

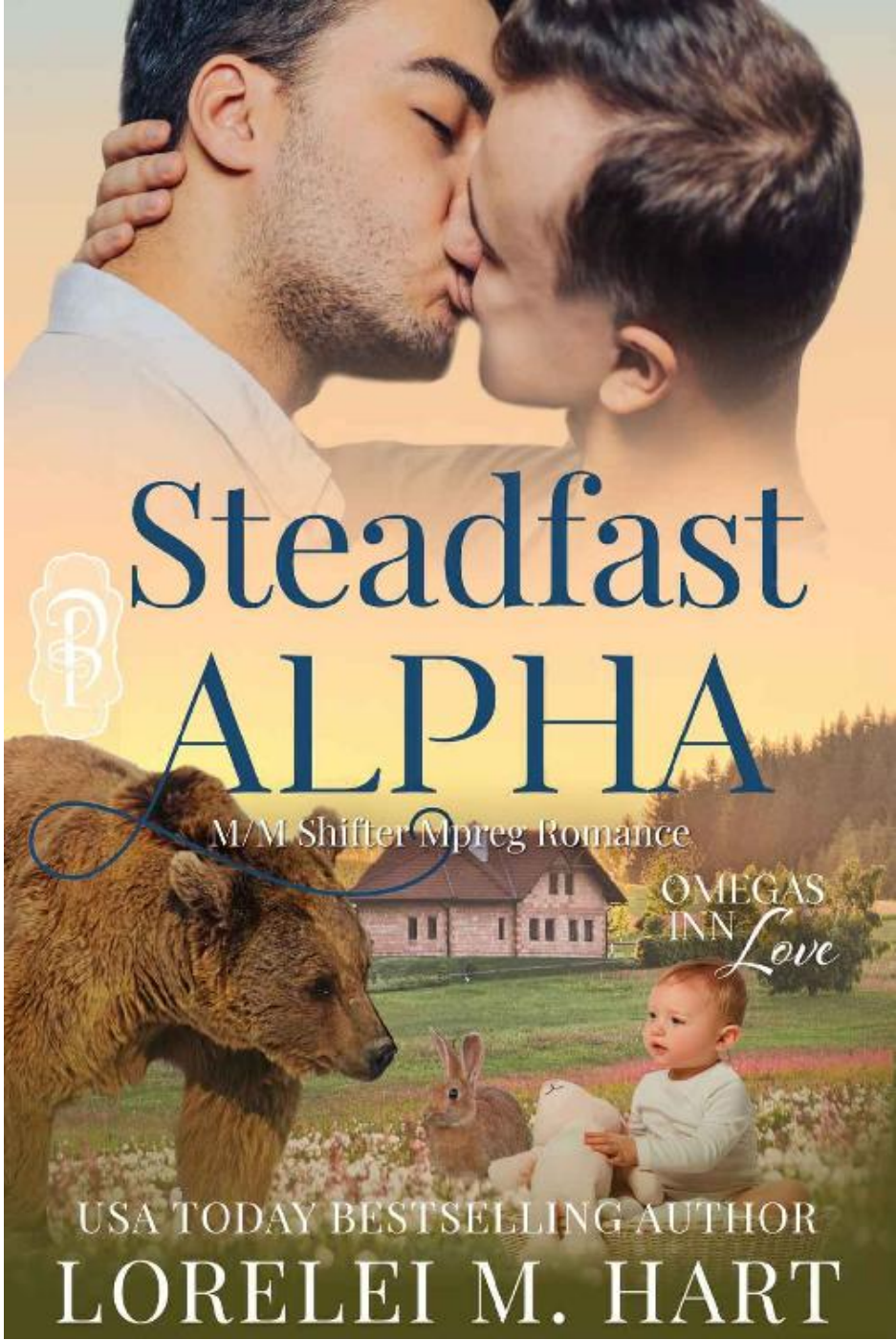
# Steadfast ALPHA

M/M Shifter Mpreg Romance

OMEGAS  
INN  
*Love*

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

LORELEI M. HART



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Steadfast Alpha

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## **Locke**

I've always had a plan. My life has always gone according to that. However, along the way, I missed something. I thought my regimented life and financial security were enough to sustain me.

I was wrong. My bear craves an omega and a family, but I'm not interested in the dating scene or one of those apps.

So when a wax-sealed envelope arrives in my mailbox offering me a chance to get away, I make plans to travel, sure the rest and relaxation will quell my bear.

## **Sheppard**

Once I retired from being an Olympic gold-medal winning swimmer, I had no clue what I wanted for or from life. Having lived on a tight schedule since that first daddy-and-me swimming class when the teacher said I had talent, I was so ready to be free.

But now, those free hours stretch out in front of me, empty. And my rabbit, who has never had a lot to say, has decided a mate will give us purpose.

I've heard no one leaves the Bearclaw Inn without a mate, but never dreamed I'd receive an invitation. Good timing? Or just

a dead end?

Only one way to find out.

*Steadfast Alpha is the second book in the Omegas Inn Love Series. It is a sweet with knotty heat MM shifter mpreg romance featuring a solid, well-fixed alpha bear shifter whose plan isn't all he thought it would be, an omega rabbit shifter leaving behind his public past with no plan at all, the magic of Franklin and his Bearclaw Inn, and a guaranteed HEA. Each book in this series can be read as a standalone. If you like your alphas hawt, your omegas strong, and your mpreg with heart, download your copy today.*



Steadfast Alpha  
Omegas Inn Love Book 2

By  
Lorelei M. Hart



# Chapter One

*Locke*

My business plan is right on schedule.

In fact, it was ahead of the timetable I'd set up while working on my business degree. One of my mentors, a professor who had decades of business success before deciding to teach what he'd learned while still earning the big bucks, had us do this plan for our first assignment. A lot of my classmates had joked and turned in something they would never be able to achieve or that showed so little forethought, I was stunned.

The professor didn't grade this; he merely made notes as we each presented our plan to the class. But from that day forward, he gave extra attention to the few of us who had taken his suggestions seriously. We were invited to his corner office to see what we could aspire to, taken on various other field trips he thought would inspire us, invited to his home for discussions, and, the cherry on top, given internships the following summer.

I learned more from that man in the one class and three internships than from anyone else. Enough that when the other two students he had so favored and I were offered positions with the company upon graduation, I turned it down. Because I believed I could do better, and my business plan did not include working for anyone else.

And he knew it. Stephen Judd, professor and business genius, shook my hand and told me I'd made the right

decision. He went from mentor to friend, and we got together at least twice a month for a drink at the club he'd gotten me a membership to far earlier than most. It was a hefty annual fee on top of the buy-in but worth every penny for the networking.

We had a lot in common, Stephen and I. He also worked very long days, had founded his company at a young age, and had no relationship beyond the occasional one-night stand. A bear has to let off steam every so often. There was no mating in my business plan. If a person wants to do something, they should plan to do it well, and my college self couldn't not see how I could achieve my business goals and be the kind of mate someone deserved.

But my bear had other plans, and as time went on and I did earn and settle into a corner office in the building opposite Stephen's, the voice inside me became consistently louder and more insistent that there was a fated mate for us out there. The buzz of static made it hard to focus on my goals. One of the things I'd always made time for was sleep in my huge and comfortable bed—which my bear decided I should not be able to enjoy.

But sleep was overrated...I could catch up when I died. Or one of those cute sayings people who didn't get any sleep were wont to quote.

Somehow, I had developed the ability to nod off at my desk for brief cat naps—bear naps?—in the afternoon. They were the only thing keeping me from passing out at a less opportune moment like behind the wheel of my car or in the elevator. If this kept up, I'd have to hire a driver for the safety of the community.

“Sir?”

My eyes snapped open, and I turned my chair away from the view over the city to address my assistant. Although he couldn't have seen me, he probably knew I'd been resting my eyes. But he'd never say a word, of course, being far too professional for that. “Yes?”

“Sir, you've received a letter.”

“A letter?” We got mountains of mail every day, but they almost never crossed my desk. Others handled them. “Who is it from?”

“Someone named Franklin at the Bearclaw Inn.” He approached and set the envelope down in front of me. “It looked important.”

I picked it up and flipped it over. “A wax seal? I didn't even know they still made those.”

“I believe you make it yourself by melting...” He fell into silence, shrugging. “Anyway, I thought you might want to see it.”

He never brought me random mail and, even though I suspected it was just an ad of some sort, despite the heavy, expensive stationary, I reached for a letter opener from my desk drawer. “Thanks. You can go.”

He slipped silently out the door, perfect in his duties as always. Once he was gone, I slit the envelope open and pulled out a handwritten note. That was also surprising. People usually typed notes and even if they wrote, it was rarely if ever cursive.

Intriguing.

Unfolding the sheet of paper, I settled back to read.

*Dear Mr. Locke,*

*I am pleased to invite you to the Bearclaw Inn for a very special stay, all expenses paid...*

Locke was indeed my last name, but my friends called me that. I read on, the details about this offered free trip raising all kinds of red flags for me. I'd never heard of the place, and who would think I needed a free trip anyway? What did this Franklin guy want from me?



## Chapter Two

### *Sheppard*

Even though my training days were long over, I still came to the pool at the crack of dawn. Hell, if the gym stayed open twenty-four hours a day, I would be there in the wee small hours.

Especially since it had been months since I slept a full night. I didn't know why. My mind wouldn't stop, especially on the days that I decided not to get to the pool or even out of the house.

Leaving my home was a crapshoot for me. My small town knew who I was. Last week, I'd been invited to cut the ribbon on a new hardware store. The local celebrity athlete.

It wasn't as amazing as it sounded. I'd retired months ago, and sometimes I wanted to have a day or a week where I was just me and not the Olympic swimmer. Just Sheppard—even though I didn't know who I was without being on a constant training cycle.

An omega rabbit who didn't remember anything other than working out and stuffing my face with calories in order to meet the demands of said training.

But I was destined for more.

And while I cringed when someone recognized me in public, I was emptier than ever in my apartment. Lonely.

Hopping out of the pool, I was satisfied with my swim. I hadn't pushed myself to the limit like I used to and, slowly, I



had taken to enjoying the exercise again. It had been a while.

My brother and I met at the door. Me exhausted from the water and him from his run. While I excelled in the pool, Jenson was lightning on two legs. Our dads always laughed and said that if they had a son who could fly, they would have the triad of super-athletes.

“I’m starving,” Jenson said. He paused, stretching, while I unlocked the front door.

“We’re always starving. It’s my turn to make breakfast, so come on in.”

“Carbs. All the carbs!” he called out on his way to the shower. I took one at the gym after my session. Jenson was about a month out from his first Ironman marathon and was training day and night.

I went straight to the kitchen and mixed batter for blueberry waffles. They were his favorite. Jenson couldn’t boil eggs so, unless I cooked for him, he ate the frozen ones.

“I’m starting laundry. You need anything washed?” he called from down the hallway.

“No. I’m good.”

“Damn, that smells good.” He came in and stole the first waffle, stuffing it into his mouth piping hot. I knew how that was, to be starving all the time. I didn’t miss it.

“Sit down and eat.”

“Yeah, okay.” While he gobbled up his waffles and mandatory veggie, egg-white omelet that our dads insisted we eat every morning, we talked about his plan. Damn, I envied

him in that moment. He had a goal and was on the journey to meet it.

Jenson cleaned up, and I answered my emails. As always, I had received opportunities for sponsorships but, once I researched the companies, I usually realized I wanted nothing to do with them. Certainly didn't want to put my face to a brand with shady intentions. I'd worked damned hard to keep myself tabloid unworthy.

That's what my dads called it.

"Hey, I forgot to tell you. There's some mail on the table by the TV. Any of your friends getting married?" Jenson said around a mouthful of waffle. There had been one left...

"Not that I know of, why?"

Jenson shrugged. "One of them looks like a mating or maybe wedding invitation." We both had human and shifter friends since our careers made us exist in both worlds. As rabbits, we were easily able to find places to run, not that my brother longed to run any more than he already did. But he still needed to let his rabbit out from time to time.

"Huh." After checking my social media, which someone else managed for me, I went to the table and scooped up the mail. I was already thinking of excuses to RSVP no because ceremonies like these reminded me of what I was missing in my life. A mate couldn't complete me as a person, but I would welcome someone who didn't see the athlete or the gold medal but saw me.

I turned the thick envelope around to reveal a wax seal stamped with a bear claw. Interesting. The return address was

some B&B a couple of states over. I'd never heard of it but I was intrigued. If it was an invitation to a wedding or a mating ceremony, the return address would be from the couple.

I was careful with the wax seal. Kind of felt like I was in a novel and, if I disrespected the seal, some magical villain would come to tell me I'd ruined the prophecy.

"Is it an invite?" Jenson plopped down next to me on the couch.

"It's a letter," I said as he inspected the envelope and peeled the wax seal off with audacity. "Hey!"

"What? You were gonna wear it on a necklace or something?"

Brat.

"No. I just..."

He sat up. "What's the Bearclaw Inn? Did you stay there? They wanna put a cardboard cutout of you in the lobby or some shit?"

"No. They...well, he. It's an invitation to stay there. All expenses paid except for the flight there. A free vacation."

"Damn, that sounds nice. You can go anytime?"

I shook my head as I skimmed the letter but then read it over again, trying to soak in every detail. "It's next weekend."

Jenson took the letter from me and read it over himself. "Are you gonna go? I mean, it's not like you have anything else to do...sorry. Didn't mean it that way."

He was an ass sometimes, but he was my best friend. Plus, I was far from perfect. I had to admit that the last few months,

while everyone else was excited for me, I'd plunged deep into introspection, which wasn't a good place to be.

“I think so. I'm gonna talk to Dad about it.”



## Chapter Three

*Locke*

The more I thought about the invitation, the more I thought it was a scam. I'd seen mail from time-shares and various other such things that came on pretty nice paper. But the handwritten note? They sometimes used a font to look as if it were personalized, but never real ink, and this was for sure that. As my fortunes grew, so did the number of people who hoped to get me to invest some of it in their projects, and usually I just tossed them in the trash. Heck, I had an assistant partially so I would never even see them. His job was to shred and send to the composter on the roof.

But he'd given me this one.

Sorting correspondence being his job, he had quite an ability to recognize junk when he saw it as well as finding the rare piece of actually relevant snail mail. So, while my hand holding the invitation back in its envelope hovered over the waste basket, I hesitated.

Then I tapped the button on the side of my desk. "Davey, can you step in here for a moment?" An intercom might seem old-fashioned, but it was a security measure. Should someone make it past the lobby guard, the receptionist, and my assistant, I might not be able to use my cell phone or even the land line on the small table by the window, but it took a fraction of a second to tap the button and, if I didn't speak after doing so, it would alert Davey of danger.

But I kind of liked the old-office feel of using it, so more often than not, I used the intercom to summon Davey. It was also faster.

“Right away, sir.” I had asked him to call me Locke on more than one occasion, but except for rare occasions, such as our annual picnic, he preferred the more formal address. Sir or Mr. Locke. He opened the door and stepped inside. “Should I close it?”

“Yes.” I waved to the chair in front of my desk. “Have a seat.”

“All right.” He settled himself, straight backed as always. I had a private theory that he’d been either a butler or a gentleman’s gentleman in a previous life because no shifter in his twenties had it in him to be this formal. “What can I do for you?”

I pushed the envelope across the shiny wood surface. “Read this over, please, and give me your thoughts.”

He reached for it and frowned. “Is it a security issue?” Fingerprints, of course, he always thought of everything. “I thought...”

“No, I just want your input before I decide whether to respond.” Leaning back, I watched him run his finger over the seal before pulling out the invitation and opening it. “Do you recognize the seal?”

“Yes, that’s why I gave it to you.” He didn’t say more. Never one for chitchat.

“Perhaps you can expand on that?”

A rare grin quirked the corner of his mouth. “The Bearclaw is a very nice place, or so I hear, and the only way anyone can stay there is by invitation.”

“Is it usually comped?”

“I don’t know for sure, but I believe so. It’s a very special thing to be invited. I envy you, sir.”

“How does this Franklin stay in business if he doesn’t charge anyone?”

“No one seems to have that information, either. Presumably he’s well fixed and likes to have guests he handpicks.”

“Not very logical though, hmm?” I considered a moment, not really expecting a reply. “Is he selling something? Shares in the place maybe? Some sort of business opportunity?”

“Not that I’ve heard.” He read the invitation again. “Definitely envious.”

Since he’d never expressed the least bit of jealousy about anything I had, this really aroused my curiosity. “And why is that?”

His lips moved then stopped before he replied. “You will have a very nice time there. A friend of mine went a few years ago and reported that the inn is nicely appointed, the breakfasts are delightful, and it is set in an area with a lot of beautiful countryside and small pleasant shops to explore.”

I gaped at him. “Do I make it a habit to explore countryside or ‘pleasant shops’?”

“No, sir, but maybe you should.”



I jerked back as if my pet kitten had bitten my hand. And Davey, despite his cute name, was not anybody's kitten, but neither had he ever made such a statement to me. His lion rarely appeared at all. "I beg your pardon?"

"I've never told you what to do, sir," he began.

"As you shouldn't." Irritation rose, and my bear who had actually been pretty quiet today was grumbling. I so did not need that voice heard from.

"But just this once, you need a break. You work harder than anyone ever should, and maybe a few days off will give you renewed energy to go back to it. You have that big meeting coming up, and, if you'll forgive me for saying so, you don't look like you're getting much sleep."

Wow. Davey did have a voice; he just usually chose not to use it, and I kind of liked this version of him. Not that I'd say so, but honesty was good.

"I haven't been, actually." I was just grateful he didn't mention knowing about my naps, since we were being so open with one another. "And you're probably right, but as you know, the cost isn't an issue. I could go to the lodge?" I'd bought the A-frame in a ski resort area as an investment and also with the idea of using it when I took time off.

"Yes, you could, but I think you'll enjoy the Bearclaw. And why not go somewhere new." Not that I'd been to the lodge—not once since I closed on it. If I loved it so much, wouldn't I have gone?

I studied my assistant, his expression earnest and kind. He never gave me unasked-for advice, and maybe I owed it to him

to take it the one time he did. “You do think it’s a good idea?”

“Yes.”

“For sure not a scam or someone wanting time alone with me to present a business scheme?”

“I’m sure, sir.” He stood up. “Should I make the airline reservations?”

“And the car rental. But if this is bad...”

“I know, I’ll never hear the end of it.” He started for the door, calling over his shoulder, “But if it’s good, I want a raise.”

“You’ll get it.” I always liked a deal, even this kind. And I hoped it was a bet I’d lose. I really needed the rest.



# Chapter Four

## *Sheppard*

While Jenson and I had never heard about the Bearclaw Inn, the internet had a lot to say about it. A lot.

Apparently, Franklin, the owner, didn't take reservations. There was no phone number, and to call his website minimalist was being kind. He did all his business via handwritten letters. No emails. No online RSVPs. Nothing.

Reddit omegas and alpha alike had a ton to say.

Those who spent the weekend at Franklin's invitation never left unmated. Never. In all of his years of inviting people and having them stay at his B&B, all of his matches worked out in the end. A couple of omegas and alphas said that the road to getting together was a bit of a struggle since Franklin invited people from all over the country, but not a single one of them had broken up or not gotten mated.

My rabbit was thumping his leg and scratching at my insides to give this a chance.

A chance, almost a guarantee to meet our mate.

An alpha to love and feel safe with—to love me and steady me when lately I felt like a wave in the ocean—ebbing and flowing but never really going anywhere.

In my parents' house, I went to the kitchen where the smells of fresh pumpkin bread and cookies wafted through the air. One of my fathers was a baker, so this was no surprise.

“Morning,” I called out so that if they were in the middle of anything, I wasn’t going to walk in on it. Jenson and I had both interrupted our fathers in the middle of all kinds of things over the years. They were very affectionate and...energetic.

“Hey there,” my dad Abe said, coming from the pantry. My other dad, Bryan, came out shortly after. Both of their faces were red, and Abe was smoothing his shirt down.

“Really? In the pantry? That’s where the cookies are,” I joked.

“Damned straight,” Bryan said and swatted my other dad on the behind.

“Jeez.” I grabbed a freshly made cookie and went to pour a cup of coffee. “I have something to talk to you about.”

“Sounds serious. Let’s go sit down.”

We took our morning treats and coffee to the living room and sat on the couches. My parents’ house was always so cozy. Abe was a bear shifter and always had our den loving and warm. “Have you guys ever heard of the Bearclaw Inn?”

Bryan shrugged and so did Abe. “Is that somewhere we stayed for a meet?”

“No. Here. Read it.” I pulled the invitation from my pocket and handed it to them. They were sitting so close together they read it at the same time.

Abe gasped. “I’ve heard of this place. This guy, Franklin, is a matchmaker.”

“How did you find out?” I asked.

“In baking class I teach at the community center, there’s a student named Craig who met his mate there. Said Franklin is a widower and matches people up so they can find love like he did. I don’t know the whole story, but Craig and his omega are really happy and are expecting twins in a few months.”

“Are you going to go?” Bryan asked, holding up the letter. “I know your training didn’t leave a lot of time for dating, but are you looking for an alpha, Son?”

I shrugged. Trying to hide the truth from these two was like trying to sneak in the window while they were standing inside, waiting. “I do. My rabbit is longing for a mate. But I don’t want it to be a case of me trying to find a mate because I’m bored or I don’t know what I want to do with my life.”

“When you were still focused on swimming, did you want a mate?” Bryan asked.

“Of course, Dad. I didn’t have time for one.”

Abe took my other dad’s hand in his. “A mate is a lifelong commitment. Your alpha has to be your priority, and you will be his. I don’t think you take that lightly. You never have taken anything lightly. Always been gung ho on anything you put your mind to.”

“I want a mate. I want a family. I...I want something other than myself to live for.”

Abe slapped his hands on his thighs. “Then that settles it. We need to go shopping.”

“Shopping, Dad? I tell you I want a mate, and you want to go shopping?”

Bryan stood. “Shep, all you have is workout clothes, lounge clothes, and maybe some suits for the press. Let your father take you shopping. You’re going to meet your mate.”

I’d done a ton of workouts, but nothing compared to the exhaustion I felt after shopping with my dad Abe. When we were done, I slumped onto my couch, surrounded by bags.

I had one thing to do.

Book my ticket.

I had to admit, after the talk with my dads and thinking over it some more, I was more than excited to buy a ticket and meet my mate despite the chatter of that little naysayer in my head.

“So you’re doing it?” Jenson asked, looking over my shoulder. Nosey little brother if there ever was one.

“I’m doing it. Why not, right? Don’t you have some running to do or stretching? Something other than minding my business?” It was all in fun, the way we spoke to each other.

“Not really. First class or regular?”

“I’m going to meet my mate,” I said, hovering the mouse pointer over the buttons to book the seat.

“First class,” we both said together.

And then I saw the price.

“Nope. Regular. Normal class. Damn. You’re flying to another state, not selling an organ. Jeez.” Jenson wasn’t wrong. He was very careful with his money. More careful than me and that was saying something.

“Okay, alpha. I hope you are as eager as me to meet. I hope so.”





# Chapter Five

*Locke*

Getting away from the office was never as easy as it should have been. Despite organization and planning on my part, there were others who wanted last-minute meetings or calls. Often, I had to change my flights and the few times I had tried to get away—well it didn't happen. Sometimes issues in other countries or markets could require my attention, but Davey went to bat this time, insistent that nothing was going to cost me this much-needed rest.

He was always protective of me and my time, but this time he seemed particularly fierce, which made me wonder just how exhausted I did look. Washing my face in my office bathroom, I studied the shadows under my eyes and had my answer. Shifters had fewer health problems than humans, but even we could work ourselves into the ground. Apparently. Maybe literally.

“You ready, sir?” Davey's face appeared in the open bathroom doorway. “The car is downstairs.”

“Yes, I think so. You sure there's nothing else I need to do before I go?”

“Not a thing. It's all covered.” He stepped aside so I could come out then herded me toward the office door. “And I don't want you to worry about a thing.”

“Thank you, Davey.” I gave him a glance. “If anyone but you was being this way, I'd think they were trying to get rid of me to sell the office machines.”

“Ha ha, so funny, sir.” He walked me to the elevator and pushed the Down button. “Seriously, give yourself one weekend without making work your number one priority.”

“I will do my best.” I walked onto the elevator, and he moved to follow, but I held up a hand. “I really think I can make it to the lobby on my own. If I’m going to be able to relax, it’s only because I’m counting on you to be my eyes and ears.”

There had to be something wrong with me that I’d worked this hard to achieve everything I had and didn’t feel confident taking a few mental health days.

I slept on the plane. Not something I ordinarily did, but it showed how much I needed that rest I was on my way to get. Disembarking, I yawned and headed for where the car would be waiting. I could have rented a car, but I was determined—and Davey pressed me—to let myself enjoy a few of the luxuries I’d earned. For once. And the car he’d arranged was all about that. Deep leather seats that had me leaning back with a sigh. Maybe I should do this more often. How much more could I accomplish if I wasn’t running on empty?

It was a long drive out of the city and into the countryside, but I used all the discipline I had not to get my phone out and check emails, messages, and markets. If I was going to take advantage of this opportunity, I had to do it correctly. So, I looked out the window and tried to be a good tourist. There were a lot of trees. And we drove through a small town where the driver mentioned there were many charming stores to browse when visiting the inn.

I felt like someone was trying to make me go shopping.

Finally, we arrived in front of a charming building, more like a large old home than a hotel, and, as the driver opened my door, a dapper older man came out on the porch and waited while I climbed the stairs.

“Franklin?” I held out a hand.

“That’s me. How was your trip?”

“Smooth flight and the same for the drive.” I stepped aside while the driver deposited my bag on the porch and left with a nod to us both. “Looking forward to a relaxing time.”

“Well then, why don’t you come on inside, and I’ll give you a tour?”

I wasn’t sure I needed to see all the parts of the building, but he was so nice, and even if I didn’t need a freebie, it was kind of the old fella to host me this way, so I followed him in. “It’s so bright and open in here.”

“Well, thank you. My late husband and I wanted our home to be welcoming, and after he...well, I wanted to welcome others here to where we were so happy.”

As he walked me through the living room and other downstairs areas, I could imagine him here with a special man, someone he loved very much. This home was definitely put together with love. “We serve breakfast in the morning and snacks in the afternoon, as well as lunch and dinner, if you don’t go out, but don’t ever go hungry. If you want a late-night sandwich or anything, makings are on hand.” Aches and pains I’d ignored eased, and if my bear would just stay as quiet as he was right now, I might go to my room and sleep until Monday.

“Thank you for everything. Can I see my room, now? I think I’d like to take a nap.”

“Absolutely.” He started for the stairs then stopped, cocking his head. “I think another guest has arrived. Would you mind terribly if we wait a moment so I can show you both your rooms at the same time?” He gave a wry grin. “These old legs like to skip a trip where they can.”

What could I say to that? “Of course. I—” I forgot what I was saying when Franklin opened the door to reveal the other guest.

And my bear said the one thing he had not until now.  
*Mate.*



# Chapter Six

## *Sheppard*

Despite the fact that my dad had bought all new clothes for me, I wore my comfiest hoodie and lounge pants to fly. I knew that the flight would be exhausting, but I had no idea the hassle this particular one would be. What was supposed to be a four-hour trip had countless delays, and I arrived at my destination several hours late.

Here I was, late to meet my alpha. I took an Uber from the airport to the Bearclaw and arrived at nearly five. The sun was touching the horizon and, as the car came to a stop, I gasped at the beauty of the tangerines and magentas water-coloring the sky.

“You must be Sheppard!” Franklin, or who I hoped was Franklin, opened the door. He was a stout guy with salt-and-pepper hair and a priceless smile.

I didn’t think that this was going to be an age-gap situation, but I tried to keep an open mind in those few seconds while I walked toward the beautiful home. “I’m Franklin. Welcome.”

*Whew.*

“Good afternoon. I was delayed.”

“That’s okay. We were waiting for you. Come on in and get settled.”

When I walked into the large home, I was immediately struck with how beautiful it was. A lovely staircase with a

stained glass window. Simple and elegant furniture. Franklin took pride in this home, and it showed.

“Sheppard, this is Locke. He’s staying with us as well.”

I turned to see who Franklin was speaking about and froze in place. Every muscle in my body went rigid, and my breath hitched in my lungs. Locke stepped forward, chuckling a bit, and extended his hand. “I’m Locke. It’s nice to meet you, Sheppard.”

I should’ve listened to my dad and worn my best outfit. Locke wore a button-down shirt with a sweater on top, along with dark-washed jeans and some cute sneakers. Not what I expected but I was definitely not let down. He was gorgeous. When our hands touched, there was a bit of electricity that flowed between us.

*He’s a bear. Tell him to take us to his den.*

“It’s nice to meet you as well. May I see my room? I smell like the airport and the airplane.”

Locke smiled. “You smell fine to me, omega.”

I ignored that comment. The alpha was just being polite. I shouldn’t read too much into it. People didn’t fall for each other that fast.

“It’s right upstairs,” Franklin answered. “Follow me, please. Both of you.”

It took a few seconds for me to tear my eyes off of Locke with his warm eyes and strong arms that begged for me to bury myself in. Maybe I was reading too much into this. There was always a chance that Fate could throw a wrench in my plans or hers.



We followed Franklin up the stairs. The balcony had a door on either side. “That is yours and this one”—he pointed to the other side—“is Locke’s.”

“Thank you so much. For the opportunity and everything. I really appreciate it.” I opened my door but watched Locke go into his room.

“It’s my pleasure. Really. Dinner is in the oven, so if you’d like to freshen up and come downstairs, I’ll be serving it soon and telling you more about your stay here.”

“I’ll be there.”

I pretended to take my sweet time getting into the room but once the door to my suite was closed, I breathed out and tried to get my composure. I’d looked like a complete slob down there. What a great first impression.

After the quickest shower of my life, I dressed in the jeans my dad bought, along with a blue V-neck sweater my dad said brought out the color of my eyes. A boy I had a few dates with in high school had mentioned my eyes, but I’d had championships in Japan and, when I came back, he had moved on, and I went to the prom alone.

I leaned on the counter of the bathroom and hung my head. This day had been a whirlwind. I was tired. I was hungry. I was agitated with the entire transportation department.

Maybe I was too eager. Locke was gorgeous and fully bear. Grizzly, if my scenting was correct. I had no fear of bears. One of my fathers was one after all. They didn’t know

what we would shift into when we were born, but both Jenson and I were rabbits.

Didn't stop my bear father from raising us like cubs.

The sound of the oven opening downstairs caught my attention. How long had I been standing there, mentally debating if all of this was real? Showing up late to dinner wasn't the best first impression—or second.

I bounced down the stairs, taking a moment to bask in the light coming through the stained glass window. One peek at the bottom of the stairs revealed a sitting room that led into a library. Fire blazing in the fireplaces. Everything in its place, but not in a hotel-like way. More like a well-loved home.

I followed the sound of conversation, mainly the bass of Locke's voice. "Am I late?"

"You're right on time," he said, taking a platter from Franklin's hands. Roasted vegetables surrounded a chuck roast that was already making my mouth water.

"How can I help?" I asked.

Franklin handed me the bread basket, along with a bottle of wine and the butter container. "You can take everything into the dining room, and I will be right behind you."

"Anything else?" Locke put the platter in the center of the wood table. It was set with stoneware and heavy cutlery that suited the rural location. The dining room was surrounded with windows that gave us a view of the countryside. Burnt sienna and golden leaves were scattered along the ground as the trees bid them goodbye for the winter.

“That’s all. Now, let’s sit down and get to know each other.”



# Chapter Seven

*Locke*

Franklin sat down to eat with us, something I had been prepared to encourage, even if he had not done so. For more than one reason. Few people threw me off my game, at all, but with my bear doing some kind of wild dance inside me while chanting *mate* and *mine* and other much less PG-rated suggestions about how we should close that deal, my thoughts and words were not lining up at all.

“So, you said you and your late mate set this place up?” I said, just to get him talking so I could spend my time taking in the sight and scent of the other guest at the inn.

“We did.” He smiled, but his eyes held a mixture of emotions I couldn’t entirely sort. Sadness at loss? Happiness with memories? “He was the one with the best taste and all the good ideas.”

“The place is beautiful,” murmured Sheppard. “And I’m very grateful to have been invited to enjoy it for the weekend.”

“I’m glad to have you as well. My mate would have been so pleased to see people coming here and coming together like this.” He held out a hand. “Pass me your plates and let’s enjoy our meal.”

We did as he asked, and our host piled up the roast and veggies then handed back the plates. “Don’t forget rolls.”

They were the kind of soft dinner roll that I’d loved when I was a kid and that almost nobody served anymore. Pulling

one open, I slathered it with butter and took a bite. My sigh had Franklin and Sheppard both grinning. “I can’t help it. Can you tell me where to buy some of these? Is there a bakery in the little town we drove through?”

“There is.” Franklin pushed the basket closer to me. “And they are very good, but these come from my own oven.”

“Can I arrange for you to ship me a dozen every week?” I was only half kidding, but Franklin laughed.

“I’m glad you like them. Is the roast okay?”

We both assured him that everything was far more than okay and then proceeded to prove that true by devouring everything in front of us and accepting the offer of seconds. While we ate this serving, a little slower than the first, conversation picked up, and I had the opportunity to learn more about the intriguing omega who was spooning apple butter—homemade as well—onto his fourth roll.

“So, Sheppard, you look kind of familiar, but I don’t think we’ve ever met.” I had been so lost in my bear’s excitement when I first saw Sheppard, I hadn’t realized this, but if I hadn’t seen him before, it was his doppelganger for sure.

He licked a dab of apple butter off his finger, something my bear heartily suggested I do for him, and set down the last corner of the roll. I regretted that—my bear wanted to feed him, not stop him from eating. My animal had never been very present beyond wanting the occasional run until recently when he’d begun to point out that he wanted his mate. And if he had made the comment about any other omega, I might have thought he just wanted someone, anyone, but he never had.

Sheppard was the only omega he'd ever noticed. Those one-night stands I'd had from time to time left him cold. He didn't show any reaction to them at all. But this rabbit—wow.

“Oh, you might have seen me swimming.” He reached for the morsel and nibbled at it. I unsuccessfully tried to suppress the shudder that ran over me. No one commented on it though.

“Swimming?” Why would I have seen him swimming? I hadn't been to the beach or even a lake in years. “Where were you swimming?”

He blinked, long lashes shielding his eyes before he answered. “I was in the last Olympics.”

“And the one before that,” Franklin put in. “But he didn't medal until this one. Gold,” he added helpfully.

“Gold...yes! I did see you, but I was in a sports bar at a meeting with an investor and the sound was turned down so I didn't hear your name. “That's impressive.”

“Thank you.” He didn't say more, and I appreciated both his achievement and his humility.

“You left everyone else in that race behind,” I recalled, suddenly realizing something. My bear had awakened that night from his semi-slumber. He saw him... And it changed everything. “Congratulations on your success.”

“I appreciate that. It was a long-term goal, and one I was lucky to reach.”

“I'm sure it took talent and hard work.”

He reached for another roll. “These are so good, Franklin. Would you share the recipe? I don't really do much baking,

but I would love to try.”

Subject changed.

“Tell us a bit about yourself, Locke. I understand you have your own successes to enjoy.”

I shrugged. “Nothing like an Olympic medal. But I do like my work for the most part. And my office.”

“It’s good to like what you do for your work,” Franklin mused. “Since you do it all day, and I’m guessing that you, Locke, labor on into the night.”

“Sometimes, but I don’t have other responsibilities, being single.”

“That’s true,” he said. “A mate would probably be a distraction.”

“Yes.” How often had I shared that same thought. “I am sure he would be.”

“But a good distraction.” The older man’s eyes grew shiny before he looked away. “A very good one.” He got up and grabbed the platter. “I’ll get dessert.”

We insisted on helping then settled down to eat the amazing warm blueberry pie with rich, creamy vanilla ice while we talked about ordinary things, like why people called me Locke, but I managed not to reveal my actual first name. I used an initial on all business correspondence just for this reason. And if Sheppard could avoid a lot of detail about his business, so could I keep my secret for now.





# Chapter Eight

*Sheppard*

The dinner was incredible, and so was the company. Locke had me in a daze of awe. He was already an accomplished businessman and had a plan for his life. His eyes sparkled when he spoke of how his plans were panning out.

Franklin complimented him on achieving so many things for his age.

In comparison to Locke, which I learned was his last name and not his first, I was as solid as water.

All my life I'd trained. Tight schedules. Sleepless nights. Flights. I'd been to places all over the world, but only experienced hotel lobbies, cabs, and swimming facilities. Also a few radio stations and TV studios.

All of that and what did I have?

A piece of gold and some trophies.

"It's a gorgeous night." Locke's voice resounded behind me as I stood at the back door, breathing in the cool air.

"It is. A good night for a walk."

His chuckle wrapped around me like a warm hug. "I was going to sit and enjoy the night in one of those rocking chairs. I swear they have been calling my name since I got here."

I moved aside for him to go to the back porch, and he reached out and brushed my fingers. Every cell in my body ignored with lust and my rabbit went nearly feral inside me.

“Would you like to join me, Sheppard? That’s a great name, by the way.”

“Sure,” I said with an unsteady tone. “And thank you. You still haven’t divulged your real name.”

He sat in one of the rocking chairs and sighed while patting the one next to him. “Everyone who talks to me calls me Locke.”

I laughed while sitting down. “Keep your secrets, then.”

“I’m not the only one. You barely spoke about your life back there.” His statement wasn’t accusatory but blunt. I liked it. Most people danced around the issues.

“What’s to say? Some days it all seems trivial. I jumped in a pool and swam the fastest.”

He nailed me with a stare. “Is that how you see it?”

I rocked a few times, letting the cool air infiltrate my attitude. “No one talks about life after completing a goal. Especially one so hard to get to as the Olympics. You work all your life for it. You get the medal. You celebrate. Bask in the afterglow for a while. Then nothing.”

He grunted. I half expected him to light up a cigar. That’s what he scented like to me—cigar smoke and cherries. He rolled his sleeves up to his elbows, despite the chill in the air, revealing part of a tattoo that I suspected traveled up his arm. I would love to explore that tattoo and more. “That’s true. They don’t. You must have some idea. Even though we don’t make concrete plans, everyone has an idea of what they want to do next in their lives.”

He wasn't wrong. This man who I had met only hours had insights for me. "I thought about coaching."

"Kids?" he asked.

My eyes were on his full lips, wondering what they would be like on mine or wrapped around parts of me. Gods, I needed to stop thinking about a stranger that way. At the same time, Locke felt like anything but a stranger. Like I could spill all my secrets to him, and they would be safe. "Yeah. I want kids."

Another chuckle that reverberated through me. The shudder that ripped through me had nothing to do with autumn making way for winter. "I didn't mean if you wanted children, omega. Do you want to coach kids?"

Embarrassment flooded my veins. "Oh. Yeah. Kids. There's so much talent out there. Even when I was the best, there were others vying for my spot all the time. Some who were just as good if not better than me but simply weren't as lucky or hadn't been at the right place at the right time. Sometimes it all seems like a sham. I don't mean to sound ungrateful."

"You don't, Sheppard." He absolutely purred my name and, while that was impossible for a bear, I couldn't think of another way to describe it. "The coaching sounds promising. You've been there. You know what it takes and how hard you have to work to get to your goals. Who was your coach?"

"I had two." The memory warmed me. "My fathers."

"I take it they weren't hard on you."

“They didn’t have to be. I was hard on myself. They were fantastic coaches. Both of them. Are you close to your family?”

Locke stopped rocking. “My parents passed away. About three years ago. I was an only child.”

He sounded so sad. I wanted to get up and wrap my arms around him despite yearning to be in his embrace since the moment I first laid eyes on him. “I’m sorry.”

Locke smiled but it didn’t reach those warm eyes of his. “Thank you. I’m glad you have family. It’s important. I didn’t realize how important until I was left without one.”

We rocked for a long time in silence. His breaths were steady. His heartbeat strong, a rhythm that soothed me more than the movement of the chair against the porch. More than the wind or the scents of fall.

Then my brain got in the way.

I was falling for this trap. I came here, hopeful for an alpha, and here I was ready to ask him for my mating mark, along with anything else of mine he wanted, but I didn’t really know him.

I opened my mouth to speak, to come up with something to make him respond so I could hear that voice again but as I did, he rose to his feet. “It’s getting late. How about that walk in the morning?”

“A walk sounds great. After breakfast?” I stood and almost fell. My knees were weak when I was around this man. He caught me with his hand on my waist, and I nearly tipped

forward and pressed my lips to his. It took every bit of restraint I had not to.



# Chapter Nine

*Locke*

I slept well.

Considering my bear's uproar since he got a look through my eyes at the rabbit he called his mate, I had not expected to rest at all. But a hot shower in the nicely appointed en suite followed by a cup of the herbal tea left outside my door, and my head barely touched the pillow before I fell into dreamland.

Usually, I woke before dawn to work out in the gym in my building before heading to the office, but this morning I did not open my eyes until well after sunrise, and a glance at my phone told me eight o'clock had come and gone.

I stretched and lay there in comfort for a couple of minutes before I remembered where I was and what my plans were for the day. A certain omega and I were going to take a walk somewhere. The thought had my bear back awake and chanting, and I was right there with him. My plans for rest were going well, but it had been a long time since I'd been so excited to wake up and do anything social.

Hell, it had been a long time since I actually had done anything social. Sure, I went out for lunches and dinners, cocktails, even played racquetball or, once recently pickleball, but those were all business-related occasions. This morning's plans were unlikely to result in any monetary gain. That sure sounded fun.



Another shower, toothbrushing, and all the rest of the grooming took me a fast fifteen minutes, and after donning a pair of jeans, a polo shirt, and one of my favorite pairs of sneakers, I grabbed a light jacket and headed for the door.

When I opened it, I found Sheppard just leaving his room, and my heart sped up at the sight. If he'd looked great last night, standing here with the scattered stained glass light coloring his face, he looked like the subject of a medieval painting. "Good morning, Locke."

"Sheppard. You slept in, too?"

"Yes. After having to be up at five or earlier for years to get all the pool time I needed, I never rise before seven now."

"It's after eight."

He grinned. "Isn't it wonderful? I just slept so much better than usual, I didn't want to wake up, I guess."

"I'm very glad you slept well. It must be this place because I did, too." We fell into step together going down the stairs, and just that small act made me happy. "I think I smell bacon." Sheppard gave a little skip and almost missed a step, but I grabbed his arm and steadied him. "Thank you." He giggled. "It's just that bacon was not on the training table at our house, and I've missed it."

"It does smell amazing, doesn't it? I don't eat it often, either. I wonder what else Franklin has for us?"

The old gentleman himself waited in the dining room doorway. "I hope you two are hungry."

I had never let go of Sheppard's arm, and I didn't want to now, but it would have been awkward to squeeze through the

doorway side by side, so I released him and allowed him to precede me into the room.

The table was laid for us, but only two places were set this time.

“Franklin? Aren’t you going to eat with us?” Sheppard asked.

“No.” He moved a plate of croissants to the sideboard where a buffet was laid out, enough breakfast for twice as many people. “I had breakfast a couple of hours ago while you two were still snoozing away. But I will sit and have coffee with you, if you don’t mind. I have some suggestions for places to go and sights to see.”

“We were just going to take a walk...” I began, but Franklin arched a brow and I stopped. “Of course, I’m always up for ideas.” In fact, I hadn’t been open to ideas from others much in a while. Too used to being the boss. But if I wanted to show this omega a good time, expert advice would be welcome.

Sheppard and I surveyed all the food and made our selections. Bacon, fluffy scrambled eggs, the croissants, country potatoes...and big bowl of gorgeous fruit salad. I took some of everything, reminding myself I was going to be walking or sightseeing and could enjoy the calories. Besides, I had a feeling that calories didn’t count here at the Bearclaw.

“What do you do with the leftovers?” Sheppard asked, waving at the bounty. “Do you have a second seating?”

“No,” laughed Franklin. “Only you two, but if you wouldn’t mind, I’ll package up what we don’t eat and you can

drop it off at the shelter in town? They can always use a little something extra.”

He went up even higher in my estimation with this request. “Of course. Is there anything to see there?” I asked.

“That’s just what I was going to suggest. It’s a nice little place with some interesting shops, a bookstore, antique places... Many of my guests enjoy spending time there. Also, the diner is very good for lunch.”

“If we have room,” I joked. “But the town sounds good. Are you up for it, Sheppard?”

He was, so we went.

The town was every bit as nice as Franklin said, better even, and the shelter where we dropped off the food held none of the depressing aspects of the one I volunteered at in the city on Thanksgiving. The people there probably were every bit as much in need, but the place itself felt much homier and, kinder if that was a thing. Just overall, a place much nicer than one would expect to find called a shelter. It was a two-story building on Main St. between the hardware store and the bookstore Franklin mentioned, and after we handed off the food, we followed the scent of ink and paper next door.

The whole town was lovely, and we walked up and down, going in and out of stores for a few hours, but nothing could top the fact that I found two signed volumes by a mystery author from the 19th century. I had some first editions of their works, but nothing autographed, and I bounced from foot to foot while the shop assistant carefully wrapped my purchases.

Apparently even I had my weaknesses, like these books and the omega who laughed at me while also laughing with me.



# Chapter Ten

*Sheppard*

“For business or for pleasure?” I asked as we were seated at a table for two in the quaintest diner I’d ever seen. The place was decorated in bright, bold colors, and everything was intimate and yet, fun.

Locke coughed, choking on his water. “I’m sorry?”

“The books. Are you going to keep them in your home or read them or sell them for more money? Sorry. It’s really none of my business. I was just curious.”

Locke reached across the table and put his warm hand over mine. As a rabbit shifter, I tended to stay warmer than a human would, but my temperature was nothing compared to his. It traveled up the length of my arm before spreading throughout my body. “It’s fine. A fair question. I keep these. I’ve actually been looking for these two particular books everywhere. I can’t believe I found them in this small town. Together. In the same shop. What about you? Do you enjoy reading?”

“I do. But I prefer my Kindle to a paperback. I love books, don’t get me wrong, but having an entire library at my fingertips is convenient.”

“That’s true. Don’t let me fool you. I have a Kindle in my backpack a well.”

The server approached the table and smiled. He was handsome but nothing compared to the man next to me. “What

can I get for you two?”

We ordered quickly. Wine for the both of us and after I ordered the turkey club, Locke requested a steak-and-brie sandwich with onion rings.

It sounded so good! “Actually, can I change my order, please? I’ll have what he’s having.”

The waiter chuckled. “Of course. I’ll be back with your wine.”

“It’s a lovely day,” I said and noticed that Locke still hadn’t removed his hand from mine. When he caught me looking, he removed it, but it didn’t miss my attention that he had blushed furiously.

“The fall is my favorite. You know, I almost didn’t accept the invitation when I received it. I’m glad that I did.”

His eyes bore into me, telling me more than his words ever could. A pleasurable tingle rippled along my skin, waking up every part of me. “You mean when you saw that letter in a wax-sealed envelope, you were excited? I thought it was another mating ceremony or a wedding.”

He cocked his head while the waiter came and delivered our wine. “You don’t like ceremonies or weddings?”

I sighed. “I like them. I do. They are a beautiful display of love. But after a while, you want to send out the invitations and not receive them from others. Gods, I’m a downer.”

We both laughed. “No, you’re not. You’re allowed to express anything you’re feeling without guilt, Sheppard. And yes, I was excited about coming here for a vacation.”

I scoffed. “Yeah, plus the rumors that this place is guaranteed to have you leaving no less than fully mated.”

All the color drained from Locke’s face. “What? I-I haven’t heard those rumors.”

I looked around, waiting for the punch line or someone to reveal we were on a hidden camera show. He had to be kidding.

“Locke, that’s why we were invited here. Franklin is a matchmaker. No one knows how he does it or why, but no one has ever stayed at the Bearclaw and left unmated. Or so I’m told.”

Another blush. My ego was thoroughly stroked at this powerful, almost intimidating bear getting embarrassed by me.

“I’m beginning to understand that. My assistant was a bit shady about the whole thing when I showed him the invite. Now I see why. I thought it was a good chance for a weekend away. But Davey almost pushed me out the door.”

The pause between us soured my stomach. There was a delicious meal in front of me, one I would’ve never been able to partake in while in training and now, the last thing I wanted to do was eat.

“Locke, don’t worry about it. Let’s enjoy this weekend.”

He began to eat. My heart sank and shattered inside me.

*Mate. Tell him. We need him.*

Of all the times for my rabbit to shout at me. The resolve in his voice made my heart flutter. He was sure that the man who was now silent across from me was my mate.



I'd ruined it before it even got a chance.

I raised my hand to alert the waiter. Locke needed to enjoy his stay here. He deserved a vacation without a mating hanging over him like a shadow.

The waiter brought me a to-go container. Locke looked over at me packing my food up. "Where are you going?"

"I'm letting you enjoy your meal and the rest of your vacation."

"Sheppard, I didn't... You don't have to..."

I held up my hand. "It's okay. Relax and have this time to yourself. I understand."

Not what my rabbit wanted me to say, but he was my mate and, despite wanting him so badly I could taste it, his happiness came first.

"Sheppard, it's..."

"Locke, listen. It's okay. I've called an Uber. Maybe I'll see you tonight at dinner. Have a great day."

A car pulled up and I got in after confirming the details and, as much as I wanted to, didn't spare a look at my bear mate who was now eating alone.

*Mate. Go to him. Make him ours.*

"Yeah, not today, buddy." I sighed.

When I got back, our host met me in the foyer. "Good afternoon, Sheppard. Where..." The lines in Franklin's

forehead were deep while his eyebrows bunched over his nose.  
“Where is Locke?”

I forced a smile. The widow owner of this immaculate place hadn't been wrong. But sometimes Fate had other plans.  
“He is still in town, but I got a little tired. Hey, I got this for lunch but decided I'd rather take a nap. Did you want it? I haven't eaten a bite of it.”

“Oh, thank you. I don't get into town much. Have a good rest, Sheppard.”



# Chapter Eleven

*Locke*

I couldn't eat a bite after he left. Once again, the server had to fetch a to-go box, but I forgot it when I left, and the poor guy chased me out on the sidewalk with it. I wasn't sure I'd ever be able to eat again. Although nobody had mentioned to me about the mating aspect of this vacation—and I would have Davey's head for that when I returned—I was more surprised than shocked to hear about it. My bear was adamant that Sheppard was our mate and had no issue whatsoever with a matchmaker being in the mix.

The real problem was that before I could even consider agreeing with my bear, the rabbit hopped away as fast as he could, leaving us alone. No matter how much my bear wanted him, and even if we were in full agreement on that matter, it didn't matter in the least if the omega in question did not share that opinion.

Maybe we were just reacting to the atmosphere of the Bearclaw. The comfortable atmosphere, good food, a great night's sleep. Those were things I'd probably been starving for, for years. Enter a very good-looking and funny and sweet Olympic medal winner, and I'd have to be made of ice not to melt at his feet. The best thing to do would be to go back to the inn and pack up, head for home. I did need everything the place offered, but if I had to spend that time with someone who did not share my feelings, or what I thought were my feelings, then I would not be able to enjoy any of it.

It was better to head home and lick my wounds, throw myself back into the work that would fill the hours of the day. My bear would keep me awake at night, hurting, too, but there was nothing I could do about that.

But instead of calling for the car to come and pick me up, take me back to the Bearclaw, I walked the streets of the quaint little town. Leaving Main St. behind, I roamed the residential streets, taking in the homes with their neat yards, raked leaves, and final flowers of the year. As the afternoon went on, people were pulling into their driveways, piling out, and heading into their homes. Families and couples greeting one another, carrying bags of groceries or the children's backpacks from school. I never wanted any of that, figuring if the time ever did come when I could make room for a mate in my life, we'd live in the high-rise apartment building and probably not have children. If he wanted one or two, we'd work it out, but my job did not make me material for a father of the year.

No, I never wanted what the man getting out of his car only to be tackled by a little boy with sparkling eyes calling out, "Daddy!" and already launching into the story of his day at preschool.

I never wanted it until now when the man became me and the one standing in the doorway drying his hands on a towel and grinning at the scene took on the face of Sheppard.

I needed therapy. Nobody changed like this.

Did they? Or maybe it was the natural next step for my life.

Except he didn't want me.

Or maybe it wasn't such a big change so much as an expansion of my world. Or maybe it didn't matter because Sheppard didn't want that with me. He wanted kids. Why did he tell me about the Bearclaw? Was it a warning that he didn't want that with me?

But by the time I called for the car and climbed in to ride back to the inn, I'd decided I wasn't going anywhere. I'd stick it out for the weekend and see what happened. Maybe Sheppard would like us, maybe he wouldn't. But for once, I was throwing caution to the wind and just sticking something out for a non-business reason. Like the signed books, this was for pleasure, and I intended to squeeze as much of that out of my stay here as possible.

And, who knew? If Franklin truly did match every alpha and omega who came at his invitation, I might be underselling the magical element.

Magic!

Okay, now I truly was falling under some kind of spell.

Back at the inn, I went upstairs and got cleaned up before dinner. I'd do my very best not to make things weird or in any way uncomfortable. At the bottom of the stairs, I started for the dining room, but Sheppard came out of the kitchen.

"Dinner is set up on the patio. Franklin isn't going to be able to make it tonight." He paused, as if wanting to say something more but then continued back the way he came.

At least he talked to me. Determined to unweird the situation as much as possible, I followed him and sat down at the table outside. The meals were more restaurant style, the grilled chicken, pilaf, and broccoli already on the plate. But... “Please tell me there are rolls in that basket,” I moaned and picked up the napkin to peer underneath.

“Are there?” Sheppard, who had managed to put away several the night before, leaned over to see. “Oh, yes.”

His fervor at the rolls broke the ice, and I burst into laughter. Sheppard froze, two rolls already in his hand, and I watched emotions cross his face. Outrage, confusion...and then humor. “You like the rolls, too,” he grumbled.

“I certainly do.”

From that point, we eased a bit, and by the time we were eating the tiramisu for dessert, we were doing much better. More back on the ground we’d been in before lunch. Then I noticed a note on the edge of the table, under the coffeepot. “What’s this?” Unfolding it, I saw a single sentence. “*The forest is there for a run.*”

That’s right, it is.” Sheppard smiled. “I’m up for it.” He set his fork down and studied it on the table. “Locke, I don’t think it’s because of the location or the matchmaker. I just like you.”

I reached for his hand and brought it to my lips. “I’m very glad to hear that.”





# Chapter Twelve

## *Sheppard*

“Are you sure?” I asked him, never feeling so vulnerable in all my life. My chest was cracked open and at that moment, he had the power to mend it or make me bleed.

“I’m absolutely sure. I want to see that adorable rabbit of yours. My bear wants to run with you, Sheppard.”

“Okay.” I took off my shoes and then my socks and pants, well aware Locke’s eyes were fixed on me the entire time. I may have stripped down slowly, loving the way he assessed me. With a shimmer of power, I shifted into my rabbit and hopped over to my mate, who was still in human form.

He crouched down and ran his hand over my head and ears. My leg thumped with contentment. Our mate was stroking us. He thought we were cute. “Sweet little thing, aren’t you? I bet you can run like the wind. Let’s see.”

While he undressed, I watched in awe. Nothing about his human form was less than perfect. Chiseled abs, just the right amount of muscle to indicate he took care of himself without being too muscly for my taste. And then he shifted. My animal shuddered with the immense power popping and crackling in the air.

My mate was a majestic bear. Huge and menacing. If I were his prey, I would be scared stiff. He could eat me up in one bite.

I took off, wanting the chase. Truth was, I desired the chase in human form, too. I wanted him to romance me and take me as his, but I'd seen the look on his face when I revealed the purpose of the Bearclaw and the invitation. He hadn't been exactly eager.

Bears could run a bit faster than rabbits, in general—yes, I'd googled it—but my athleticism seemed to carry over to my other form, making us equally matched.

We ran through the forest behind the B&B. The trees were magnificent above us. The moon shone through the branches. The smells of incoming winter and the falling away of autumn made me feel as though we were flowing through a fantasy. We stopped once or twice, and he lay on his side, letting me get onto his belly. He sniffed my form, and I rubbed my face against his chest. He smelled like honey and amber, at least those were the names to the scent that came to mind.

By the time we were done and both exhausted, lying on the ground, it was nearly midnight. Locke reached out a paw and curled me into his chest. The sound of his steady heartbeat nearly lulled me into a deep sleep, but I awakened when reality sank in.

I couldn't help but sigh, knowing that my time with Locke was coming to an end.

Weekends were too short in general, but this one was flying by.

What would happen after this? Would we fizzle, exchanging a few texts and calls? One missed call and one week of no communication would stretch into a month and,

before I knew it, there would be years since the last time I had spoken to my fated mate.

No, I couldn't let those thoughts win.

“What is it?” he asked as we shifted back.

“Never enough time,” I answered but didn't explain any further. He didn't need the added pressure.

Our animals had bonded as we ran. They had communed with each other and decided our fate before we could mess it up.

If only our human sides would catch up.

“Should we head to bed? I'm sure Franklin has plans for us tomorrow.”

I tried like hell not to read into what he was saying. There was nothing I wanted more than for him to take me into his embrace and make love to me. Mate me. Make me his.

I wanted him as my alpha.

All the flinging back and forth—the last few months of having no purpose and no vision of the future...it was all clear now.

I wanted a family and a life and a home with the gorgeous male in front of me. Craved it. Hungered for it.

And, despite my fears about mating, I knew this was not a whim to quell my boredom. A family and a life with Locke was my destiny, or, at least, one of them.

“I'm sure he does.” I forced a chuckle.

We went into the house. Franklin was most likely fast asleep, so we tiptoed up the stairs. My body was exhausted, but my mind was wide awake.

“Sheppard?” Locke whispered, and I melted right there on the balcony. The door to his bedroom was to our right and the door to mine was to our left.

Lust threatened to burn me alive while love kept it at bay, that and my need for my mate’s heart to want me as much as I wanted him. I would wait for him to come to me.

Rabbits didn’t chase—they were chased.

“Good night, Locke. Sleep well.”

I forced my feet to walk toward my bedroom. I held my breath waiting for him to stop me. To tell me he wanted me. To tell me that this weekend wasn’t in vain. That Franklin wasn’t wrong.

That we were meant to be together.

Honestly, I would’ve taken anything he was willing to give me in that moment.

I went inside, not daring to look back at him; all my resolve would crumble with one breath from my beloved mate. Sitting in the chair by the window, I memorized the sight of the moon—everything about that night.

As hard as I tried, no sleep came to me.



# Chapter Thirteen

*Locke*

Last night's rest had been a fluke. Because even though I tumbled happily into bed and pulled the soft sheets and blankets up to my shoulders, my traitorous eyes remained open, staring at the ceiling. Or what I could see of it in the dimness. Usually after my bear had a chance to get out and stretch his legs, he'd sleep like a log, but tonight that didn't seem to be happening. He seemed...disappointed in me. Not something I'd noticed him expressing before, but it did not make for comfortable sleeping.

Remembering Franklin's offers, I considered going to the kitchen for a snack, but I wasn't sure where our host's bedroom was, and it would not be nice to wake him up just because I couldn't sleep. So instead, I pulled my Kindle out of my backpack and settled in to read a guide written by an investor with such poor skills I thought the fact he'd authored this to be comedy. But even that failed because the writing was so dry that soon I fell asleep. In my dreams, I had not walked away, not gone to my own room alone but instead had said what I wished I had.

*"Want to come in?"*

*"Yes, I'd love to," dream Sheppard said, and he followed me in and sat on the edge of the bed. He looked up at me and lifted his arms, welcoming me into his embrace, an offer I certainly did not turn down. Rather I hugged him and my lips*

*crashed into his in the kiss I wanted to give him. We belonged together and I knew it. I wanted him to wear my mark, to take him home with me and never let him go. We said things to one another, promises of forever, full acceptance of mating with none of the worries that I'd expect from two people who had to make a life together out of two very different ones in different places.*

*From there, it was a typical dream's welter of movements, some of which made sense and some of which did not but all of which had me flying toward orgasm with mind-blurring speed. We kissed and touched and mouths and hands were everywhere, but just as things were really heating up, it all blew away.*

*Just gone.*

My eyes snapped open to find that I was alone, of course, except for my bear who was in full growl. *Mate.*

*I know, I was dreaming about...*

*Mate!*

Sitting up, I pushed the covers aside and then stood. I needed a breath of fresh air to clear my head. The dream was already fading, but the feeling of it hung over me as I stepped out the door of my room and into the hallway. A click had me looking across the hall to where Sheppard had also emerged.

He wore pajama bottoms, the waistband hanging from his hips. No shirt whatsoever. Although we'd shifted, and I'd admired him in the moonlight, it was not the same because that had been the polite shifting nudity, and this was something

else entirely. This was the precursor to the rest of the night. I wanted to say the rest of our lives, but that was probably just the dream talking. I just wanted to be in the moment, and whatever that might mean.

I backed into the room and took him with me, our clothing falling by the wayside. We weren't talking because we didn't need to or maybe want to... It didn't matter, but my hands were stroking his skin and my lips were following wherever they went, tasting him and nibbling. As I kissed down his shoulder, I took a little nibble, nothing that would mark, although it took all my strength to make it so. I wanted to mark him, but not without him wanting the same thing. I'd never felt this way before.

He moaned, and I dipped a hand down to his slick, finding him more than ready for me. "Sheppard, if you don't want this, please say so now. Because once I'm inside you, stopping will be much harder."

"Don't stop."

It took no more than that before I was inside him, driving as deep as I could before withdrawing and doing it again. And again, more of me disappearing into his body with each thrust. He was made made for me, so tight as to be almost painful but addicting in the pleasure/pain combination.

I reached between us and gripped his cock, wanting him to come with me, even if I wasn't sure I could hold out long enough. But I was going to try. I needn't have worried because when my balls tightened and my cum poured into his body, hot liquid coated my hand. And then my knot swelled and, without giving it nearly enough thought, I asked, "May I mark you?"



“Yes!”

I sank my teeth into his neck and tasted blood then lapped it sealed and fell over him, taking as much weight as possible on my arms. Our combined scent wreathed us both, and I wanted this night to go on forever.



# Chapter Fourteen

*Sheppard*

I woke with the sun usually, but this time it was the smells from downstairs that roused my rabbit from a dead sleep.

Arms around my waist tightened, and something prodded my back.

My mate.

Locke.

I was fully and completely mated now. Marked as well. The sting of his marks burned at my shoulder where he had bitten me.

“I smell bacon.” I rolled over to face him.

Locke laughed and nuzzled my nose. “I smell my omega. And that’s not all I scent, love.”

Gods, how one night could change your entire life.

“Do I smell? I need a shower?” I asked, giggling like a lovestruck boy. I knew exactly what my alpha was talking about.

“No. I smell your need for me. After...I forget how many times during the night, you’re still starving for me. I love that.”

I leaned on my elbow and kissed his full lips. “I’m not the only one.”

“No, you’re not. Let’s get showered and get down to breakfast. My bear wants you fed first.”

We showered together while making love again. I had to go into my room to get my clothes but brought them into his since I knew I wouldn't be sleeping alone that night. It wasn't until I had dressed under the roaming gaze of my alpha that our circumstances hit me like a brick.

I stopped with my fingers on my zipper. My heart thrummed between my temples.

“What is it? Sheppard? Are you okay?”

We didn't know each other well. His bear must've alerted him something was off. “Um, I'm overthinking as usual. Let's go have breakfast.”

We finished getting dressed and went downstairs, hand in hand. When we got into the dining room, Franklin immediately beamed with happiness. Despite what I'd heard was his sad love story, his joy for us shone through. “It's always the run that does it,” he murmured to himself while waving us into the kitchen. Breakfast was served buffet style and we ate at the small round table in the kitchen. The view was spectacular, and so was the sunrise over the hills and valleys in the distance.

Franklin had gone overboard but, since our appetites were voracious, we managed to polish off most of the meat and eggs and a good half of the muffins and cinnamon rolls. Franklin mentioned that the rest would be donated to the shelter again, and he hummed while he packed them up in a basket. This time, someone would stop by to pick it up, so he didn't need us to make the trip into town.

The owner was one of a kind.

“Sheppard, shall we take the walk we talked about doing yesterday before we visited that nice town?” Locke asked.

“It’s a lovely morning.”

Locke turned around. “Franklin, would you like to join us?”

Franklin laughed a bit. “A stroll with the newly mated couple? I think not. I remember those days. Soak them up, males. Believe me. Time is short. Life will fly by. Go on, you two.”

We decided to head back toward the forest where we had run as animals the night before. We didn’t make it far before I was pressed against a tree with my alpha devouring me. His lips were hungry though he’d had me all through the night.

“I can’t get enough of you, omega.”

“You might have to,” I said as a tear streamed down my face.

“What? What does that mean?” He pulled back, cupping my face in his hands.

“We’re here, and it’s amazing, but, er, what happens tomorrow? I’m on an airplane back home before dawn tomorrow. You have your life and your business. I love this, and I’m over the moon that I found you but...”

“But what, omega mine? Did you think that this was it? One amazing weekend, and that was it? You bear my mark, little rabbit. My mark means something. Does it mean nothing to you?”

I gasped. “It means everything, Locke. I’ve waited and wanted a mate for so long. What’s going to happen to us? I don’t want to miss you and sleep in an empty bed. Hell, I don’t know how I’m ever going to sleep alone again.”

He chuckled. “I’ve thought about that, too. I’ve thought about all of it, Sheppard. We’ll make it work.”

“How?” I barely let him finish his statement. I clung to his shirt with fisted hands, scared but silently vowing never to let him go—at least, for very long.

“To get something amazing, you have to make changes. You have to give up something. That’s what I’ve learned over the years in business, and I think it’s the same in this situation.”

I blew out a long breath while he moved to kiss my neck, making my thoughts fuzzy. He pressed me against the tree with his pelvis, the sign of his need hard against mine. I tilted my head back to give him better access as he moved my shirt collar and grazed his lips over my mark. “You’re not helping me think straight,” I said, letting out a moan.

“You don’t have to. Let me do it for you.”

I moaned his name again. “How can you think like this?” I reached for his hips and ground against them.

“I’m not, actually. My bear is. He promises this will work. One way or the other. You’re mine. Fate brought us together. I’m not letting anything tear us apart.”

“Locke, I’m leaving tomorrow, and so are you.”

He stopped kissing me, and I immediately regretted pushing the subject. “Only a temporary separation. I promise.

I'm not sure I could live too long without you, omega."





# Chapter Fifteen

## *Sheppard*

I didn't sleep the night before my flight. Not one bit. Locke and I spent the night wrapped in each other, savoring every moment as though it would be our last.

We packed up the last of our belongings and then paused. I even made the bed to have a few more minutes in our cocoon. Franklin didn't accept reservations, so this place that we had our first moments together, would remain in our memories.

"Are you ready, love?" Locke asked and ran his hand down the length of my arm. I had fought against tears all morning, but when he said those words, the dam broke loose. I'd never been much of a crier, but this weekend had turned everything on end. Our lives. My emotions.

My vision was clear for the first time since retiring from my career.

I wanted a family and a life with my alpha.

"It's going to be okay. You have to trust in us. I know that's hard because it's so new, but that doesn't make it any less strong. Omega, look at me." It took a moment, but I finally did. His eyes held nothing but love and, as I stared into them, I knew he was right. "I'm not letting you get away from me. Come on. Let's get to the airport."

"We? My flight leaves hours before yours."

He shook his head. “I’m going with you to the airport. I don’t mind waiting a while if it means I get a bit more time with you.”

I lit up hearing him say that. He was right. I needed to trust in our bond. Even though it had been built in less than a day, it was a firm and steady foundation.

“Let’s go.”

Our parting at the airport was filled with tears and promises. I was home right on time, and I went straight to my parents’ house to tell them everything. They were ecstatic and wanted to see pictures. Funny thing was, I hadn’t even had a chance to take a picture of my alpha and had to text him to get a selfie. Even Jenson was over the moon happy for me.

Now, to fill in the blanks.

When Locke got home, he immediately suggested video chatting, which I agreed to, of course. Anything for a moment with him.

His schedule was crazy, but he always made time for us. Only a few days after we’d been separated, he sent me a message late at night. I knew that despite the time difference, it was late for him as well. My stomach dropped. I couldn’t help but think the worst. He was done with the long-distance thing. This was it. The end to my dream.

“Hey,” I said and noticed his bedroom was dark.

“Hey, to you. Did I wake you?”

I held up my index finger and thumb showing him that he did, a little bit. “What’s going on?”

He sighed, and my heart leapt up in my chest. This was it. I held onto the edge of the laptop for dear life. “I can’t take this anymore, Sheppard. This distance. This sleeping alone. How I did it all of those years, I’m not even sure.”

“You’re breaking up with me,” I said and reached for the top of the laptop, ready to close it upon hearing his confirmation.

“What?” he yelled. “No. Never. What? Is that what you thought was happening? Sheppard!”

My heart slowed a bit but not back to normal. I flipped the light on beside my bed right as Locke did the same. “Then what?”

“I was calling to ask you if you’d come here. I have a house we can live in together. If you don’t like it, I can find another but I don’t care as long as you’re with me. I know your family is there and they are important to you. They can come anytime they like. Would you think about it?”

“No,” I answered, barely hiding the smile rising on my face. “I won’t think about it, Locke. I need boxes. Not a lot, since I don’t have a lot, but yeah... I can’t stand being away from you, either. When?”

He chuckled. “I wish I could hold you right now, omega. I’m aching for your touch. How fast can you get your things packed? Do you want me to fly there and get you? I’ll go to the airport right now.”

I giggled. “I can pack everything up easily, but I need to take care of some other things. Financial things and getting my

mail forwarded. Plus, I need time to tell my parents goodbye and spend some time with them. Maybe a week or two?”

Locke’s disappointment was so strong, I could feel it through the bond though we were miles apart. “I can accept that if it means having a lifetime with you, Shep. I can’t believe you’re mine.”

We talked over things for a while until my yawns overpowered our conversation. “Go to sleep, love. We can talk tomorrow.”

“Okay. Locke, you look happy.” While he had been happy every time we chatted, I could see the longing in his face when we did. It mirrored my own.

“I am. I’ve got something to look forward to now. I’m already making a mental list of things to add to this house to make you more comfortable.”

I blew him a kiss. “All I need is you, Locke. Talk tomorrow. I love you.”

“I love you, too. Good night.”

The next morning, I tasked myself to telling Jenson and my parents about the decision. I was both excited and sad about telling them. My parents weren’t the typical parents who kids saw a couple of hours a night and during the weekend. My parents had been my caregivers, my coaches, my support team, my everything growing up and they did a damned fine job at it.

Telling them I was leaving would be hard.

“Good morning,” I yelled out.

“In here, Shep,” Abe called out from the kitchen, of course.

“Morning, son,” my dad Bryan said as he walked into the kitchen from the living room. They were both still in their pajamas, and Abe was making breakfast.

“Have you two had your coffee? I need to talk.”

“I haven’t, but go on,” Bryan said and reached for the coffeepot with one hand while squeezing my other dad’s bottom with the other. I groaned but really hoped Locke and I would be just like these two. I never doubted my parents’ love for each other. Not one minute.

“Locke has asked me to move in with him.”

I didn’t know why but I expected sobbing and dramatic fainting on the floor. Instead, I got bright, shining smiles from the both of them. “It’s about damned time,” Abe said. They both came over to embrace me.

“You’re not sad? Your oldest son is moving away.”

Bryan rolled his eyes and sighed. “You moved out years ago, and Abe and I have been talking...”

*Uh-oh.*

“We are ready for grandchildren. I can’t believe you two took so long to decide. We need to meet this mate of yours.”

“We talked about it at the inn. We want children as soon as possible,” I admitted.

Abe did a little dance. “I’m gonna be a pop-pop soon! When are you leaving?”

“It sounds like you two are happy to see me go.”

Bryan came over and hugged me tightly. “It’s not that, Son. We are so happy for you. We want you to have the joy that we have in our lives. It’s time. Besides, we love road trips, and coming to see you and Locke will become a new thing for us. You know we can’t go long without seeing you, Shep.”

We all paused, letting the news sink in. “I need some of those plastic tubs, and I’ve got to go to the bank. All kinds of things.”

“You need help?” Abe asked.

“I’ll let you know. Thanks, Dads.”



# Chapter Sixteen

*Locke*

He didn't fly.

So it took longer for him to get to me, but I had to be patient. My omega did have a car, and it didn't make any sense for him to leave it behind or have it shipped and then ship all his totes when he could just drive it all here.

I offered to fly there and drive back with him, but as he rightfully pointed out, I had a whole lot on my plate at the office, and if I took time off for the drive, I would have a hard time stealing some for his arrival.

There was something wrong with that logic, but I let it go by. Sheppard wanted to do this himself, and I wasn't the overbearing kind of alpha who wanted to control every aspect of their omega's life. If he wanted to drive himself to me, so be it. Once he lived under my roof, we'd figure out our own rhythm, but for this move, I'd bow to his choices. He'd lived alone for quite a while and there would always be adjustments to a new living situation.

Although, I had no doubt my fated mate and I would live in bliss together, once he got here. I hung up the phone and went back to my new favorite hobby—pacing.

Sheppard gifted his furniture to his brother for simplicity's sake and because I already had everything. If there was anything else he wanted, I'd take him shopping and let him pick it out. If he hated everything in my place, I'd call the donation truck, and we'd start fresh. I'd never spent enough



time at home to care about what I had there, and if truth be told, I'd picked out a full suite for each room from a catalog when I moved into the place. It was good quality, and expensive, but looking at it now, I realized it totally lacked personality.

We would be shopping. And maybe there was a shelter somewhere in this city that could use it. The one where I volunteered on Thanksgiving maybe? Davey, my assistant, was an avid supporter of this shelter for abused omegas, so I sent him a text about steps forward to make the donation.

I received texts when Sheppard stopped for gas and calls when he took meal breaks, and video calls when he was in his motel for the night. I ached at the distance between us and imagined where he was on the road. How alpha would it be to ask him to let me use location to follow his trip?

It would only be in case of an emergency, but still felt pushy to me, and I didn't want him to regret his decision to come and make a U-turn. Not that he would. Or that I was overthinking. He should be here soon.

My phone buzzed with a text and I launched myself across the bedroom at it.

*Want to tell the doorman to let me in?*

Letting the phone fall, I buzzed the intercom and barked, "Let my mate in, Gus. He lives here now."

"Yes, sir."

"And I'll be right down. Get someone from maintenance to unload his car, please."

"Yes, sir."

A man of few words, Gus, but having one of the last great doormen in the city, maybe the last one considering we were not a huge city and there were not all that many tall buildings here, was a real plus in choosing my building.

I hopped in the elevator and reached the lobby to find Sheppard arguing with Gus about handing over his keys. “Mr. Sheppard, I don’t want to upset Mr. Locke. Please give me the keys so Jason can unload your car.”

Reaching the podium, I folded Sheppard into my arms and closed my hand over his keys. “We have a freight elevator, and Jason will pull right up to the loading dock and have everything upstairs in two shakes.”

“It’s part of his job,” Gus agreed. “It’s no trouble.”

Sheppard still seemed hesitant. “I’m not sure.”

“Let them do what they need to while I give you the tour.” I managed to free the keys from him. “I’m sure you’ll want to see the pool?”

His eyes widened. “The pool...here?”

“It’s on the roof, but it has a glass enclosure at this time of year, when it’s kind of cool out.”

“You know, if you had told me, I’d have driven faster.”

I handed the ring to Gus, shifted the backpack from Sheppard’s shoulders, and passed that over as well. Along with a folded bill. I usually only tipped at Christmas, but despite what I said, it really was a bit out of the ordinary for them to act as moving men.

“Pool first?” I slipped an arm around his waist.

“Yes.” He leaned on me. “So it’s open all year?”

“Every day.” We entered the elevator and I pushed the button for the rooftop. “Did I say I was glad to see you?” His lips were warm and firm under mine, and I didn’t notice arriving on our floor until the sound of someone clearing their throat alerted us.

Stepping back, I found myself facing an eighty-year-old in a bathing suit. “Mrs. Fetherly. I want to introduce you to my mate who also likes to swim. This is—”

My neighbor from across the hall stumbled back, her hand over her mouth. “I watched you win the gold. I was on the team sixty years ago, but I never approached your speed.” Before I knew it, she was showing Sheppard around the pool area, telling him all the features and inviting him—hopefully us—over to dinner soon so they could share their Olympic stories.

My mate followed the lady, asking questions and steadying her when she misstepped. He was so good and kind and had already made a friend. After a few minutes, he walked her to the elevator and then came back and joined me. “Looks like you’ve found a fan.”

He chuckled. “I am a fan. She may not have approached my speed, but hers was good enough for three golds and a bronze. Wow. Why didn’t you tell me you were friends with Olivia Fetherly the legend?” His eyes sparkled, and his smile was huge.

“I just thought she made good oatmeal cookies.” And I didn’t know any of my neighbors all that well. Something I

sensed was about to change. “Come on downstairs and I’ll show you the bedroom.”

“I thought you’d never ask.”



# Chapter Seventeen

*Sheppard*

Locke and I fell into a routine quickly, at least in the mornings. I got up early and went for a run or a swim while Locke took his time getting ready. He had a habit of checking his emails and putting out fires before his first cup of coffee.

I, on the other hand, considered putting an espresso machine on my bedside table.

Locke's hometown had all the amenities of a big, busy city but with the charm and friendliness of a small town. It was perfect for me.

And, best of all, no one knew I was there. No one at the pool batted an eye or had me sign anything.

To the people at the pool, Olivia excepted, I was just another swimmer who arrived before the crack of dawn for a workout.

I pulled off my hoodie and sweatpants. Kicked off my flip-flops and got into the water. This week had been slow in terms of workouts. Perhaps it was the turn of fall into winter and the colder temps setting in, but that had never stopped me before. In fact, in my heavy training days, I'd looked forward to the chill. It invigorated me in the mornings. And the glass walls kept the temperature reasonable even up here among the clouds.

Perhaps I was coming down with something.

A lot had happened in the last few months. Mating. Moving to a new city. The stress had taken a toll on my energy levels.

I stopped at the edge of the pool after swimming less than I'd planned on but still over an hour. My breaths were labored, and though I'd only woken up a few hours before, I was already in need of a nap.

When I got downstairs, Locke was already in his home office. I took a shower and went to cook breakfast but instead, I stood in front of the open refrigerator, hungry but nothing sounded good—not even my usual veggie omelet.

“Shep, are you okay?” Locke asked.

I turned to see him leaning against the doorframe that separated the living area from the kitchen. “I don't know,” I said, truthfully. “Something is off. Are you feeling okay?” I stood up and shut the fridge.

“I was, but then my bear felt you weren't good. It feels... nauseated, actually.”

I braced myself against the counter. “That's accurate. Nauseated, plus tired and achy all over. And the pool smelled weird this morning. And if anyone should be used to the smell of chlorine, it's me.”

“Should we bring you to the healer? Maybe we ate something that had gone bad? But you cook everything so well, I can't see that happening.”

We both stood there for a moment. Locke took my hands in his and stepped closer so that our chests were nearly touching. “There's another thing to consider, Sheppard.”

“What?” I leaned forward to kiss him. I could never get enough of those lips.

“You could be carrying our cub.”

The pause hung between us forever. I rolled through my symptoms and the timeline in my head. We had made love so many times at the inn, it was entirely possible that I had gotten pregnant.

“We need a test,” I said.

“You stay here, and I’ll go pick one up.”

Locke moved to leave, but I shook my head. “Nope. I’ll go. You have work to do, alpha.”

He kissed me hard and fast. “This is more important. I’ll be right back.”

There was a convenience store only a block away, so he was back before the situation fully dawned on me. He ticked his head to me, and I followed him to the bathroom. We waited on the bed, sitting side by side, until the three-minute timer went off.

When it did, Locke went in to get the stick. Despite all my want for children, seeing the test terrified me. Thrilled me. Too many emotions that filled the slot of time.

“It’s positive.” He held up the stick. While I’d seen Locke smile many times over the last few months, this one was by far the best one.

“I’m pregnant?” I asked, taking the stick from him.

“You have our babe in your belly, omega.”



I sighed as tears welled in my eyes. “Are you happy?” I already knew the answer. Still, I wanted to hear the words.

“The only time in my life that I’ve ever been happier is the day you became mine.”

I ran into his arms, letting the tears flow. This was it. I’d stepped right into my dream. It was overwhelming and, despite craving this so badly, I feared I wasn’t ready.

Fate didn’t care though. Perhaps she knew something I didn’t.

“I’m so in love with you, mate. I can’t believe we’re going to have a family.”

“I am, too.”

We spent the rest of the day reveling in our joy. We joked over silly names for the baby and made an appointment with the healer.

By the time the afternoon came around, the nausea had passed, and I was starving.

“Can I take you out to dinner, new papa?” Locke asked, wrapping his arms around my waist. I looked down and realized he wouldn’t be able to do that for much longer.

“Yes. Are you sure? I’ve taken up so much of your day already.”

“I wouldn’t have it any other way, love. How about burgers and fries? None of that fancy stuff like steak-and-brie sandwiches.”

I gasped and turned around. “I never did eat that sandwich. My heart was a little broken. I gave it to Franklin.”

“Ah, mate. That was my mistake. I should’ve come after you. I knew you were mine even then.” He shrugged. “I didn’t eat mine, either, by the way.

“You have time to make up for it,” I said, winking at him.

“Let’s start today, shall we? I’ve got both of you to feed now.”



# Chapter Eighteen

*Locke*

“It’s all happening so fast.” Sheppard stopped outside the healer’s office door. “Maybe we don’t need to be here this early? I mean, nothing’s wrong. Probably. I’m just a little tired and feel somewhat off.”

“And that’s why we made the appointment.” I opened the door and waved him ahead of me. “Because probably isn’t good enough and you agreed that you’d allow the healer to examine you to ease my worries.”

“I agreed under duress.”

I leaned in and whispered in his ear, “You agreed under me.”

“Alpha! We’re in public.” His cheeks flamed, but he was smiling. “I still say duress.”

“Whatever it takes to make sure my omega gets the very best care.” I guided him to the front desk where a man in scrubs waited. “Hi. I’m Locke and this is my mate, Sheppard —”

The man stood and held out his hand. “Oh, you don’t have to introduce this athlete to me. When I saw his name on the schedule, I was very excited to be able to meet you.” Shaking his hand, he shook his head. “I’m Healer Josh. Normally you won’t find me at the front desk like this, but my assistant is out today. Come right back and we’ll start the exam.”

“Are you okay with him knowing who you are?” I asked my omega in a low voice. “I know you like slipping under the radar.”

“No, this is okay.” He hugged me and brushed a kiss on my cheek. “Some people will always know who I am, usually other swimmers who love to watch the sport. But when they are like the healer, I’m comfortable.”

“You mean some people aren’t like him?”

“Gentlemen?” Healer Josh stood in the doorway to an exam room. “If you want to get changed into a gown, Sheppard, I will be in my office. Just call out when you’re ready.”

“Thank you, I will.” Once the healer was behind a closed door, Sheppard said, “Some people are rabid fans and others are armchair experts.”

“The armchair experts want to tell you everything and the rabid fans want to hear all about this swimming rabbit’s triumphs?”

“You’d think.” He pulled his shirt over his head and laid it on a chair. “But in fact, they are not all that different from one another. The experts want to tell me about how I should have swum a race, and the fans mostly want to tell me all about themselves.”

“Themselves?” I’d never thought of such a thing.

“Yes, when I was first starting to win the big races, I was very nervous about having to talk to people who approached me, but my coach said that nearly everyone wants to share about themselves and all I had to do was be a good listener.”

“As long as you’re okay with the healer knowing about you.”

“He’s cool.” Sheppard finished undressing and pulled on the gown. “Want to get the healer?”

I rapped on his door, and the healer came out and followed me into the exam room.

Sheppard was sitting on the edge of the table, legs swinging. “I am pretty sure I don’t need to be here,” he said. “But my alpha worries.”

“Don’t they all,” Josh agreed. “At least the good ones. So, before we get started, why don’t you share with me what things your alpha is worried about.”

I took a seat while Sheppard and the healer discussed his symptoms, all of which it seemed were ordinary and to be expected.

“Are you sleeping well?” he asked.

“Yes, I feel fine until the morning when I...well, when I don’t feel so well.”

“Morning sickness should be passing soon. As long as you’re eating and drinking enough, many omegas are off their game, so to speak, in the early hours. I have a tea to recommend. If you sip it slowly, I believe it will help.”

He had many such helpful suggestions, all of which were natural. Teas, tinctures, foods that held the most nutrition while also being easy on the tummy, and “more water than you think you need.” Josh also wrote a prescription for foot rubs that made Sheppard laugh but also wave it at me.

“No problem, omega. I’m very happy to rub any part of you that you like.” I whispered this while Josh was washing his hands, but his shaking shoulders made me think he might have heard. I didn’t want to ask.

When we left the office, Sheppard seemed much more relaxed and cheerful. “Do you feel better, alpha?”

“Oh yes.” I didn’t mention his lessened tension. “It was nice of you to indulge me.”

“I know, right? I think my benevolence deserves a reward.” The skip in his step made me smile.

“And what did you have in mind?”

“Is there anywhere around here to get ice cream?”

“I don’t know.” That’s what came from never treating myself to the simple things in life. “Let me pop back in and ask Healer Josh.”

The healer indeed had a recommendation, and I promised myself to take the time to learn my own city beyond places you would go for a business meal.

“It’s just down the block,” I told Sheppard. “So we can walk.”

The storefront had a neon sign that said *Delight* and cafe tables and chairs set on a black-and-white diamond patterned floor. And they had a menu of sundaes that covered the entire wall behind the counter.

“Welcome,” greeted the young man behind the counter. “What can we delight you with today?”

Sheppard was reading the menu, his lips moving a little and eyes flicking back and forth. “I just don’t know. There are so many choices!”

“Well, we hope you’ll come back many times and try everything, but we do offer a sampler for two? You can pick the flavors, or I can make it from some of our customer favorites?”

“That sounds perfect.” I sure didn’t want to have to choose.

“Is there any flavor you don’t want?” he asked, getting out a silver dish with multiple indentations.

We told him we were in his hands, and we soon learned that each of those indentations would be filled with a little single-scoop sundae with different toppings and flavors. While it looked intimidating at first, we ate it all.





# Chapter Nineteen

## *Sheppard*

“I wish you would let me hire someone, Shep,” Locke said, peeking into the nursery. I had decided to paint it myself, using zero VOC paint of course.

“It’s not the same. This is where our kit or cub is going to sleep. I don’t want a stranger to do that. I want to. Besides, I’m almost done. Just a few more touch-ups here and there.”

This was only the beginning of the burrowing I’d been obsessed with since my pregnancy had progressed. Since I was a rabbit and Locke was a bear, and we were both shifters, there was no telling how long the pregnancy would be. Everything was happening so fast. Locke had been nothing short of supportive of my den-making.

No matter if our babe was a bear or a rabbit or anything else, I wanted our burrow to be our safe place.

I’d completely redone the bedroom once I found out I was pregnant. My rabbit was louder than ever since we realized the little one was growing inside me.

“You’ve been at it all morning. I thought you might like some lunch and then a nap—maybe a foot massage before that.”

“Locke, I really need to finish this nursery.” In opposition to my statement, I put down the tiny paintbrush I was touching up with and my stomach growled, double-agreeing with him.

My appetite was insane.

“What are we having for lunch?” I asked.

“I already made you a snack plate. That seems to be your favorite lately. Grapes, apples, a bit of peanut butter. Hummus, crackers, cheese, meat, avocado, olives, and maybe a cookie.”

“Maybe? Tease.”

He walked over to me and put his hands on either side of my belly, rubbing circles along the outside of it. “Tease? Are you kidding me? I watched you walk to the trash can yesterday and had a hard-on instantly. You’re calling me a tease?”

“Stop that. I’m getting wider than all outside. You can’t possibly mean that.”

His voice dropped to a low growl. “I most certainly do. The body of my mate, swollen with our child inside. It’s enough to make me want to take you to our den and never let you out. I’m as hungry for you as ever, omega.”

I leaned in for a kiss but as I did, my phone buzzed in my pocket. Locke chuckled as I reached down but had trouble fishing the damned thing out of my pocket. Maternity jeans did not have large pockets which was a tragedy all its own.

“It’s the school.”

“What school?” Locke whispered as I answered.

“Hello? Yes, this is Sheppard.” I sat down on the top of the small ladder for the rest of the conversation, adding things and answering questions while Locke picked up things around the room. He had hired some more people so that he could be home with me more often and condensed some of his procedures, making his work days eight to ten hours instead of twelve to sixteen like they had before.

He'd done so much for me.

“And you realize that I'm five months pregnant, right?” I asked, making sure this man on the other line had all the information.

“I'm going to think about it and let you know, okay? Thank you.”

I pressed the End button and sat there, stunned.

“Who was it?” Locke asked as he took in my expression.

“It was the university. They are looking for a varsity swim coach. Theirs just retired. I put in a resume but never expected them to call.” My stomach growled again, reminding me that no matter what was going on, I was hungry. Again.

“Let's talk about it over lunch. Shall I carry you?”

I cracked up. “No. Let's go.”

Locke was weirdly silent through the beginning of the meal and I wanted to know why. “What's going on, Locke?”

He shrugged. Not like him at all.

“Talk to me, alpha. I can feel that something is up with you.”

He sighed. “Are you going to take the job?”

“I'm thinking about it. But I have the feeling you've already made up your mind.”

He took my hand across the table but then tugged.

I knew what he wanted. I ate most of my meals on his lap. I moved to sit sideways across his legs and pulled my plate closer. “Tell me what's going on. You knew I was going to try

and get a job. It's at your alma mater. It's only fifteen minutes away. I don't want to be useless around here."

"You are never useless. I don't want to hear that again. But you're pregnant. What if you slip and fall? What about out-of-town meets?"

"I'm not going to slip and fall. I'll be careful, I swear it. And if I go out of town, I thought you could come with me. We could make a weekend of it."

Locke held onto me tighter. "I can provide for us. You don't have to work. Who is going to take care of the baby? I..."

He was running out of excuses and fast.

"Locke, I need this. I need to have a purpose beyond this home, not that it's not enough. Being your mate and eventually being a father will fulfill me, but I want to keep up my knowledge and pass it on to others. What if the next Olympian is in that pool? What if I can help someone? Not everyone has amazing, supportive parents like I did. Swimming was a big part of my life, and I don't want to completely let go of it."

"And the baby?" he asked. "You don't even want someone else painting his or her room."

He was right. The last thing I wanted was someone else raising our child. "I will work around it and, honestly, I'm getting that baby into the water early. Can we work this out?"

He nodded. "If this is what you want, we absolutely can. My bear was being a bit overbearing. And so was I. I'm sorry."

I kissed him long and hard. He wasn't overbearing. Just protective and fierce about me being safe. "You don't have to be. You can't help it. You're an amazing alpha."



# Chapter Twenty

*Locke*

Sheppard took the job, and I offered him my full support. How could I do anything else when he was so excited about the position?

“I’m head coach for the varsity, but I was also asked to work with the kids who come for workshops and other events. Isn’t that exciting?” He was shoveling bread and jam into his mouth, his current favorite after-dinner snack. “And there are some high school kids who will get to work out with the team in the summer and...”

We were still going to have to figure out what we would do once the baby came, but as he continued to tell me all about the job he was starting tomorrow morning, I knew we would. “How are the facilities?”

“I forgot you wouldn’t know. Since you went to school there, they’ve totally rebuilt the aquatic center, and it’s huge.”

I hadn’t ever entered the old pool, avoiding anything like PE while obtaining my business degree if at all possible. There had been a requirement that I take a couple of classes in physical education, but I’d taken racquetball figuring it might be something I could do with other business people for a kind of athletic meeting. Swimming...not so much. In fact, I’d done more of it in the past few months than ever before in my life—most of which consisted of floating around while my mate did thousands of laps. It might not have been that many, but it sure seemed like he went by me that many times.



“It’s nice, then?”

“Oh my gosh. Better than that. It’s state of the art, set up for just about any kind of water sports you like. Water polo, volleyball, of course swimming and diving... Don’t get me started about the diving venue. It’s never been my skill, but I can watch those divers all day.”

“It sounds spectacular.”

“More than.” He snuggled closer to me on the couch. “And there’s a new sport they just started offering. I’m going to learn it after the baby comes because it’s not something I can do now.”

“Really?” I pressed my lips on the top of his head, loving just sitting here talking and his enthusiasm for what he’d be doing for work. Maybe a little envy even.

“Yeah, they’re putting together a faculty squad, but I just don’t have the breath to do it right now with someone filling the whole middle of my body.”

“What is this new sport you want to play once your body is your own again?”

“Oh...underwater hockey. Doesn’t that sound amazing? It’s just like regular hockey where you use a stick or paddle to move a puck from one side of the pool to the other.”

“With scuba gear?”

“No, that’s the very best part. No breathing apparatus at all!”

I could only be glad that he didn’t want to do it now.

“I am getting so out of shape.” He patted his belly and sighed. “Even my swimming workouts are really slowing down. I feel like I don’t have a clue where my center of gravity is.”

“You can probably give yourself a break on this. I think most people who are six months pregnant avoid extreme underwater sports.” I gave him a squeeze. “They might even shorten their workouts a little.”

“Sometimes it’s all I can do to get up and hit the pool.”

“Maybe sometimes you don’t need to?” I tugged him onto my lap and gave him a gentle kiss. “You could stay in bed and cuddle with your alpha. I miss you when you leave.”

“Do you?” He linked his arms around my neck. “I don’t want to make you sad.”

“I know.” I kissed him again, way less gentle and with more heat. “You’re not making me sad now.” Nor was I sad that we were wearing pajamas which I began to strip off my omega. “Arms over your head.”

He complied but I caught his cringe when his belly came into view. Heading that off at the pass, I bent and kissed his bump. “You’re so sexy.”

“You don’t need to say that. I’m not going anywhere,” he said. “I know I’m a beach ball.”

“Then you’re the sexiest beach ball anywhere. Omega, I’d be turned on by you if you were legitimately shaped like a beach ball, but you’re carrying our baby in there, and making it look darned good.

“You think?” He lifted his hips so I could get his flannel pants over his hips then I stood him up to remove mine. Then he settled back on my lap, facing forward. “This position was genius, by the way.”

“I think it was your idea.”

He wriggled, making my already stiff cock even stiffer. “It was, wasn’t it?”

Reaching around him, I fisted his penis and gave a squeeze. With my other hand, I slid the head of my cock through his slick before fitting it at his hole. He closed around me, tight, hot, and made just for me. Grinding against me, he moaned, that breath he was worried about dealing with underwater working perfectly. My mate’s athleticism had given us many nights of pleasure, and even as he grew larger and we had to be a little more creative, I’d never experienced anything like him. Because he was unique, and as we rode together toward orgasm and over the top, I cried out his name and thanked Fate and Franklin and all that was good for putting this omega in my life.

I could only see good things ahead.



# Chapter Twenty-One

## *Sheppard*

“We have a few more relays to run through. I’ll be okay. I need one minute.”

I tried to walk away from the other coach, Reggie, but he clapped a hand on my shoulder. “Sheppard, it’s okay. We knew you were pregnant when we hired you. We expected a few bumps in the road—no pun intended.” We both looked down at my now-prominent baby bump. I had to order overly large shirts with the school’s logo to cover it and show my team spirit at the same time.

“I can finish this practice,” I said, my back aching and feet begging for mercy.

“I know you would power through, but we don’t need you to do that. We need you at your best. Go home, Sheppard. Get some rest. Come back tomorrow strong. That’s what we would tell an athlete, right?”

I couldn’t argue with that logic.

On the way home, everything hit me like a ton of bricks. I cried more than I had in my whole life. It wasn’t the practice or the fact that I got told to go home and rest—it was everything.

When I pulled into our driveway, Locke was already there. His eyebrows were furrowed. My rabbit could feel his trepidation through the bond.

He went to the passenger side and grabbed all my things before walking around and opening the door for me. They said chivalry was dead, but if there were still men like Locke around, that was a lie. “Do we need to get you to the healer, love?” Those were the first words out of his mouth as he moved his free arm around my waist and pulled me in for a kiss.

“No. Reggie told me to go home early. I’m all sore and achy.”

“He was mean to you? Is that why you’re crying?” A growl pushed through his regular bass tone.

“No. Of course not. And he was right. I am tired today. So damned tired.”

“And hungry,” he added.

I waggled my eyebrows.

“Not that kind. Though we can take care of that after you’ve eaten and rested, omega.”

We went inside and he heated up some leftovers while I took a shower and changed into my comfiest clothes and went downstairs. He sat at the table with my plate and his in front of him. “Come sit, Sheppard.”

I wondered if he knew how much it turned me on when he called me by my whole name. Who was I kidding? Almost everything this man did turned me on.

I ate all my food in record time and grabbed a lemon bar that I had baked the day before while I had a burst of energy. “How is work?” I asked, feeling selfish. I felt like all of our conversations revolved around me and the baby and all baby-

related things, which was normal, but I wanted to hear about him.

“I closed that big deal this morning,” he said, smiling.

“What? Isn’t it early? I thought you were closing it next week.”

He chuckled while leaning over to kiss me. “Actually, there were some details that had to be handled. The contracts were supposed to be signed two weeks ago. We got an extension, and they were signed this morning.”

“We should be out celebrating,” I said.

“No. You should be going to have a rest. I make and break deals every day, omega.”

A flood of emotion crashed into me without warning, and I raged. “You’re embarrassed about me.” The statement tumbled out of my mouth, without passing through my mind first.

“What?” he almost shouted while his eyes grew big.

“You’re embarrassed because I’ve gotten so fat. We haven’t been out in weeks. That’s why you don’t want to celebrate.”

I knew my outburst was unwarranted but it came barreling out anyway. Tears poured from my eyes and a bit of crying turned into outright sobs. What in the hell was happening to me?

“Omega, come here.”

I shook my head, refusing him but also not wanting to. Hormones were horrible, awful things when they were on the

fritz.

“Sheppard, come here.” His voice beckoned me, a light in this tunnel I was trapped in.

I forced my body to stand and he immediately pulled me into his lap. I laid my head on his shoulder and inhaled his scent. After a few moments, the sobs died down, and I took one long breath, letting it all go.

“Let’s get you to bed.”

Despite my size and the fact that inside me was another being, Locke picked me up and carried me to our bed and tucked me in. We said nothing for a while as he lay next to me and ran his fingers through my hair. “Are you ready to talk?” he asked.

“I didn’t mean those things. I know you’re not embarrassed of me. I don’t even know why I said that.”

He pulled me closer and rubbed circles on the outside of my belly. “You’re all over the place lately. It’s okay. I know this all must be so difficult for you. I can’t imagine the range of emotions you’re experiencing.”

This alpha of mine was rock steady, no matter what. “You’re not upset at me? I said some awful things.”

“No. If they were true, I would be upset at myself. If you thought those things, then clearly I wasn’t doing my job as an alpha and assuring you that you were gorgeous and I would never be ashamed of you. You are beautiful, especially rounded like you are. You absolutely glow, Sheppard.”

“Thank you,” I said, already falling asleep. My emotions were more exhausting than this pregnancy.



“For what?”

“For always being my rock.”



## Chapter Twenty-Two

*Locke*

I was at the office when I got the call, and I almost didn't take it, since I didn't recognize the number. But I did...thank the gods.

"Locke, this is Reggie at the aquatic center."

"What's wrong?" Interesting how that was my first reaction. "Is Sheppard all right?"

"Yes, well, no. I'm not sure." The other coach was also a bear and an alpha, and I knew from the first time I met him that my mate had a protector on the job. He'd kept an eye on Shep since he started working there, sent him home early when he was tired or didn't feel well, made sure he ate on his lunch break and other times, and always had his water bottle handy. When I thanked him, he told me that if he had a son, he'd want him to be just like my mate. And if he had an omega, he would be glad for someone to help out when he couldn't be there.

"Care to clarify that?" I had spoken to him before, but the tone in his voice had me standing up and ready to run for the door.

"Well, we're having a big meet here today," he said. "Six other universities. It's a huge deal for the school to host it."

"Shep told me. Is it going well?"

"The meet is, but I'm not sure your omega is at his best." He cleared his throat. "He'll kill me if he finds out I called

you.”

“He doesn’t need to know, but I thank you for the call. Is he in labor?”

“Says he’s not, but I think he’s fibbing because he doesn’t want to disappoint the team, the university, the association... The omega takes his work seriously.”

“I hope he’s taking our child’s birth just as seriously.” I shouldn’t have said that. Of course he did, but he also felt a great sense of responsibility, and would do anything to avoid leaving his team in the lurch. This was not only the university meet, but it was opening with the kids he coached, and he’d grown very close to them in the few months. Unless he was actively about to give birth, he’d stay there and coach his teams. “I’ll be right there.”

I arrived to find the meet in full swing and the young people already done with their races and sitting in the stands. The JV was in the pool and around it, lining up for their races if they weren’t actively participating. Although the stands were not nearly the size of those for many of the university sports, like football, for example, the ones that were there were filled with fans, parents, other students, and athletes. They were cheering and clapping and much more involved than I’d expected for a swim meet.

What had I thought a meet would be like?

So many people recognized Shep from his Olympics, and he did not nearly have the public persona many did. He’d turned down a lot of lucrative contracts to promote various products, passing on a whole lot of money. The university did not have the budget to compete with those offers, but Shep

was so happy with the job, and I was happy I could provide for us so he could do whatever job he wanted, even if that meant none.

But watching him with the team gathered around him, I knew he'd never be a stay-at-home dad. The university did have a day care that was open most of the time I was at work, and I'd become more flexible with my hours as well. I could work from my home office whenever I chose. The joy of working for myself. It meant working extra hard to build the business, but it also meant—and I'd just figured this out—that I could set my own hours and that they didn't have to continue to be as long. I'd gradually cut back throughout the pregnancy, but I could do a little more.

As I watched him do his job, Sheppard got a funny look on his face. His brows drew down, lips tightened, and one hand flattened on his baby bump. He'd had those false contractions before and it had been no big deal, but Reggie was right. He was off. A couple of kids had to chase him down when he walked past them with no notice of their saying something to him. And then he stopped and hunched over, palming his belly again. How long had it been since the last one? Five minutes or so?

I couldn't stand there any longer. Approaching Sheppard, I waited until he was free before I made myself known. "Mate? You're in labor."

"No, I'm not." He waved me off. "I'm just feeling more of those fake pains. They'll pass soon."

"I want to take you to the birthing center to be checked out, at least."

He gasped then tried to make it appear as if he hadn't. I wasn't falling for it.

“Sheppard, it's time to go.”

“Locke, why are you here? Don't you have a lot of meetings today?”

“I canceled them.” Or I would have Davey do it as soon as I sent him a text. “Come on. Reggie can handle things here.”

“Alpha, I don't tell you how to do your job and—” His mouth formed a complete O.

“And?”

“And it would be wrong for you to tell me how to do mine.”

On a hunch, I glanced down to see a puddle forming at his feet. And it was not pool water.

“Alpha! I think I need to go to the birthing center.” He was absolutely pale.

“Good idea, omega.”

We did take a few minutes letting the maintenance guy know to clean up and Reggie and the teams know we had to leave before I helped him to the car. As the door swung closed behind us, I heard a ripple of applause that might or might not have been for us.

I kind of thought it was.



## Chapter Twenty-Three

### *Sheppard*

As we walked into the birthing center, the healer was there, already waiting. The birthing center was open and staffed but some, like us, chose to be attended by our own healer.

“How far apart are the contractions now?” he asked.

“Three minutes. Maybe two,” Locke said.

“Let’s get him into the room.”

Locke carried me into the birthing room. It was a lovely place and while we’d toured it before, I was instantly calmed by the light mint color on the walls and the soothing music softly playing from speakers in the ceiling. A small diffuser was in the corner, and the smell of lavender permeated my senses.

But it was my alpha who kept me calm and grounded.

“Can I examine you?” Josh, the healer, always asked permission before doing anything. It was one of the things I most liked when we were deciding on who would help with delivering the baby.

“Of course.”

I undressed and got onto the bed. Locke held my hand while Josh did whatever he did down there.

Another contraction took hold. “You’re fully dilated now, Sheppard. Listen to your animal. He will tell you when it’s



time to push. He knows exactly what to do.”

Five or six contractions later, an urge came over me and I knew it was time. My rabbit urged me on from that place where he lived inside me.

Locke must've felt the shift because he looked toward Josh. “It's time. This baby is coming.” He sat on the edge of the bed and took both my hands in his. “You can do this, Sheppard. You're the strongest omega I know. Let's bring this babe into the world. I've got you. Squeeze as hard as you have to.”

I felt a *whoosh* inside me and knew something had changed. I retreated into my animal, just as Josh had suggested, and let him take over. The baby was in place. All I had to do was push.

*Bring our babe into the world.*

“That's it, Sheppard. One more big push.”

I bore down, squeezing the life out of Locke's hands and growling though my animal had never growled before. “There he is.” Then came a huge relief as I felt our baby come out. I threw my head back while my body relaxed for the first time in what was an eternity of pain.

But once I saw our son being held and cleaned by Josh, the pain faded.

“Locke, would you like to cut the cord?” Josh asked.

“Are you okay? Can I?”

“Of course.” I wanted him as involved as possible. “Go. Look at our son.”

The cord was cut and Locke placed our already crying babe on my chest. The second our skin touched, he gurgled a bit before settling against me.

“He’s gorgeous, alpha,” I said, crying.

“He takes after you.”

We held onto him for a while before Josh needed to weigh him and take care of the afterbirth which I had expelled with my babe in my arms.

“We’re a family now,” I breathed as Locke swiped a cold towel over my face.

“Sheppard, you and I have always been a family. Now we’re a family of three.”

Once we were settled, Locke called my parents who were ecstatic and already had bags packed. They were in the car and on their way by the time they ended the call. I placed the call to Jenson myself. He was days out from his marathon but promised to come see his nephew as soon as he could.

“What are we going to name him, omega?” Locke asked while rocking the baby in his arms. Our babe was swaddled and had already nursed like a champ.

I’d thought about it since the day we found out I was pregnant but now, seeing him in Locke’s arms, I knew he needed a strong name like his father. “How about Theodore? We can call him Theo or Thor.”

Locke rumbled. “I like it. Strong name for a strong boy.” He brought our babe to his face and kissed his forehead. “Theodore Locke, you are so loved.”

“Does that mean I’m Sheppard Locke?” I asked, knowing where this conversation was headed. I’d been mated to this alpha and had his child but still didn’t know his first name.

“Yes.” Locke smirked.

“Good.” I decided not to ask. His name might’ve been something atrocious that he didn’t want to tell me or perhaps he simply preferred Locke.

“I’ll let you put the names on the birth certificate, then. Keep your secrets.”

“Thank you, omega.” He put Theo in the bassinet and came over to sit next to me. I wanted a shower desperately but didn’t quite have the energy yet. “I ordered you some dinner.”

“Thank you.”

He chuckled and moved to nuzzle his face into the crook of my neck while he inhaled deeply. “There is no need to thank me, love. You’ve given me life—twice. Once with your love and the second time with our son. You don’t need to thank me for anything ever again.”



## Chapter Twenty-Four

*Locke*

Once we got home with Theo, life took on a whole new rhythm. Despite my responsibilities, I was on paternity leave as well. While I had somehow had the impression that it would be slow and maybe a little boring to hang around the house all day—especially with a baby who would probably be sleeping nearly all the time—I could not have been more wrong.

First, while Theo probably did sleep most of the hours of the day and night, he did it in short stretches, meaning neither of us got to sleep longer than three hours at a time, either. We started to look bad, big bags under the eyes, and we went from cuddling the baby and each other to still cuddling the baby but mostly mumbling at each other, incoherent phrases that all had something to do with diapers.

Then, two weeks into this, Shep's dads blew back into town on a breath of sanity. They had come to see us right when Theo was born but had to leave to take care of some things. Now they were back. The first thing they did was make their son pump enough milk to fill a few bottles, then they shut us in our bedroom with orders not to come out “no matter what you hear.”

It sounded ominous to me, but they had raised Sheppard to an adult and managed to keep him alive. And since I was hearing strange ringing in my ears that frightened me a little, and since I didn't have the strength to argue, I obediently marched into the bedroom and fell face-first on the bed. I did

feel the bounce as my omega landed beside me, but that was the last thing I remembered until a baby's cry woke me. Shep was curled into my arms, and I started to get up, but then I heard soft voices and gradually the cry stopped.

*No matter what you hear.*

We slept nearly around the clock. At least I did. Shep got up once or twice, he told me later, to express more milk because he needed to, but for that whole day and night, we rested, and when we emerged to eat waffles and eggs with Shep's dads, I felt like a person again.

“We're staying for two weeks, at least,” Abe informed us.

“And then maybe two weeks more,” Bryan concluded.

And I couldn't argue. I had been working eighty hours a week or even more until recently, and my mate was an Olympic-gold-medal-winning athlete. Yet, when it came to taking care of one little baby, we needed help, and I was not ashamed of that.

How could I be when they had such joy in the whole thing? Theo already adored them, and I hoped they'd be able to visit often or we'd visit them. They were family, something I hadn't had in a while, and they treated me like a son, too. After that first twenty-four hours, they didn't try to take over again, but hung out, there ready to help with anything we needed. They cooked a lot of the meals and cleaned up and sat with us watching TV or cuddled the baby when we asked for a break.

I was in love with my in-laws.

But once we were out of our sleep-deprived trance, things were better, and we were able to enjoy the baby as well as Bryan and Abe and each other. That's when things became more like what I'd expected and less like a coma. Every day, Theo changed, and I was so glad to be there to see it. I planned even more home-office days once I was back to work. I would not be as productive, but I didn't care. I had a lot of money sacked away and a new baby to enjoy.

Life was amazing.





# Epilogue

*Sheppard*

“He’s still in diapers, Shep.”

This argument had been going on for months.

“That’s why they make swim diapers. I want him to be comfortable with the water as soon as possible.”

Locke pursed his lips. “He is. They’re called baths.”

“You don’t trust me to take care of our son in the swimming pool?”

His face fell. “That’s not nice, omega. Of course. I trust you with my life and his. I’m...”

“Just an amazing alpha who cares and worries about his family. I know. You show us every day.”

Locke sighed and took a seat on the bench. “I’m going to sit here and worry. You go do your thing, Coach.”

I got in with Theo and introduced him to the water. He kicked his little legs, and we followed the instructor’s lead while she taught us how to get our babies to learn.

Locke took some pictures of us, and soon the lesson was over. It would progress to getting Theo under the water and training him to turn over and swim on his own, but the whole thing was a process.

“That wasn’t as painful as I thought.” He laughed.

“Of course not. Oh, I forgot to tell you. We’ve got dinner at my parents’ house tonight.”

My parents and even my brother, Jenson, couldn't stand to be away from Theo for very long. Three road trips and missing him convinced them to sell their home and move into our neighborhood. Jenson now lived in their guesthouse. Theo was surrounded by family and, even more than that, Locke was as well. He didn't have his parents anymore, but mine took him in as a son.

"I know. I...was actually thinking Theo could have another first today."

"What?" I asked, toweling off while Locke handled drying off Theo.

"I thought tonight, he could have a sleepover with his grandparents. I already called them and asked." I gasped. Locke and I hadn't had a full night alone since Theo was born. "I booked a fancy hotel room and everything."

"You did? For us?"

I didn't deserve this man.

"Yes. Well, it's selfish, really. I have an incredible mate. I want him all to myself tonight." He leaned over and kissed me. "But, if you don't agree, I understand."

"I want you all to myself as well. My parents are going to be thrilled."

Locke blushed. Blushed. I hoped he blushed for the rest of our lives. "I already called them. They are, in fact, thrilled."

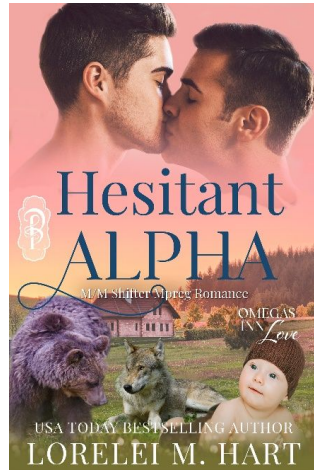
"That sounds like them. Thank you, alpha. I need a night out. How did you know?"

“Because I know you. I will always try to give you what you need.”

Now my cheeks heated. “I love you, Locke.”

“I love you back,” he said and leaned over, kissing the breath out of me.

An Excerpt from *Hesitant Alpha*



**Chapter One**

## *Saint*

Tuesdays were the heavy-lifting days. Despite the fact that most in the country got their coupons from apps on their phones, the supermarkets and just about everyone else still printed out their multi-page flyers. I didn't mind because some of my customers really seemed to enjoy them. And one lady used them to line her birdcage, claiming her parrot liked all the colors. She also thought he might be able to read "a bit," and liked to keep him mentally stimulated. Who was I to argue?

Adding to the weight of my bag were the smaller packages I seemed to get more of every day. The larger ones I dropped off on a big loop through the route before I set out to walk from mailbox to mailbox. Many of my coworkers no longer walked at all, preferring to drive up to each address and lean if possible or hop out if necessary to stuff the mail into the box. I'd spoken to citizens who claimed their packages were thrown onto their property by other carriers. I did not report them, but I did let the customers know that they certainly could file a report with the postmistress if there was any damage.

And that was what got me in trouble.

Not that I'd ever been the most popular mailman at our office, but I had a decent relationship with most of my coworkers. Better than the pack members who should have been both family and friends. Still, I never quite felt as if I fit in. They had so many inside jokes. At first, I asked what they meant, but that only made them laugh louder.

I'd begun to believe I'd never fit in anywhere. My pack was different than most others, and not in a good way. Oh, maybe for some, but if you had the slightest desire to have feelings of your own or experience any kind of freedom, it would never be comfortable. Our alpha was older than dirt—he said that himself, once, but gods forbid anyone repeat that in his hearing. Or where one of his toadies might be listening.

Old-fashioned, some of the elders said, but I had met a few other wolves, mostly passing through town, who claimed their packs followed the old ways. And they bore little resemblance to ours. They had, however, heard of us.

I gathered most other packs had.

Prides were not, in most cases, religious. Most gave reverence to the goddess. Certainly all tried not to tick off Fate who held our matings in her hands. Some even celebrated human holidays like Christmas, but most stuck to the solstices and other nature-based festivities.

Not us. Sometime when I was not much older than a toddler, an elder wolf came to our gates. I remembered only because it was the day everything changed. Up to that point, we were pretty much like everyone else, but when that bearded dude with his walking stick marched up to the alpha house and banged on the door, our happy little pack turned into a cult.

Harsh words, I know, but his arrival at a vulnerable time in our previous alpha's life served as a pivot that haunted everyone on the lands to this day. Alpha was standing at the bedside of his only son when the prophet marched into the room. I'd been playing on the steps, throwing a small ball in the air and trying to catch it in the cup, waiting for my parents

who were inside with all the others. Bored, hungry, and looking for someone to play with, I defied the instructions of my omega father to, “Stay right here and play with your ball,” and followed him inside the house and up the broad staircase to the room of my usual playmate, Arch.

At four, I had little understanding of the situation except that the grown-ups were crying or wringing their hands. The alpha was surrounded by many of his betas and others, crying out to the Goddess for help. Terror squeezed my insides, and I thrust myself into a corner of the room, behind a dresser, to watch without somehow getting caught up in whatever was upsetting the big people so much.

The old man shoved his way into the room and disappeared in the crowd. The alpha demanded to know why he was there, and he spoke but in a much lower voice than the alpha, who was fond of shouting just about everything, ever did, so I couldn't hear. But after some back-and-forth, there was no more talking, and I curled up in my corner and drifted off.

I didn't know until much later that the gasps and high-pitched words that woke me were in response to the very sick little boy on the bed sitting up and asking for candy. A high fever refused to break, the pack healer had no results, and then this man came in and said some kind of incantation over him and saved his life. Or so everyone believed. And maybe he did, but that was no excuse for giving him utter control over our lives from that day forward. He claimed that Arch had crossed over before he got there and that he'd reached over and dragged him back from the abyss to stay with his grateful

parents and grow up to be the most important alpha in the history of the pack.

That meant he was bowed and kowtowed to over and over and became quite impossible. Nobody wanted to play with him, but we did because he told us to, and if we defied him, he told someone else we had. Mose, the old man, was on his right-hand side all the time, telling him what to do and how to do it in order to be that most important alpha. Arch was never even challenged. Who would challenge a god?

It was totally weird.

And I left the moment I could. But I missed a lot of what being part of a pack meant. Even if I did have a bear for a father.



## **Chapter Two**

## *Memphis*

By the time I left the office, the streetlights outside the towering business were on and the walking traffic had slowed. I lived in an apartment nearby, since I spent more time at work than home. It wasn't even a home at this point, more like a hotel.

My bear didn't appreciate the city, not one bit. It was a rare occurrence that I took a day trip to the country and let him out for a run. He hated the abrasiveness of urban life. The noise. The myriad of smells all competing against each other and overloading our senses.

Plus, the city was full of humans. Humans who didn't understand shifter culture or shifter ways.

Those who even knew we were real said shifters were feral but, in my experience, the humans could use a lesson or two in kindness and decency.

I was a prosecutor, which meant I worked harder and for less money than the others—and at the mercy of the state.

I'd become cynical of people, mostly humans since becoming an attorney. In college, I'd foolishly thought I could somehow change the world but now...I was numb.

The job drained me of all my energy and time. By the time I got home, I was hollow and empty.

After taking the stairs to my apartment, I wrenched the door open. The super still hadn't come and fixed it, and it stuck every time I opened or closed it. The pipes rattled when I

turned on the hot water, and one of the burners on the back of the stove didn't work at all.

Not that I had the time or gumption to cook.

I tossed the pile of mail on the rickety kitchen table, not having the energy to deal with it right that moment. I needed a shower to wash away the gunk of the day, and my belly needed food.

Another thing my bear was not pleased about was the takeout I lived on.

He wanted fresh meat, something we didn't get very often.

After I showered, I emerged from the bathroom in my pajama pants with a towel wrapped around my neck since my hair was still dripping. The fridge whined at me as I opened it to see if there was anything close to edible inside it.

There were tons of cartons and to-go containers but none of them had much more than a morsel between them. And many were of questionable vintage.

“Fuck, I need to eat.”

I sat down at the table, pulling my phone to me. I wanted a steak and potatoes, maybe with some macaroni and cheese and crab cakes, but I was still on a tight budget and needed to stick to my guns. After all, I was still up to my eyeballs in student loans.

Instead of what I wanted, I ended up with hot-and-sour soup and an order of wontons. It came with free rice, and anything free was more than welcome. It was a far cry from the protein that I needed but it would have to do.

While I waited for the delivery, I pulled open my laptop, ignoring the sinking feeling in my gut at doing so. Since Carl left, I'd realized what he'd done in my absence. He'd taken advantage of my hardworking personality and ruined me financially. Yes, I was stupider than a bag of hammers for not checking up on things, for trusting him completely and moreover, blindly, but he was my omega, or had been.

If you couldn't trust your mate, what did you actually have in this life?

Turned out, for the last eighteen months, I had little to nothing. I hadn't chosen this apartment because I liked the furniture or enjoyed the constant stirring in the hallways or everything being broken down inside of it.

It was the cheapest thing I could find in walking distance of the courthouse.

Because I had to downsize my car.

And sell my condo.

All to make things right after finding out about the debt that Carl had accumulated in my name while I wasn't looking. Yeah, I'd seen the shopping bags and the new things he brought into the condo. He claimed he'd gotten it all on sale.

And he kind of did. He got it 100 percent off since he'd signed up for credit cards using my name and social security number to get them. I hadn't been a person who checked their credit or even their bank account regularly. I had all my payments scheduled to pay automatically.

Or so I thought.

After he left—a week after I confronted him—I looked into everything. The mortgage hadn't been paid in almost three months because he stopped the auto-pay. Everything from electricity to water, to the garbage bill were past due. He must have been sneaking to the mailbox before I got home and also deleted emails, so I never knew anything wrong was happening.

Gods, I had been a lovestruck, stupid fool for all my hundreds of thousands of dollars' worth of educating myself.

Of course, I wasn't liable for the things he did fraudulently, but I had to pick up the pieces of my life. And by the time I did, it was too late to save the condo—thus my lovely apartment—and I'd nearly lost my job because the city didn't look kindly on prosecuting attorneys having bill collectors show up at the office on a regular basis.

I breathed out a sigh of relief as I checked all of my accounts, savings and checking, along with my credit report and my security account. I had signed up for a service that texted me anytime someone tried to use my name or any of my credit cards. He had tried a couple of times since the breakup, but they alerted me at once.

I learned my lesson with Carl.

Never trust anyone—especially not a handsome, smooth omega.

Honestly, I didn't trust that he would never try to do anything to me like that again.

A knock on the door sent my growling stomach into overdrive. After retrieving my measly meal from the delivery

guy, I plopped down on the hard couch and tucked in. This was the last month I had to live this way. Eighteen months of budgeting and living off scraps, and I was finally done paying for anything that had legitimately been mine but had not been paid due to his access to my bank account.

All of that sacrifice, and soon I would be free.

Stuffing a dumpling into my mouth, I opened some bills. All good news. Everything was on time or scheduled to be paid on time like they should've been all along.

There was one envelope near the bottom that I didn't recognize. The return address read Franklin Constant. In a state I'd never been to.

I turned it around to see that the heavy-weight envelope was sealed with wax and had a bear on it.

An envelope with a wax seal. I didn't even know they sold or made those anymore. To me, it was something right out of a Robin Hood movie, something a king would send to his lover.

Not me, in this shitty apartment while eating my six-dollar soup.

What in the hell could it be?

Only one way to find out.

## **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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