getting too much more anxious about the township’s desire to steal my family home.

I could almost hear my grandfather talking about the responsibility of keeping up family traditions, of caring for the home so many generations had made use of. He would be so ashamed of me if I lost it through naivety. But that was why I had approached Wade, right? At first? This upsetting situation had led to me finding my mate. A mate in whom I had confidence.

Finally, with the dishes done and the extra pasta stowed in the fridge, we returned to the living room where he went over the forms with me and explained what they meant. I tried to understand but was still somewhat confused when he finished.

“I’ve never had to deal with this sort of thing, you know,” I told him. “My only real associations with human law involved getting my driver’s license. And paying property taxes.”

“You’ve been paying them yourself this whole time?”

“Sure.” I nodded. “I go in and pay in the town hall. Someone at the diner was complaining that their mailed checks never got cashed, so I didn’t want to take a chance.”

“And they give you receipts?”

“Yeah, I have them all in my desk.” I jumped up from the couch and went to the desk where I found the envelope where I’d tucked them for years. “Here they are.”

“I think that’s helpful,” he said. “But let me work on this for a while.”

He continued to read and make notes until it got quite late, and I was drowsing beside him on the sofa before he chuckled and tossed the pages on the coffee table.

“What?” I asked, snapping awake. “Do you know what to do?”

“I’ll take care of this,” he said. “Let’s go to bed.”

Chapter Thirteen

Wade

Once I saw the official filing, I knew it was a slam dunk to get Hurley's property secured. They had so many technical errors, it looked like a practice example from law school in which our assignment was to decimate it with corrections. It blew my mind that they paid a lawyer to help with the process.

But even without the technical issues in the paperwork and the legal issues with which they went about trying to get the land, the thing that sealed the deal and made it possible to end it without a huge lawsuit was the fact that I could track the land ownership back to when the town was first settled and, according to the town's charter, it was protected for that reason. I don't know why that provision was put in there. It was odd even for the time, but I was grateful.

If I were to guess, someone in the know about Hurley's family's special gifts did it specifically for them. Whatever the case might be, it was safe. At least safe from the town trying to snag it. It wouldn't protect him if the state decided they needed this land for something, but I didn't see that happening in the future.

It had been a long week of filing paperwork and making a case and, in the end, my appearance at the town council meeting shut it down instantly. I felt like I had walked off the set of an old movie, the way it all played out. None of any of this would've flown in the city.

“Why did you do that?” Debi Harmony was the person whose name was on all the paperwork, but, from what I could tell, she was a pawn of the group more than the spearhead of it all. “The town was trying to do what was right for the residents.”

“Not all of them,” I reminded her.

“We picked a place no one lived. We could’ve gone after your land, you know.” Had it been someone else, I’d have called that a threat.

“No one was living there,” I reminded her. “And besides, my land would require a lot more work to do what you were looking to do. You didn’t pick it for a plethora of reasons, and not knowing my client was around was the least of them.”

“The town is struggling,” she confessed. “We need to do something.”

I hated that I felt bad for her—for all of them in that moment. They had tried to steal my mate’s land, the land that had been with his family for always, longer than the town was even incorporated. But also—had they not done that, I might never have met him. And really, if the town needed help, it was my town, too.

“Then let’s figure out something to help it that doesn’t include harming residents.” I went back at her with a bit more of an edge than I intended. “When is the next committee meeting?”

What was I doing? I hated committees, and they had been awful to us, and there I was injecting myself into town business like it was my most favorite thing.

She told me, and I officially became a new member of the Tourism Development Commission. It would be good though. It was helpful to the town, and I could prevent them from hurting others along the way. Maybe I could convince them they needed a better lawyer, too, because whomever they were using didn't know anything. My guess was it was a board member's relative. That was the only answer that made any sense.

I went home to find Hurley gone. He'd mentioned something about going for a swim. I felt bad, knowing how he longed for the sea and was on land a lot more than usual. He hadn't said anything to indicate it wasn't what he wanted, but still I worried.

A quick shower and a rerun of my favorite sitcom then I was in bed for the night. It had been a long day between a court appearance and the garbage with the town, but at least things were settled now. I'd been confident from the beginning, but that didn't make the relief that flooded me any less satisfying.

I reached for Hurley's pillow and hugged it close as I dozed off, his scent exactly what I needed.

When I woke the next morning, I was comforted by his warmth at my back.

"You're home, my love." I snuggled in closer.

"Sorry I was out so late. I finished up everything at your place and then went for a swim." He kissed the top of my head.

"My roof is done?"

“There was no need to take my time anymore.” He chuckled, his breath tickling my shoulder. “Not with you officially moved in.”

I rolled to face him. “Are you, my sexy mate, saying that you deliberately went slowly to keep me here?” I rubbed noses with him to let him see I wasn’t upset but was instead being silly.

“I wasn’t going slowly, per se. But I wasn’t putting in the hours I could have, either. Now that it’s done, what do you want to do with it?”

It was a very good question, one I hadn’t thought that much about.

“The properties do connect.” And if we cleared things a bit, we could make it connected in a way where we could easily travel back and forth between the two places. “And we talked about possibly turning it into my office.”

The problem with that was people not seeing me in town. A lot of the trust that was earned with my position had to do with visibility and comfort levels—me being a townie and not some blood-sucking lawyer. And yeah, I’d had people ask me straight out if I was one of those. Fair enough—my profession didn’t have the best reputation.

“And you’re worried about the locals and what they might think.” He wasn’t asking. He knew me so well.

“Maybe a little bit less than yesterday.” I told him all about what had happened with his case. I hadn’t mentioned the meeting earlier because I hadn’t known it was happening until

I overheard it at lunch while eating banana cream pie. Sitting at the counter every day paid off.

“I need to check the zoning, but I think it will be fine.” I ran a finger down his chest. “But maybe we can table this for a little bit?”

“You aren’t excited about your new office?” he teased.

“I haven’t had your knot in at least a day. That just isn’t right.” I stuck my lip out in a faux pout. “But if you’d rather talk about my potential new office, I guess we could do that instead.”

I felt a bit of suction on my ass, my mate already on the same page as I was.

“I was thinking that mint green is a good office color.”

I pushed his shoulder gently and straddled him.

“What were you saying? Please ride me until I explode? Was that it?”

“I think maybe it was.” And this time, the marks on his chest, three of them, would not fade.

Chapter Fourteen

Hurley

In the end, Wade decided that his committee joining made all the difference for people thinking of him as a local. It didn't hurt that he'd agreed to put in a few hours a month of pro bono legal work to help the town and found a property on the other side of downtown that actually was uninhabited and suitable for beach access. It had once had a home on it, but the last of that dolphin shifter family had died out a century ago. Wade was still doing research to confirm there was no heir floating around, but it was a matter of *pro forma*, the legal term that he explained meant doing things the right way even if you already knew the answers, which I did. They'd been frenemies of my family, the only dolphins my granddad trusted not to behave badly with octopuses.

Debi was working with Wade on the project. She'd hated what some others had been trying to do and, once she felt she had support, was learning not to be anyone's pawn. So that was good. The committee was taking more of Wade's time than he'd expected, and he looked a little tired but assured me that he was fine.

So, with the heat off my property, and Wade confident in his place in town, it was full speed ahead for his office in the other house. And the first thing we needed was a path between the two places for convenience. After all, who wanted to get in the car and drive twice as far when they could take a stroll to their office via the pathway we were currently laying out. The two properties actually abutted, and with a bit of boulder

moving and ground leveling, we would be able to have lunch together every day. Not always at home. Wade still believed that eating in town gave him a presence nothing else would, but I blamed it on the pie.

He loved that banana cream and so did I.

We'd begun a whole new life together, and I took most of my swims early in the day while Wade was working. Sometimes the tides made it tricky, but I considered it worth it not to miss a moment with my omega.

His house would make a great office and guest quarters for any of his friends who might come from the city as well. I'd already begun that work, and I was doing that with no slowing down whatsoever. The sooner it was ready, the sooner he'd be closer. We had so much fun planning the layout and the decor, wanting an easy coastal vibe slash Scandinavian feel for his clients to enjoy. No leather and dark wood for Wade. He would still have the traditional bookcases filled with law books and his diplomas and degrees and certificates hung all over the walls, but they would be framed in light wood or metal and the reception area would be separated from the office by a glass wall that could be darkened for privacy.

The dining room at the back of the house would be a conference room, and we were opening the back wall there to overlook the ocean. When I asked who he'd be conferencing with, he pointed out that a lot of his practice was family law. Sometimes, there would be reading of wills with lots of relatives or family trust meetings. Also, it was large enough to hold the entire committee, thus reminding everyone where he was.

A very bright attorney at law, my omega.

Every afternoon, he came by to see what I'd done that day, and we discussed our next steps. The home was a far cry from the sodden mess it had been when he bought it with its faulty roof. One of my favorite features was the open floor plan that by the grace of the sea gods had not been ruined in all the flooding. I'd sanded it lightly and refinished it, and it looked amazing.

We usually sat outside and had a cold drink before heading home. The deck on the back was not ready yet, but it would also be a feature of the offices. With law business being so private, usually meetings had to be held indoors, but the distance between the cottage and any other buildings, and the ability to see if anyone approached his section of private beach would mean he could hold some client meetings outdoors on beautiful days.

And of course the bedroom, now that all his belongings had moved to my house, was handy. Sometimes we stayed overnight and hauled a comforter out to the deck where we could lie on our backs and watch the heavens wheel above us. Stars and moon and clouds and everything the universe had to offer right there for us to enjoy. We could run down and swim and come back up and do anything we liked. I kept sandwich makings and things in the fridge, which we could make a quick dinner from if we didn't feel like leaving.

It was such paradise, I didn't know how I'd ever enjoyed life before my omega came into it. I had, of course, but not like this. Both parts of me were overflowing with joy when he

parked in front each afternoon, got out of his car, smiled, and walked into my open arms.

How could lovemaking get better every time?

I only knew that it did.

One day, we were lying on our comforter after a swim when all of a sudden, clouds came scudding off the ocean and suddenly the blue sky was dark gray and menacing. We grabbed our comforter and raced inside to tumble onto the bed laughing and kissing. Always kissing and why not? We were really good at it. Together.

Thunder crashed, lightning sliced through the sky outside the window, and rain pounded on the roof. Wade curled close to me and gave a little shiver. “Before I met you, I’d have been washed away by this storm. Instead, we’re safe and warm and not a drop is falling on the floor.”

“Mmm.” I stroked my hands down his back, loving the warmth of his skin and the way he hardened at such an innocent touch. “You were lucky to find me.”

He chuckled. “Your modesty is your best characteristic, alpha.”

“I know.” Cupping his bottom, I squeezed. “And these cheeks are two of yours.”

“I know that, too.” He ground against me, and I reached between us and grabbed both cocks in my free hand. As I rubbed them together and rubbed my palm over the heads, precum making things slippery and even hotter, he groaned. “Alpha, what was it like in the ocean when it stormed?”

“Nothing like this.” My breath was getting shallower already. His stiff shaft against mine had a tendency to do that. “I went deeper, avoided the waves and the electrical disturbances, just watched it through the water.”

“That sounds nice.”

“It was...yeah, it was nice.” I gave a firm squeeze and sped my strokes, getting close already. “But so is being inside a house with your cock in my hand. Or mine in your ass.”

He crashed his lips into mine for another deep kiss, and by the time we came up for air, our cum was coating both our bellies.

“Lucky you don’t need recovery time,” he muttered. “Ass now?”

“As you wish, omega mine.”

Chapter Fifteen

Wade

I felt like crap. Complete crap. Hurley had taken me out on a boat I'd picked up secondhand for us, and I was still feeling the motion sickness. I'd thought it had been such a great idea when I passed it, coming home from a day in the state courthouse. It was just sitting there at the side of the road with a For Sale sign, calling out to me. What better way to connect with my mate than spending time together in the place he felt most at home.

I hadn't counted on wanting to puke from the time we left until three days later.

"Stay home." Hurley brushed the hair from my brow. "You look green."

I felt green.

"I'm sorry." I fell into his arms sobbing. "I didn't want to have the boat make me so sick. I want to be able to travel the waves with you and see the world you so love."

He rubbed small circles on my back and he shushed me, promising me there wasn't a thing to be sorry for.

"Motion sickness doesn't last once there is no motion, my love. It just doesn't. You should be feeling better now that we are on dry land. You are sick. You probably ate something bad when you were in the capital city for court. That's all."

The thing was, I didn't eat anything there. I'd brought my lunch. "I had peanut butter from here." I snorted my snot in

the least sexy way possible. It was green and gross. Great. That was just freaking great.

“Let’s get you in bed,” he said. “I’ll run to the office and put a sign up letting people know you are sick. You said you had no appointments today, right?”

I loved how he took care of me.

“No appointments,” I sniffed. “But people usually just show up.” It was apparently the way of things around here, and I was just now getting used to it.

“I remember.” He scooped me up and brought me to bed, helping me off with my work clothes and tucking me in.

The next thing I knew, it was noon, and I was just waking up. I got up and padded outside to find my mate working on repairing some netting that came with the boat. I loved watching him do things and, normally, I’d want to just sit there and enjoy the show. But today, I was still yuck and just wanted to see he was here before I went back inside.

“You’re awake.” He set what he was working on down and brushed his hand off on his jeans as he stood up. I wasn’t too sick to appreciate how they hung on his hips, showcasing his sexy abs. “I got some things for you.”

Why did he look so happy? I was sick and grumpy, and here he was smiling and rambling on about presents or something. I was so not in the mood.

He took my hand and led me inside and to the table.

“I stopped by Mama Jo’s to get you some chicken soup.” He turned on the flame of the burner with a click of the knob. It already had a covered pot on it, my guess one containing

said soup. “It’s not completely cooled, so it should be ready soon.”

“I’m not hungry.”

“You’ll feel better when you eat.” He grabbed a box of oyster crackers and poured a few into a dish then set it before me.

“Thanks.” I picked one up and nibbled on it. “This might be enough.”

“We’ll see.” He disappeared into the bedroom and came out with a brown bag from the pharmacy. “I stopped to get you some medicine, but when I asked the pharmacist what to get for you, they suggested this instead.” He set the bag down next to my bowl of crackers.

I peeked inside to find three different pregnancy tests.

“I can’t be pregnant.” I rolled the top of the bag up. “I got sick on the boat,” I reminded him. “That’s what caused this.”

“Coincidences happen.” He opened the bag again and pulled one out. “And you very much can be pregnant. Do you know how babies are made?”

“Hurley...” I closed my eyes.

He was right. I did know how babies were made, and we sure had done a whole lot of that. But I was a lawyer, and I was just starting my practice, and we hadn’t even mentioned having kids and...

Hurley’s hand settled on my cheek. “Whatever you are thinking, it will all be okay. I promise.” He kissed the tip of

my nose. “Let’s find out for sure before your brain goes into overtime.”

I gave him a nod of agreement and got up, carrying one of the packages with me. It took a bit to figure out how to take the test, the whole *just pee on a stick* thing not exactly accurate, at least not for the kind this was, but we managed to accomplish it pretty easily.

“Now we wait for three minutes. It says not to look because it’s not accurate until the full time.” I set the box down and walked into the bedroom. There was no way I could have it sitting in front of me and not look at it. None.

Hurley followed me and pulled me in for a hug. “If you are worried about me, what I’ll think, I would be over the tide with joy at having young with you. It would be all the dreams I didn’t know I had coming true all at once.”

I sucked in a breath, relieved that at least that part wasn’t something I had to worry about.

“I have my job.” Which, spoken out loud, sounded not only selfish but cold.

“And nothing says you can’t still have your job. Our baby, if there is one, will have two fathers. Nothing says the omega has to stay home with the baby.”

I looked up at him, in awe. “You would give up your time in the sea to be a stay-at-home father?”

“I wouldn’t be giving up anything. I’d be gaining everything.” He kissed me sweetly. “I love you, and I already love our baby and before you say anything, yes, I think it will

be positive. It makes sense with your tiredness and stomach yucks and your grumpiness.”

I opened my mouth to correct him on the grumpiness, but he was right. I had been. Very. I’d assumed it was because I wasn’t feeling well, but if I were honest with myself, it started a bit before that.

“I love you so much, and I do want to have a baby with you; I was just caught off guard.” I nibbled on his chin. “Let’s go look at it together.”

We walked hand in hand into the bathroom to see two lines staring back at us. We were going to be dads.

“I love you, alpha mine.” I held onto him tightly. “Thank you for making me a father.”

“As I love you, omega mine.” His voice cracked with emotion. “Thank you for being my everything.”

There was still a lot to figure out, but in that moment, all that mattered was Hurley and I and the little family we were creating.

Chapter Sixteen

Hurley

I thought he'd never leave.

Wade had not had a court date that took him out of town in over a month and I was champing at the bit to get to work. By the time he got home, his big surprise would be all ready. Debi was his new partner in crime and part-time legal assistant—she had skills, who knew? The town didn't pay her enough to live, so she worked from home for him twenty hours a week and had already gotten a clerk friend in the courthouse to make sure he didn't head back home too soon. We'd need every minute we could get to finalize things before his return.

It wasn't a regular shower, but it was even better. At five months along, Wade was no longer sick to his stomach, even on the boat. He'd insisted on trying, determined to hang out with me on the waves, and to both our relief, sea sickness was not a problem. We would just zoom out and I'd dive in and tentacle around near the boat for a while. I'd suggested he fish while he waited, but he was terrified of accidentally catching me. Or "one of your fishy friends."

It didn't exactly work that way, but he was happy to just lie on deck under the canopy and relax while I did my thing anyway. Paradise...like everything else about our life together. Perfection.

Debi was the one who approached me with the plan. Like all the other town positions, the committee members were all local business people, and between them, they owned shops of

all kinds, and every one of them wanted to thank Wade for his help with the new beach project, which was zooming ahead, and all of his other legal work.

So...nursery!

I waved goodbye to him and called Debi to activate the phone tree. "Operation nursery" was underway. Fifteen minutes later, the cars begin to pull up on the driveway and, when that overflowed, those cars were unloaded and moved out onto the road so others could pull in with their gifts and passengers.

Tom Bride, who owned the hardware store, had the paint and supplies, and he quickly organized a team to start on that process while others put together furniture and got curtains ready to hang. One wall was reserved for three talented locals to paint a mural of "under the sea." That was the theme I'd told them we liked, without more explanation than that. Some of them might know more than others about me. Some came from families who had been here as long as mine, and I didn't know what lore or knowledge was passed down.

And it didn't matter because they treated us just like any other couple in town. No. Better. They were showering my mate and I with love in a way that brought tears to my eyes every time I thought about it.

I was on the assembly crew, and I could hear Tom giving orders like the ship captain his ancestors had been. He'd brought one-coat, no fumes, extra eco-friendly paint so my mate would not have to breathe anything toxic, and so we'd be able to finish in the allotted time. I'd been a bit worried about

the mural but decided that it didn't matter if it wasn't quite done. Wade would get the idea.

Also, nobody was letting me in the room, either, once they began the work. I had to stay in the living room and wield my tools on the pale-teal furnishings, listening to the orders and the laughter and the excitement. It was a little hard, no lie. I really wanted to do everything for Wade and the babe myself. Only the knowledge that what these people were doing would bring him joy stayed my hand.

I made sandwiches at noon and served them on the deck with pitchers of iced tea and lemonade, fruit salad, and big bowls of chips. Those who came out of the nursery for lunch were dotted with paint and all wore big smiles that they turned on me. My vision blurred with tears. I'd met Wade because I thought the whole town was out to get rid of me. I hadn't known who lived here, not really. Not like I did now. Wade was the kind of person everyone wanted to be friends with, and he just towed me along into social situations, making me their friend, too.

The evidence of his kindness and goodness filled our house today, right up to the roof.

Time moved fast while we all tried to get things done, and all too soon we got the word from Debi's co-conspirator at the courthouse that Wade would be home before long. She'd kept him as long as she could, asking for advice about some made-up cousin's divorce, but now we were almost out of time.

People were moving furnishings inside and not letting me have so much as a peek, the occasional clatter or crash, gasps, and even more laughter marking the final rush to be ready.

There was no way to hide that we had company. As many people as possible had moved their cars away in the opposite direction, but just to be able to get back without a hike, a few cars were still close, but nothing about what he could see from a distance said, *welcome to your shower*. No, he didn't see the banner announcing that until he was actually parked in the driveway and over excited townspeople were pouring out the door.

Wade clambered out of the car and into my arms, muttering, "Is everyone in the whole town here?"

"Just about," I told him. "They even closed Mama Jo's for a few hours. Welcome home, omega mine."

I turned him to face the others, and they broke into cheers, surrounded him, and almost carried him inside the house, leaving me to follow in their wake. But I didn't mind. My omega deserved all the love and so did our babe. However, when I made it through the door, Wade was calling, "Hurley, come on. We need you."

Propelled by backslaps and cheerful jibes, I made my way to the closed nursery door where the mayor made a short speech about town cooperation and gratitude with only a brief reminder to vote in the upcoming election. Then he threw open the door and stepped aside, giving Wade, and me, our first look at the room where our offspring would sleep and play.

My mate turned his face to me, tears rolling down his cheeks, and I wasn't far behind. "How...how did this happen in just one day?"

I kissed his wet cheek. "You're looking at them. All these people did this for us, mostly for you. I'm not the only one

who loves you.”

And then they all flooded into the room, wanting to show him the mural—the finished mural—and the furniture and tell who donated what and why they loved him until I saw his pale cheeks and managed to extricate him to where the party was set up in back. Food and drink and decorations and enough banana cream pie for the whole town.

Luckily.

Chapter Seventeen

Wade

“I need to swim,” I said out of nowhere to my client.

“Ummm, okay?” The poor man was trying to do a living will, and I was blurting out my desire to get into the water.

It wasn't even a particularly nice day. If anything, it was horrible weather to be down at the water. But still, I needed to swim. It wasn't the first time I felt like this, but it was by far the strongest, almost as if I didn't do it right away, I might combust.

“Sorry, Mr. Zane. I don't know what came over me.” I was six months pregnant and, between the dreams, the cravings, and the desire to be in the ocean, it was quite a ride.

Not that I would change it for anything.

“You're pregnant is what. When my omega was pregnant with our first, I had to drive two hundred miles starting at three a.m. because they wanted the new batch of apple cider from one particular orchard that they had been to once years earlier.” He leaned back in his chair, a warm smile on his face. “The cider was good. I should know. I ended up drinking it all, since the craving was over by the time I got home. Good thing I had the foresight to grab a dozen donuts from Derek's Donuts on my way through Shoreville. Those, he wanted.”

“I've never had them.” Although it was one of the few things people said made it worth going to Shoreville. I probably needed to rectify that.

“They are quite delicious. Maybe I’ll make a detour on my way home and get some for my omega.” He pushed up on the arms of the chair to stand. “Never hurts to make your true love happy.”

“We didn’t finish.” In fact, we had barely started going through the details.

“And we can finish another day. You need to swim and, like you said, it will all go to my mate as it stands, and that will do. Besides, I don’t plan on going anywhere.” He headed toward the doorway. “I’ll rebook later. Don’t worry, you didn’t lose a client. This town knows what you did for us, and we are a loyal bunch.”

And with that, he left.

I got out of my seat immediately, not even shutting down my computer. I needed to get into the water. Had I not promised Hurley to not go in without him, I’d have marched straight to the water. But he was right. Unlike him, I wasn’t strong enough of a swimmer to go out more than waist-high alone, and I for sure wanted to be in deeper.

I waddled home. And yes, it was waddling. I felt huge for my stage of pregnancy. I’d skipped the whole doctor thing because as much as I was human and Hurley assured me everything about our baby would look human because of that, I didn’t feel safe seeing a regular doctor. Hurley was working on finding us a shifter midwife, but his family had historically kept to themselves, so the search hadn’t been fruitful yet.

“You’re home early.” Hurley was in the kitchen mixing up some dye on the stove.

He'd discovered that by combining his skills in net tying and some basic stitches, he could create totes the tourists loved and was now playing with color. It was great he found a hobby he enjoyed and that he could help contribute to the tourism goals of the town and all that, but the odor of the dye had my stomach lurching. It was all natural...but vinegar!

"I need to swim." I took off my work clothes right there in the entryway. "Are you coming?"

"Yeah." He turned off the stove and ran to grab some towels, his bucket for anything he might catch while we were swimming, and a pair of swim trunks for me.

"No one is going to be there. It's gross out." And the idea of anything on my body felt so constrictive.

"Humor me until we get there?"

I did, begrudgingly putting them on.

As I had guessed, there were zero people at the waterfront.

"Told you." I stripped and went into the water, the freezing waves exactly what I needed.

Hurley swam in after me, equally naked. "Are you okay, omega mine?" He pressed his hand to my forehead.

"Of course." It tasted like a lie, and the sharp pain in my abdomen only solidified that. "No," I amended.

"Honey." His tentacles came up around me, holding me steady. "I don't want you to freak out, but...I think you might...did you know octopus lay eggs?"

I did know that. I also knew they usually starved to death protecting said eggs. But what did that have to do with—no. Just no.

“I am not laying an egg,” I said vehemently just as a stomach cramp had me nearly going under even with my mate’s assistance. It took me a solid minute before I could speak again. “I can’t. I’m human.”

“I know. I know. And I didn’t think it was possible, but this is how it happens for my kind and, if it is, you will lay your eggs soon.” One of his tentacles came up and cupped my cheek.

“Eggs, like plural?” He nodded. “You’re bigger than just one.”

Twins. I was having twins, in the ocean, three months early or maybe not early. I didn’t know jack shit about eggs.

“But I can’t.”

Another spasm whipped through me, and Hurley situated himself behind me so that I was pressed against him and his tentacles were holding me safely with my head above the water.

“I got you, omega mine. I got you.”

The spasms came closer and closer together and with more and more force. And when it was over, Hurley had been wrong. It wasn’t two eggs, I laid three. He held each one in one of his tentacles, my body barely strong enough to stay afloat.

Lightning cracked on the horizon.

“What do we do?” I asked. I couldn’t leave them. I couldn’t ask Hurley to stay in the ocean until they came. I couldn’t bring them ashore. “What do we do?” A sob broke through me.

“I’ve got you, honey. I’ve got you.”

Fine. He had me, but what about our babes?

“Will they be octopuses?” How had I not thought of it before? Everything was falling apart. I was supposed to give birth to a beautiful baby who had eyes like his alpha father. That was how it was supposed to go. Not this—not eggs.

Maybe this was one of my messed-up preggo dreams after all.

“Only until you hold them for the first time.” He was so calm. How was he so calm?

“People will see us. When the weather is better, people will see us.” Because leaving was not an option. I needed to be with my babies, and nothing was going to get in the way of that. Nothing.

“They won’t, not unless they follow us home.”

“No,” I snapped, gathering up one then two eggs and attempting to do the same with the third. “We can’t leave them here.”

“No, we can’t. But we can bring them with us. Trust me.”

And trust him I did, even letting him put our babes in his fishing bucket filled with sea water and carrying them back to our home.

Chapter Eighteen

Hurley

Well, the townspeople hadn't counted on one accessory for our new nursery. Luckily, there was room for the aquarium along one wall. It did hide part of the mural, but the beautiful colors and sea creatures made a beautiful backdrop for our eggs' temporary digs. And hopefully made them feel more at home.

I'd never heard of any eggs being hatched anywhere but in the ocean. Not in our family for sure, but a Google search gave me some ideas about how to make their glass-enclosed home as close to the ocean as possible. Temperature control and a constant movement of fresh oxygenated water seemed to be key.

Pearlescent, they were so beautiful in the aquarium, I almost couldn't take my gaze off them, but my mate was even worse. Once the eggs were laid, he went on paternity leave, lucky enough to convince a retired professor from his law school to come and fill in for him for the time being. The guest room in his house, which of course also held his office, was a perfect place for the old alpha and his omega, and they cheerfully moved in for the duration.

They didn't ask a lot of questions, but it turned out they knew of shifters and, before long, were equal admirers of our gorgeous eggs. They hinted at godparent status, when the babies were born. With business under control, Wade relaxed some, but he still did not move away from the aquarium, at all.

I continued my search for a midwife, but they were few and very busy. But I was not going to give up, especially after I found my mate peeing in a bottle to avoid leaving his spot, and finally my hard work paid off.

The midwife was a heron shifter of all things, not related to anyone nearby, and had to travel a good distance to get to us, but he was willing to do it on the wing, and that saved time. He loved octopus shifters and crooned to our eggs as if he was their uncle.

He also took one look at my filthy, exhausted, close-to-dehydrated mate—not that I didn't bring him drinks, I just couldn't get him to drink them—and sent me to Tom's hardware for a red wagon. Confused, I went anyway, glad to do anything that would help, and returned to find Wade looking much better.

“He bullied me into a shower and then cooked me lunch,” my mate reported.

“I stayed right by the tank the whole time he was washing up,” the midwife agreed.

“I offered to do that, but he said I wasn't qualified,” I protested, trying not to be hurt.

Wade bit into the apple the midwife handed him, chewed, and swallowed before saying, “You don't have training. Ernie would know what to do in an emergency.”

Ready to argue, I took another look at my vastly improved mate and clamped my lips closed. I couldn't let ego run my mouth for me. So I switched tacks. “I'm glad you were here to help, Ernie. I brought the wagon; it's out front.”

“Great.” He stood up from the floor in front of the tank and brushed off his slacks. “Let’s get it in here.”

“In the nursery?” That didn’t sound right. But I ran for it without waiting for an answer. So far, he’d been very helpful, and I didn’t want to mess with success. When I returned, I learned the method for his madness. Together, we lifted the tank into the bed of the wagon and rolled it back into place.

“This way, your mate can pull it along behind him wherever he goes in the house. See?”

Wade was even now lifting the handle and starting for the door, the cord trailing behind him to be plugged in wherever he stopped next. “Gotta pee.” And he was gone.

I hugged Ernie. “I’m so grateful. In the ocean, regular octopus don’t even survive the hatching, usually, and even shifters have a hard time. The omega tends to get so focused on the eggs, they take very poor, if any, care of themselves, and it’s all an alpha can do to keep their mate alive.”

“I know.” Ernie studied the mural. “No birds?”

“We’ll add one,” I assured him. “In a place of pride, right there above the waves at the edge. And name it after you.”

“I should hope so,” he preened, and his bird nature was evident in every motion. “If you’ll show me where to leave my bag with a change of clothes and some medical equipment, next time I’ll fly. I have the car today.”

“Sure.” I’d wondered what he’d do about things if he was shifted. Carry them in his beak? “Anything else you need us to have on hand?”

“No, your setup looks good. You have no idea how many times ocean shifters don’t know what to do if they end up on land. Did someone show you?”

“The Internet,” I told him. “But I’m glad to know it was right. I was a little bit nervous about the whole thing.”

“No need for that. Call me anytime you have a question, and if your mate has any issues, call me for that, too. Octopus shifters are few and far between, and I am glad to help with this trio.” He looked around the room. “You’re going to need more baby beds.”

“I thought because he was a human, he’d just have a baby, probably a single.”

Ernie chuckled. “Isn’t that always the way? Humans aren’t nearly as genetically superior or dominant as they think they are.”

Together, we went into the living room and found Wade had plugged the aquarium pump in near the couch and was slumped with the TV on. “Animal channel,” he said. “I thought he’d like the ocean scenes.”

“Good idea,” Ernie told him. “Why don’t you let them absorb that while we talk about what might happen when they hatch.”

Wade looked alarmed. “Is it dangerous? Do we need to help them out of the shells or anything?”

“No, not at all. But with shifters, especially half shifters, there are some variables to watch for. Everything I could see with my instruments looks perfect though. It’s just best to be prepared.”

After we talked a while, he pulled out some kind of scope and held it in the water near each egg, the light from the device revealing the little being inside the opaque shell. We couldn't see everything but enough for Ernie to proclaim them well along and looking good. He'd apparently done this check while Wade was showering but wanted us to enjoy the experience of our first look at our children as well.

He left shortly thereafter, in his car, and I came back in to sit beside Wade on the couch. He was still watching some deep-sea show and talking to the eggs about what it would be like when they were old enough to swim in the ocean, and about all the great food they'd find there. He told them a lot of things, some of which were correct and others not so much, but it didn't matter for now.

He was talking to them in a nice, soft tone, indicating he was happy and relaxed, and that was good for him, the eggs, and me.

Good for all of us.

Chapter Nineteen

Wade

Something had changed. I couldn't pinpoint what it was, but something had changed with our eggs. Something important.

I chewed on my bottom lip, crawling around the aquarium, trying to determine what it was. They looked the same from everything I could see. I reached inside, but nothing about the feel of them was different. Yet, my daddy gut told me something was not right.

Hurley was in Shoreville picking up the extra baby items we had ordered now that we knew there would be three. We insisted on buying as locally as possible to keep our money in the community, but it had been weeks since we picked everything out, and more than once, I wondered if we should suck it up and go online.

“When Daddy gets home, I'll ask him to look at you and see what's up,” I singsonged, my nerves starting to build.

They weren't quite as bad as when I first came home with our babes. I couldn't even pee without fearing they would—I don't know, something bad would happen to them. I was beyond irrational and went so far as to not trust them out of my sight. It wasn't until the midwife explained they were simply octopus instincts that came along with giving birth to eggs—or was it laying eggs? Whatever, it was connected to that, and that connection had me so irrational I couldn't function enough to even eat.

Knowing that somehow cleared things away, and I found myself eating, bathing, and even asking Hurley to watch them so I could walk around the building in the rain. And the rain thing was hardly rational, but trusting the person I loved most with our eggs was, and I saw it as a huge step.

I kept crawling around, looking for a hint, any hint, as to what had me feeling this way. The phone rang and, for a split second, I was going to ignore it and maintain my focus on my babes, but something told me to answer it. And good thing I did, because it was Hurley.

“The minivan has a flat,” he grumbled. We both hated that thing, but it was the only vehicle that made sense with triplets coming. “I’m waiting for the auto club to come and swap the tire out because the spare is missing. Next time, we’re buying new.” It had been a great deal but, given the amount of trouble we’d had with it, it was easy to see why it was so reasonable and how very much not a good deal it was.

“That’s fine. We’re just hanging out. I feel like change is coming.” I hadn’t meant to let that slip out. He didn’t need to worry when he was good and trapped on the side of the road between here and the next town. But out it came, of its own accord.

“Call Ernie, then. Could be they are getting ready to meet us.” He spoke so calmly, but my heart raced.

“Now?”

“Probably not. I’ll see you in a bit.” He hung up, and I just stared at the phone.

Ernie. I had to call Ernie. It took me a bit of fumbling, but I managed to find his name in my phone and called. He picked up on the first ring and promised to be right there.

“They’re coming, my sweet things,” I told the eggs. “And both Daddy and Ernie are going to laugh at me and tell me I’m imagining things.” I was lying to all of us. In my gut, I knew this was something to be concerned about, even if there were no facts to back that up.

The door swung open and in came Hurley, soaking wet and completely naked.

“I think I gave some poor old lady the shock of her life.” He came over to the tank. “I’m going to have to teach you three how to avoid being seen by strangers better than I do.” He spoke directly to our eggs as I stood there processing what had just happened.

“You left the car, dove into the ocean, and swam here?”

He nodded.

“But you sounded so calm, I thought things were—”

“Shh, things are fine. I just didn’t want to chance missing their birth. The car can wait.”

I very much hadn’t even stopped to worry about the car.

“You think they are coming now?” My gaze was glued to our three little ones.

“Soon.” He wrapped his arm around my shoulder. “That feeling that you get, it’s you sensing them. And see how the shell is slightly darker? That’s communication, too.”

I squinted, trying to see what he did. “They look the same to me.” I leaned into his touch.

“Just watch. You’ll see.”

And he was right. By the time Ernie showed up, equally naked, the shells were dark pink. They were stunning. Absolutely stunning.

“I see I got here just on time to throw some clothes on,” he said as he eyed the tank. “Might as well roll them into the bedroom.”

That made no sense to me, but I followed his suggestion and wheeled them in beside our bed.

No sooner was he dressed and explaining what would happen when our first baby started to emerge. I was afraid to blink, to lose one single second of their birth. They came out swimming, looking like their father when he took his full form only tiny.

Ernie said it was best to let them meet each other in their animal form, so despite my longing to hold them for the first time, I waited, the three of us watching as number two and number three hatched.

“They are so beautiful.” And knowing this would be the last time I saw them this way until they hit puberty, as I’d learned recently, made me a little bit sad.

“They are,” Ernie agreed. “And it’s time to meet your babies now.”

We had already decided that since I gave birth, their alpha father would be the first to hold them. When Ernie asked me to take my shirt off and guided me onto the bed, I was a bit

confused, but knowing he had far more understanding of the situation than I, I did. I sat with my back against the headboard as Hurley reached in with his tentacles and gathered up our firstborn.

When our sweet daughter's octopus reached the air, she shifted into her human form with a head full of hair and a whole lot to say in the form of crying. Hurley brought her over to me, and she immediately latched on.

"They will all be hungry," Ernie explained. "So we should probably give a small break between helping each one shift for the first time."

Thankfully, she drank her fill quickly, and Hurley brought me our son who was just as hungry.

"What if he drank it all?" I asked Ernie.

"That's not how that works," Ernie assured me. "Your body has been preparing for three."

Which was good, given that number three, a second daughter, ate them both under the table.

Hurley sat next to me, and we held our three babies. We named them Cordelia, Dylan, and Mira after their ocean heritage. They were absolutely perfect. Ernie agreed. He was going to stay with us for a day to help us get adjusted to three new family members and to help Hurley get the van before he headed home.

He left to give us some privacy but assured me he was just a call of his name away.

"We did it." I rested my head on his shoulder. "We made a family."

“That we did, omega mine. That we did.”

Epilogue

Hurley

Wade kept asking whether it was safe to take the babies into the ocean. He seemed afraid they would shift and swim away, but they were not going to be deep enough for that, even if it had been possible.

“Omega mine, they are babies. We are going to slather them with sunscreen, put down a blanket, put up an umbrella, and let them dig in the sand along the edge of the blanket with plastic shovels.”

“Do octopuses do that?” He held Mira in his arms, and I had the others. “Do they play in the sand?”

“First, remember...babies. They are shifters, not just animals. And in fact, even the animals have been known to play in the sand, but these are people. Remember I told you they can’t shift until puberty, which leaves us with the same problems any other parents of triplets have when they take them to the beach.”

“So, sunburn? Sand up their nose?” He still looked worried, but with each word calmed a little. “Dirty diapers?”

I nodded. “Exactly.” We lived at the beach, so we had taken them onto the sand before, but they’d only been in the wagon we’d fitted with skis to pull over the beach and never stopped to put them down at all. “Those problems.”

“And won’t they want to swim? Won’t they love the ocean?” He kissed the top of Mira’s head.

“Of course they will, but we’ll do just like all the other daddies and carry one to the very edge where we can dangle their feet and watch them laugh or scream, depending on the mood of the moment.” All three were capable of belly laughs and outraged shrieks, and none of them held back. “It will be fun. You’ll see.”

“Do they need swimming lessons?” he asked, as if it had just occurred to him, which it probably had.

“Need?” I shrugged. “Probably not, but they would probably enjoy them when they are a bit older. I think we should do that.”

“Good.” Between us, we maneuvered three babies, the blanket, the umbrella, diaper bags, and all the other gear it takes for a beach day down onto the sand. Setting up took some maneuvering, but eventually we were ready to enjoy ourselves and our children. It had taken over an hour and a half from starting to get ready until now, but it was worth it. Even if we only stayed about twenty minutes before Dylan managed to do one of those poops that requires a full bath, Cordelia spit up down her front, and we headed back up the beach to our house. Thank heavens it was just a few minutes away.

The years to come would feature many such times, and I didn’t mind at all. We gave them all baths and then fed and cuddled them until bedtime. The smell of the sea clung to their hair despite the fact they hadn’t touched it at all and had been shampooed. I breathed it in, daydreaming about when their father and I would take them out in the boat and my little octopuses and I would swim around together. We’d have

county fairs to attend, parent-teacher nights, family vacations, and so many events I couldn't even count them all. We'd be a family, living together in good times and trials, and one day, these little people would grow up and marry and have mates and children of their own.

And their father and I would still be here in this house, the one he helped me save from the township. Hosting big holiday dinners and beach parties and...

"Alpha, it's time to put the babies to bed." Wade spoke softly because all three were on the edge of sleep, and we had to take our opportunity. We carried them into the nursery that our town friends had made so special for us and when they were all asleep, we returned to the living room and sank onto the couch, almost ready to sleep ourselves. I wrapped him in my arms, and tugged him against me, loving the times when it was just us as well as when we were all five awake together. We wouldn't have long like this, but it was sweet while it lasted. Soon, one of our offspring would wake and want something.

"Should we try to sleep?" Wade asked in a voice that said he was almost there himself.

"Unless you'd like to do something else," I replied.

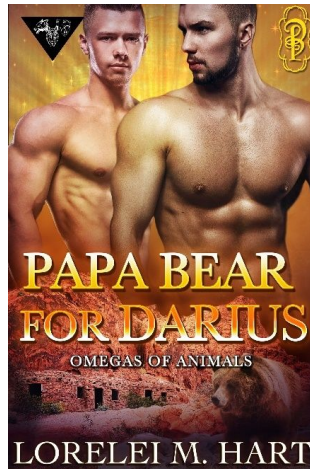
He jerked his head up and smiled at me. "We'll have to be fast."

"Let's try." Because even a quickie with this omega was worth everything. Even a single kiss.

Thanks for reading Squid Pro Quo! Read on for a peek at some other titles by Lorelei M. Hart you may also enjoy.

Papa Bear for Darius

Omegas of Animals Book 1



It all started with an invitation...

Omega Darius was always the antithesis of everything prized in his pack—something they reminded him of often as a child when his skinny physique and academic goals kept him on the outside looking in. Leaving his pack to attend university while most of the pups are just beginning high school has given him the freedom to explore all the academics he’s always longed to, but something is missing. Even years later when he finds his roommate and they form their own makeshift pack, he still feels off-center, like there’s a hole in his life.

And then he’s invited to the shifter hotspot Animals for their annual Halloween party. This will change everything. He can feel it. He just has no idea how much.

It all started with a job offer...

Alpha Bruin spends his life traveling across the country installing eco-friendly updates to businesses. It's a rewarding job, but a very lonely life. Not that he has anything to go back to. When his brother took over as clan leader, Bruin was given an ultimatum. He could challenge his brother or accept exile. Knowing a challenge would lead to his brother's death, he chose never to return again. The sacrifice has been worth it. Mostly.

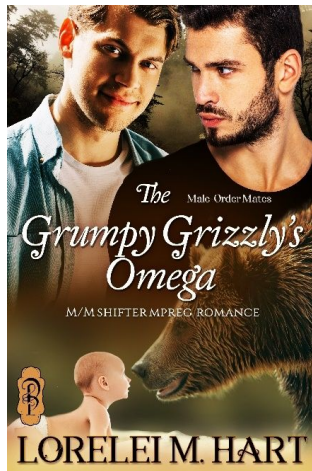
His latest work project, the club Animals, turns out to feel more like home than anyplace he's been since his clan. When the project ends, he isn't ready yet to leave, willingly accepting an invitation to their Halloween shindig.

When Darius and Bruin meet it's lust at first sight. Darius brings out the daddy in Bruin who helps him discover a side of himself he never suspected he had. If only it wasn't Bruin's last day at Animals...in the country, for that matter.

A Papa Bear for Darius is a sweet with knotty heat M/M shifter mpreg romance served up with a side of daddy yums, an unexpected pregnancy, and a guaranteed HEA. It features Darius, the roommate of Basil from Little Red Omega and the Big Bad featured in Special Delivery: Halloween.

The Grumpy Grizzly's Omega

Male-Order Mates Book 1



My bear has had it with this alone stuff.

He's ready for his mate...yesterday. My job and my side-projects have always dominated my life. As a ranger in the local national park, I've dedicated myself to helping people and animals, thinking that one day my mate would come along. But after years of being alone, I now know I have to make a move if I want the family I so crave.

My best friend Roman thinks this Male-Order App is the way. Order a husband? Like ordering books online? While I think he's out of his mind, I fill out the questionnaire and wait for an omega to bite. Still don't think one will.

My name is Aquila. When I left my ex, he didn't even notice I was gone until he needed money. He's been clear about not wanting children or getting married. And I was fine with it...

until I wasn't and neither was the animal inside of me. I wanted more. So I finally finished the questionnaire on the Male-Order App and the next day got a 90 percent match, but he lives on the other side of the country. Maybe a change of scenery is just what this omega needs.

The Grumpy Bear's Omega is a super sweet with knotty heat MM mpreg featuring a hotter than hot forest ranger, a cute, nerdy omega, and resulting in the cutest baby bear shifter ever. It is the first book in the Male-Order Males series but can be read as a stand-alone.

The Wolf and Bear's Dragon Omega

Omegas of Animals SD Book 1



Fate doesn't care about ancient rules. Too bad dragons do.

Alpha bear shifter Zevo is ready to move on from his job at Animals. When the opportunity to help scout out a new location presents itself, he's up for the challenge. Getting to see the one who got away while he was there had nothing to do with his decision—really it didn't.

Alpha wolf shifter Aras can't believe his luck when he gets the call from his old friend and crush. This time he's going to let Zevo know how he feels, even if it means risking losing him forever.

Omega Humphrey is ready to be his own dragon. Living under his family's shadow his entire life, he's ready to spread his wings. If only it was that easy.

When the three of them meet, their beasts immediately recognize each other as mates. Everything would be sunshine and roses if Humphrey's flight didn't forbid their mating and call him home. Can true love overcome ancient laws to help them find their happy ever after?

The Wolf and the Bear's Dragon Omega is a standalone sweet with knotty heat M/M/M shifter mpreg romance set in the world of Omegas of Animal. It features an alpha bear looking for more than a new career, an alpha wolf ready to settle down, a billionaire omega dragon ready to be accepted for who he is and not who his father is, true love, fated mates, an unexpected clutch, all the nesting, and a guaranteed HEA. If you love your alphas hawt and your mpreg with heart, download your copy today.

About the Authors

Lorelei M. Hart is the cowriting team of USA Today Bestselling Authors Kate Richards and Ever Coming. Friends for years, the pair 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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