

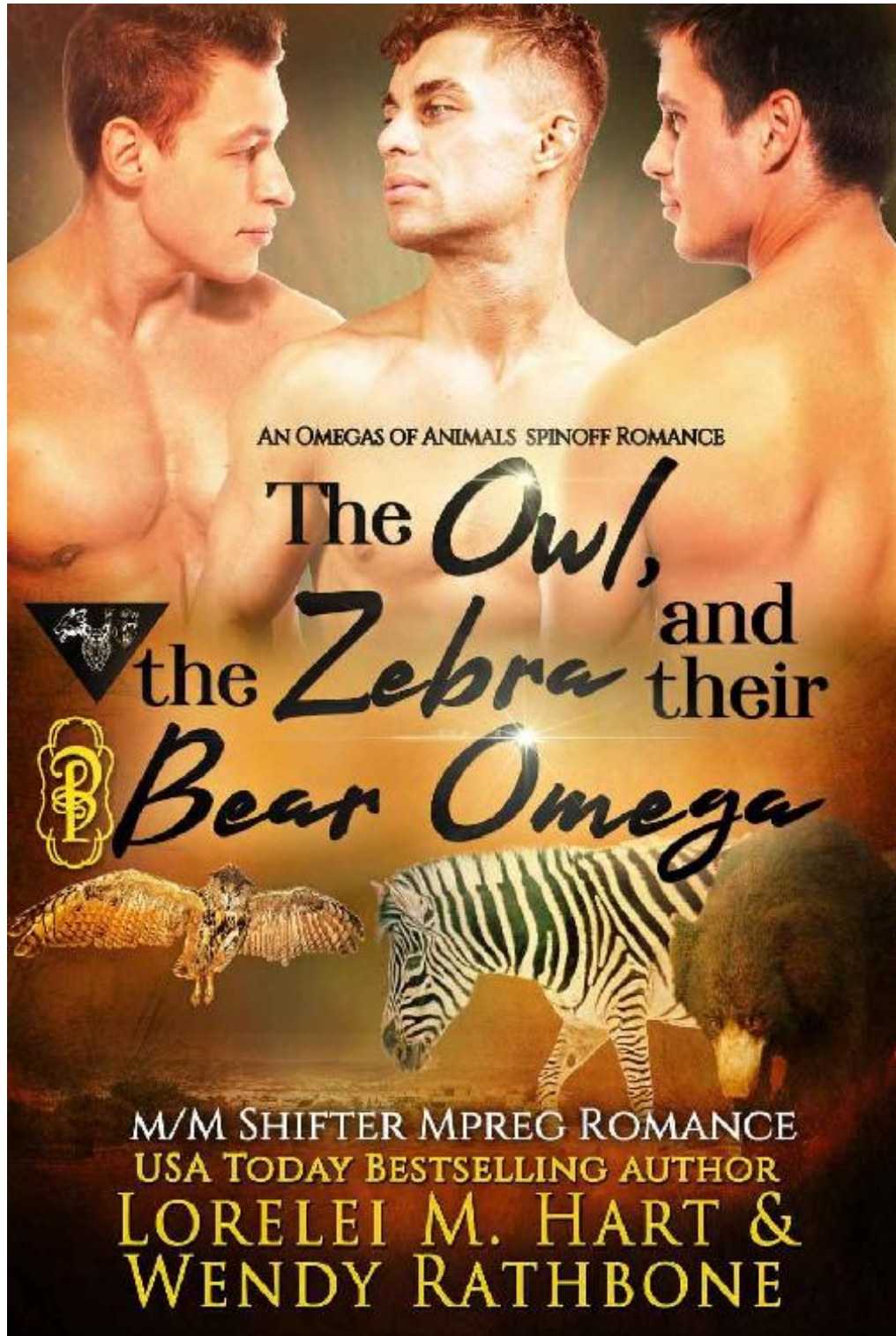


AN OMEGAS OF ANIMALS SPINOFF ROMANCE

The Owl,
▼ **the Zebra** and their
Ⓟ **Bear Omega**



M/M SHIFTER MPREG ROMANCE
USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR
**LORELEI M. HART &
WENDY RATHBONE**



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The Owl, the Zebra, and their Bear Omega

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The Omegas of Animals Series

Papa Bear for Darius

A Mate for Hudson

A Family for Cooper

Wood You be Mine

A Hoard for Flame

A Den for Finley

A Guy for Rye

A Deer for Dion

A Bunny for Bruces

A Bear Wolf for Joel

A Teddy Bear for Prince

Omegas of Animals SD

with Wendy Rathbone

The Wolf and Bear's Dragon Omega

The Red Panda and His Mates

The Dragon, the Lion, and Their Unicorn Omega

The Skunk, the Tibetan Fox and Their wolf Omega

The Dragon and Dolphin's Bear Omega

The Otter, the Tiger, and Their Wolf Omega

The Chef, the Wolf, and Their Platypus Omega

The Bunny, the Wolf, and Their Kangaroo Omega

The Owl, the Zebra, and Their Bear Omega

Arranged matings don't lead to happy ever afters at least not with your betrothed.

Alpha owl shifter Kam loves his small business delivering produce to the local restaurants. The work paid the bills, but better than that, he got to make some pretty good friends along his route. When an investor wants to buy his company, he's tempted, but his owl tells him to decline, that he needs to keep working the route. Kam learned a long time ago that when his owl speaks, he needs to listen.

Omega bear shifter Oakley is broke. His roommate left him mid-lease, his job cut his hours, and he has student debt up to his eyeballs. If money doesn't come in quickly, he's going to be forced to go back to his den and the life he left years ago. When he sees an ad for a temp job at Animals, he immediately applies. It won't solve all his financial woes, but it will get him through until next month, and that's something.

Alpha zebra shifter Edwin, AKA Prince Edwin, grew up knowing exactly who he would mate, what day his mating would be, and what his mating would bring to the kingdom. What he didn't know was how difficult it would be when the day came. Not only does he not love his intended omega, he doesn't even like him. The feeling is mutual. But neither has a choice. It is the way of things.

The night of his mating rehearsal, everything changes as he scents his true mates. Suddenly the “way of things” is no longer good enough. If only it were as easy as that.

The Owl, the Zebra, and Their Bear Omega is a standalone sweet with knotty heat M/M/M arranged mating shifter mpreg romance set in the world of Omegas of Animals SD. It features a zebra shifter whose life has been planned out for him since birth, an owl shifter who knows more than he wishes —while at the same time not enough —a bear doing everything he can not to go backward, royal shenanigans, the event of the season, true love, fated mates, adorable babies, friends from Animals and Animals SD, and a guaranteed HEA. If you love your alphas hawt and your mpreg with heart, download your copy today.

The Owl, the Zebra, and Their Bear Omega

by

Lorelei M. Hart

and

Wendy Rathbone

Chapter One

Kam

The first time I heard a cryptic message from my owl, I'd just turned sixteen. I was waiting with a couple of friends by the curb outside school for my dads to pick us up. It was Friday night and we were all going to an early dinner and a baseball game to celebrate my birthday.

Move back to the bench.

“What?”

My friend Scoop looked at me funny. “I didn't say anything.”

“Me, either.” My other friend Jael laughed.

Go sit down.

“I don't understand.”

Now!

I glanced at my cell. There were no texts from my dads saying they'd be late. Nothing to prompt the thought. But a chill went down my spine, and I knew we needed to go to that bench.

“I just got a text from my dads. They're running a little late. Let's go sit,” I lied as I led my friends to the bench on the grass. We all sat on the hard cement, stretching our legs out in a slouch as teenagers do, when we heard a loud rumble.

Before our eyes, a car came racing down the street going at least eighty, hit a fire hydrant, and tumbled side over side

onto the sidewalk where we'd just been standing. The hydrant broke, shooting a white tower of water straight up into the sky.

Jael jumped up. "Oh fuck!"

"Kam! That's just where we were standing. You're the one who told us to move." Scoop joined Jael, gaping at the car that now lay tires up by the edge of the grass. "You saved our lives!"

Now you can call 911, said my owl.

Which was exactly what I did as Scoop and Jael rushed toward the wreck to help the driver.

After that day, I learned to listen when my owl spoke. He knew things. I didn't understand how it worked and, when I told my omega dad, he shrugged it off and said, "Owls are wise, but we don't brag about it."

This was so much more than being wise.

Now, as I drove down a farm road at dawn, my truck full of fresh produce, I listened to my owl's voice deep within.

Don't sell. Don't sell.

A shiver went through my core. I knew exactly what he was talking about. My business.

I wouldn't have had any conflict with him. Not normally. I loved my business. It was small but lucrative. I had three employees. We made produce deliveries every day, some to large restaurant chains. I even had a brand new client who promised me top dollar if I got them what they needed fresh off the farms. Animals SD. A friend had recommended my service to them, and they'd hired me on the spot.

But the phone calls I started receiving one afternoon last week had given me a lot to think about. The first came from a lawyer. The second from the owner of an investment firm. They were connected, and they'd started spouting off high dollar figures before I could blink. When I finally understood they wanted to buy my business, I was stunned. Those dollar figures were quite high.

I did well for myself, enough to have my own small house in San Diego, where real estate cost a small fortune, and enough to pay my employees a decent wage as well, but the figures I heard over the phone were too high for me not to take under serious consideration.

The firm talked about expansion. They saw opportunity and had the money to put into it. The lawyer talked about how this was a one-time great deal that might not come around again as the economy changed, and I could easily cash out now to guarantee a lovely, early retirement.

At twenty-eight, I'd never considered retirement. Besides, I loved my business and had made great friends on my route. Was I ready to give it all up for extra money in the bank when I was already doing quite well?

The firm set up a meeting for later this coming week, which I'd tentatively agreed to attend. I tossed and turned every night at my options and all the prospects they might bring.

Until this morning, my owl had been silent.

As I drove toward the pale-pink eastern sky, my truck bumping along the access road from the farm, he spoke. *Don't sell.*

I turned down my radio. “It’s an awful lot of money.”

Don’t. Sell.

“Why?” I knew better than to ask. My owl hadn’t reasoned with me or given me backstories to his simple advice over the years. What he did was pound his opinion relentlessly into my mind until I gave in.

As expected, my owl was silent regarding my question.

“I love this business. You know I don’t want to sell. But it’s a lot of money.”

More silence.

“It could mean paying off the house if I want. Or starting another business that might be even better.”

He was not one for conversation. That was *my* talent. He repeated his two-word thought three more times. *Don’t sell.*

“It’s true, I’d miss my friends.” I pulled out onto the highway and headed toward my first delivery destination for the day. “And my new client, Animals, is amazing. They already gave me free passes to come by any night.”

Yet, if I sold, I’d be able to afford to go to Animals any night I wanted anyway.

You can afford that right now. The thought was so quiet I almost didn’t hear it.

I wouldn’t have been having this conversation with my owl at all if the number of zeroes on the buy offer hadn’t been so shocking. Wouldn’t I be stupid to pass that up?

Yet, deep inside, I knew. After all these years since the accident my friends and I witnessed happening where we’d

been standing moments before, I would be far more foolish to not trust my owl now. He'd never ever been wrong.

“Okay.” I let out a long breath. “I won't sell.”

Promise? A demand.

“I swear it. I'll cancel the meeting.”

Good.

“So what's going to happen now that I've decided to keep my business? Something wonderful, I hope.”

No answer. Which was typical. I would just have to wait and see.

Chapter Two

Oakley

I read the email for the fifth time, wishing I was misunderstanding it and knowing I was not. The company I worked for decided to send their restructuring plan announcement at six p.m. on a Friday. Because, of course they did. Everyone wants to read that entire departments are going to be cut and that those of us left will have our hours slashed if, and it sounded like a big if, we were the ones staying.

The notification for the second email came through while I was still staring at the first one in disbelief. This one held my future...the one that told me if my department was staying or going and if I was as well. I hated how cold and heartless they were being. These were people's lives they were dealing with.

"It's okay." I took in a deep breath and clicked it open to find that I was being cut to 3/4 time. It could be far worse. I wouldn't be able to eat more than ramen, and my plan reduce my student debt in five years was out the window, but it was far better than it could've been.

My bear was on edge, my anxiety getting him worked up. I needed to go for a shift. I filled out the attached form to my letter and shut down my computer for the night. There was nothing more I could accomplish, anyway.

Friday was my telework day. The company allowed one a week, and I chose Friday to avoid the traffic mess it always seemed to bring. Today, I was extra glad for it. Being in the

office with a bunch of people who just got fired sounded like a horrific way to start the weekend.

The door to the apartment slammed closed. My roommate, Henders, wasn't pissed or anything like that. We had to either slam the door or it never fully shut. Thinking maybe he would want to shift with me, I walked out into the living room to find him bouncing on the balls of his feet.

"I got a new job. Like a really good new job, one I was scared to even apply for because it was so far outside of my realm of possibilities."

"That's great. Want to tell me about it on our way to shift?" We had to travel an hour away before I could shift freely with Henders. He was a crocodile shifter, and they hardly blended. Not that my bear fared much better in the not-being-noticed department. But at least bears lived in California.

"I can't. I have an onboarding meeting in the morning."

"On a Saturday?" He might think it was a great job, but that was a huge red flag to me.

"Yeah. They want to get the ball rolling for my move." He shoved his hands in his front pockets.

"Move?"

"It's in New York. I leave at the end of the month." He at least had the decency to look sorry about it.

"The lease..."

"We can break it. It's only a four-month penalty." They must've offered him huge money if that was "only" to him.

“Which I don’t have. I barely have my half of the rent each month.” And would be struggling even more so with my new job situation.

“Find another roommate?”

I would not shift and bleed him right there in the living room. I would not. I’d end up paying for all the stupid damage and be in a worse position than I already was. Or worse. He could shift and snap my leg in two.

“I gotta go shift. You coming?” I was struggling between being excited for Henders and hating him for being an inconsiderate asshole. So far, excited was winning out by the tiniest of margins.

“I should probably stay away from your bear?” He said it as if it were a question.

“It’s fine. This is your big day. Money is...what was it your dad used to call it?” I grabbed my keys.

“Dirty paper.”

And while he wasn’t wrong, his father also had an endless supply of said dirty paper. I did not.

“Exactly. And we need to celebrate you tonight. We’ll shift, grab a pizza, and watch that stupid car movie you’ve been begging me to see.” I watched his face as he tried to bite his tongue and not correct me. He was failing.

“The cars are part of a huge robot.” He shook his head. “Let’s go shift. And I’ll try and give you the money I owe.” It wasn’t a promise, but it would have to do.

I hated that I had to rely on him having the extra funds to pay the rent. His father was an asshole and would only give him money if he went back to their pack and mated someone of their alpha's choosing. I didn't blame him for not trying to tap into that resource. I wouldn't have either.

Heck, I didn't go home to my den, ever. I left to escape the ways of old. I would make this work. I had to. Going back to them was a big old nope. I wasn't going to be treated like a servant. And that was the best-case scenario.

We went shifting and got our pizza. The movie got replaced with some serious conversation. To say I despised the financial struggles I was about to face would be an understatement. But I'd manage it. There was no other way.

On Saturday, while he did his onboarding crap, I had my computer on my lap and searched all the job listings I could find for something—anything that could get me over this bump. There were quite a few listings, but once I weeded out the ones that were more pyramid scheme than job prospect, the ones that paid minimum wage but expected complete flexibility, and the ones that had been vacant for years, telling me either it was a job no one stayed doing or fake listing and they weren't even hiring. Neither was a good idea to get involved in.

Then finally, I saw it. I would hardly call it the perfect job, but so much about it was. Animals, the hottest shifter club in town, was looking for help on their security team, which I suspected was a fancy way to say they needed bouncers. That job, not only could do it, I was good at it.

I pulled up the listing, making sure I met all of their criteria, and miraculously I did. This wasn't a career opportunity, but it was going to be fun. At least I hoped it would be fun.

Filling out the application forms didn't take long, and all that was left was for me to...what? Fill in the pieces? If only life were that simple.

Chapter Three

Edwin

Zebra royalty is treated quite different that the way humans treated theirs. We didn't live in palaces or wear crowns —usually, at least —and our subjects were not required to bow and scrape in our presence.

We were, however, treated with great respect and lived in better homes than most at no cost, and we received an allowance for our needs. None of this, however, explained the attitude of most in the royal family and some of our less-modern customs.

The one that concerned me was the fact that I was betrothed before I was old enough to even speak the name of my mate-to-be. Not that I considered this a problem because a picture of him sat on my dresser, and he was someone I knew reasonably well. Matings among zebra royalty are not based on romance or friendship or even Fate. No, while the average zebra can pick their own partner for life, those of us born into privilege paid for that with our freedom. Meaning, I did eat well, dressed in designer clothes, and had all the electronics I ever wanted in my bedroom. But on the appointed day, one that had been set up based on star readings on the day of my birth, I would be mated to the scion of another dazzle. Some people called zebras herds, but not my group. They said the term herds was for horses and that they weren't sharing anything with an inferior animal.

I'd never actually put a lot of thought into the whole thing except that it was the price paid for being royalty. My function was to do as I was told, preferably with a smile —no teeth showing, please —and help to perpetuate the monarchy.

With my upbringing and lack of outside influence, it never occurred to me that things could be different. Until one day, when I was being fitted for my mating suit —an outfit I was meant to burst out of in a power shift right after the ceremony in zazzle tradition —and I realized I didn't want any part of the whole thing.

The revelation nearly sent me to the floor, my knees turning to water. The tailor who was currently kneeling in front of me, pinning my hem, jerked back. “Hey, you almost put a knee into my eye. Everything okay up there?”

“Fine,” I snapped. “But I have things to do, so are we almost done here?” I felt a little bad. The man was just doing his job, but it was one that I suddenly realized would have no purpose. My zebra and I would have no part of an arranged marriage to someone who we not only weren't in love with, weren't fated to, but did not like. And life as a shifter was long. The idea of waking up every morning next to him, sharing a cup for our toothbrushes, looking across the breakfast/lunch/dinner table, traveling on missions representing the zazzle with him.

No.

Just no.

Why it took me so long to realize the impossibility of it, I wasn't sure, but now that I had?

Fight or flight took over. And I knew my fathers and the rest of the zazzle hierarchy well enough to be aware what the results would be if I employed fight. First of all, I wasn't that tough. Plenty of others were bigger and stronger than my lean form. And if I refused to mate the person appointed to me, I would be locked in my room until I "saw reason." I'd heard of that happening elsewhere once or twice. Eventually, the prisoner always gave in. Sitting in a chamber with nothing to do, no computer or books or anything because those would be taken out for sure, eventually anyone's will would crumble.

My zebra form was far better suited to flight. But any attempt to do that would have the same result. Locked in the bedroom until I came to my senses and remembered my duty. Any rebellion on my part would be regarded as a form of insanity that, should I prove super strong and not give in and agree to the mating, would eventually be treated with potions that would ensure I came around. I would be assisted down the aisle and would agree to the vows because my brain was no longer capable of any sort of protest.

And although I hated the idea of this mating, I hated the concept of losing part of my mind more. So I straightened my spine and tried to forget why I was being fitted for this suit, or that it being fitted for me?

I'd done so many times before, taken my mind elsewhere and tried to imagine what it would be like if I didn't have these obligations, if I was like the rest of the people in our dazzle. The common people as my fathers and the betas referred to them.

"Your Highness?" One of the betas stood in the doorway.

“Yes?”

“Your beloved has arrived.”

Gods I wished he wouldn't put it that way. “Would you tell him I'll be done here shortly and meet him in my sitting room?”

“No need.” He came in right behind the beta. “I'm already here.”

“Welcome Harl. I'm done here.” I stepped away from the tailor. “I'll change and we can go.” To the beta, to the tailor, to anyone listening it probably sounded like I was eager to be alone with him, but in fact I just wanted to get whatever he needed dealt with so I could go back to trying to enjoy my last week of being single and free. Or as free as I'd ever be.

I stepped behind the screen and changed back to jeans and a shirt then rejoined Harl. “Let's go.”

On the way to my quarters, I veered off. “Let's go outside where we can talk.”

“You're probably wondering why I'm here at this time, when you didn't expect to see me until next week.”

“Yes.” I held the screen door open and then followed him outside. “But judging from your serious expression I have a guess.”

We fell silent while we put some distance between us and listening ears. Anyone watching would likely think we were sneaking away for a few moments of romantic alone time anyway. Most would have no idea how I felt about this potential mate.

“Let’s sit on this log.” I gestured to a downed oak surrounded by enough underbrush we would be hidden from inadvertent view. “And we can talk.”

He looked as uncomfortable as I felt. But we had our conversation and agreed that neither of us wanted this mating, but neither of us was being given a choice. We even tried a kiss. We agreed it was awful. The terrible thing was, we were on the same page about everything, but it wasn’t a page our families would tolerate.

Chapter Four

Kam

At Animals, I brought the first load of my goods to the back entrance that led straight to the kitchen. It was still morning. The club was closed. I'd texted my arrival to the onsite security office. One of them always arrived within five minutes to let me in.

When I stepped through the back door, the kitchen greeted me, impeccably clean and entirely empty. I brought in three loads of fresh produce, storing some of it in one of their massive fridges. When I was finished, I peeked through the doorway to the bar. Shadows played over the shining mahogany bar top which also had gleaming copper footrests and hand guards. The high ceilings gave the club an airy, dreamy feel. I could never get over how elaborate and enticing the club was.

The only other people I saw through the kitchen door were part of the cleaning crew. They worked quietly, finishing up their final detailing.

"It's okay to look," said a voice behind me.

I straightened up and turned, the swinging door almost hitting me in the shoulder. The security guy who'd let me in stood with his hip cocked, eyebrows raised.

I smiled. "I was just peeking."

"You're welcome to look around. In fact, I came to tell you that the manager would like to see you. He's on his way

here. It'll be maybe ten minutes—if you'd be so kind as to wait?"

"Zevo wants to see me?"

The guy nodded.

"Why?"

He shrugged. "Not sure. We get some big events here, so maybe he needs more"—he turned around to look at the bin of watermelons on the countertop that I hadn't put away—"more watermelons?"

I laughed. "Probably lemons and limes. With bars, you can never have enough of those."

The guy held up his phone. "I'll text him that you'll be waiting for him?"

"Sure. I can hang out."

"You know the way to the offices, right?"

I nodded. When I'd interviewed to add Animals to my delivery route, Zevo had given me the full tour except for the apartments on the lower level. Those were private for residents and their guests. But I knew they were there.

"Okay then. Feel free to look around. If any of my security team bothers you, just tell them you're here on my watch and waiting for Zevo. My name's Olson."

"Thanks."

I left the kitchen and walked through the main club area, marveling all over again at the artwork on the walls, the huge dance floor, and the chandeliers that no doubt spread their

golden waves of light over the crowd when the club was in full swing.

Taking my time, I made my way through another set of doors that led to a long, windowed hallway that opened up to the huge wing that housed the club's management offices.

The entire time, my owl was silent but attentive. I could feel him awake and aware, taking in every sight and scent and sound. Could me being here at Animals every day be the reason for his insistence I not sell my business? It seemed odd, though. I rarely stayed longer than the time it took to unload. And I came in the mornings when the club was closed.

I reached Zevo's office, but the door was closed and through the window I could see it was dark. I found a bench in the foyer and waited.

Finally, I heard a door open and close and footsteps tromping through the hall. I looked up and saw the bear-shifter manager round the corner, backpack in one hand, keycard in the other.

Zevo lit up when he saw me. He always seemed to be in a great mood, and was the type of boss who let his employees know he truly appreciated them.

"Kam!" He walked straight up to me. "Thank you for waiting. I'm so glad I could catch you."

"You're here early, aren't you?" I got up and followed him as he unlocked his office door and stepped inside. The lights came on.

"Yep. Double shifts for me right now. Good thing I've got husbands at home who can take care of the kids."

“What’s going on?”

He went around his desk, setting his pack down on top.
“Big event. *Huge*, is more like it. We’re hosting a royal wedding.”

“Woah. For who?”

“A giant zebra contingent. Or rather, zazzle, as they like to be called. And you know how they are. Everything has to be perfect. Those guys would notice a dust speck out of place. The wedding will be held out back, if weather permits, and the reception will be inside the club. I need lots of produce. You know zebras. They eat a lot of fresh fruits and veggies. They like to graze, so if the dishes on the buffets run empty, I’ll get in trouble for sure.”

“So a special order, then?”

“Yep. I have the list on my computer.” He unzipped his backpack and took out his laptop, quickly opening it. A few keystrokes and he turned the screen to face me. “Have a seat, look it over, and let me know if there’s anything you can’t provide, and I can go from there.”

I sat in a comfy chair with the computer and read every word. Zevo was rapidly texting when I finally looked up.

“I think I can get everything on here. It’ll mean trips to several farms in a row.”

“Do you need extra equipment? A bigger truck?”

“Nope. I’ve got it all. I can handle it.”

Zevo let out a long sigh. “Thank you, Kam. I’ll email you the list. That makes my life sooo much easier. I don’t have to

hire more delivery help. As it is, I'm adding temps to my security team and extra cleaners. They want white tablecloths on every table, of course." He let out another quick breath.

"I got you covered. You're my favorite customer. You'll get the star treatment."

Zevo leaned forward. "I expect to pay you a bonus for this."

"Thank you, Zevo."

As I left the office and moved through the foyer to the hallway, my owl did a weird flutter inside that felt as if he wanted to shift without warning. I stopped in my tracks, swaying, trying to keep myself upright.

"You all right?" The beautiful, rumbling voice came from my left. Not Olson. Not anyone from security, but someone sitting on the bench I'd been using only ten minutes before.

My owl made another swift move inside me, and it felt as if wings were spreading from my back. They weren't. I had more control than that, but my owl was certainly making himself known.

"I'm fine," I replied.

The man sat on the bench with his long legs stretched out, head tilted with a lot of brown hair shifting to one side, and a flirty little smile playing at his full lips. I scented bear. And omega. He was broad-shouldered, with a puffed-out chest, but lean from the waist down and with legs that went on forever.

My owl pressed against my insides with an urgent communication of need. In truth, the guy was totally my type, but I didn't have time for this.

You have time for him.

Well hell. My owl had spoken. There was no going back now. Before I could say a word, the bear on the bench said, “My name’s Oakley. Are you here for the part-time security job, too?”

“No. I already work for Zevo. Deliveries.”

“Fantastic. I’m here for an interview. If I get it, maybe I’ll see you around?”

You have time for him. Ask him out.

My owl didn’t understand human etiquette. If he saw something or someone he liked, he wanted it. In the wild, he’d strut his stuff, and that would be it. Either he’d be accepted or rejected. The thing was, owls mated for life, but we hadn’t found our mate yet.

I walked toward him. “That would be lovely, Oakley. I’ll be disappointed now if you don’t get the job.”

Oakley sat up straighter from his sprawl and brought out his phone. “Can I text you if I get it?”

So bold. I liked him even more. “That would be a yes from me.”

I wasn’t usually so forward, but Oakley, the name, the man, all of him was everything in a guy I could go for.

I grabbed my phone from my pocket and sat down next to him. After we exchanged numbers, we both chuckled a little to ease the tension. What tension there was. Because I felt like I’d known the guy for years. Sitting on the bench next to him, a relative stranger, was easy. He put off a sort of heat that

embedded into my skin, and he smelled like fresh berries.
Lovely.

A moment later, Zevo called Oakley into his office. I
crossed my fingers he'd get the job.

Walking to my car, it seemed I was floating. My day was
getting better and better, and my owl approved.

Chapter Five

Oakley

Things had been all together crappy after I had my hours cut and Henders told me he needed to move. I was days from needing to pay my rent and was still twenty bucks short. I'd find the money even if it meant selling some of my clothing to the secondhand stores. They were super picky and usually took very little, but for some reason Jo, the owner, took a liking to either me or my fashion sense, and I could probably get the money with ease.

Next month? That was a different story. When Zevo called to get me in for an interview, it was like a dream come true...or at least the beginning of one. I still had to nail the interview and all of that. But I felt confident.

They say a confident man gets all the interest from possible suitors. It looked like "they" were right. I walked into Animals, ready to win them over. Instead, I found myself getting the number of the world's hottest owl and nailing the interview. At least I thought I nailed it. Didn't matter since I got the job, regardless.

But the best part of it all was getting that phone number. That sexy little owl shifter had gotten ahold of my heart already. I doubted I'd ever be able to even look at another. And his scent. It was delicious. Like toasted marshmallow and burning leaves. They shouldn't go together, but whoa... that scent held onto me and wouldn't let go.

“Here is the paperwork.” I handed the pile to Zevo. If I had to state one *meh* or *eww* thing about the day, it would hands down be the paperwork. Who didn’t use the internet for things like that nowadays? Animals, apparently.

“Excellent. Do you have a bit of time to discuss hours and take a tour and all of that? Paid, of course.”

“Absolutely.” Being a club, my hours meshed beautifully. I could do any and all nights. I worked during the day, getting done by 2 p.m. That gave me some great availability. At least I would think so as an employer.

From there, we went on a tour. I’d been there before when they first opened, but I was there as a college kid checking it out, not as someone who saw the little details of this place that had it hopping. Now that I was touring it as an eye on security, I could see all the little ways they tried to make any single shifter and any omega, for that matter, feel safe. It was quite impressive, and I was excited to be a part of it.

I was also excited to call the owl, and it was getting to be a struggle to pay attention, which was why I missed Zevo’s question the first time.

“So, royalty is an issue for you?” Zevo’s head tilted to the side a tiny bit.

“What? Royal?” Crap. I was messing up a good thing before I began. “Maybe can you ask me again?”

“Distracted by the hottie?”

Great. It wasn’t even my first official day and I was “that” guy, the one who put his dick first. Fabulous.

“Yes.” There was no point in lying. He saw it firsthand. “I don’t know what got into me.”

“I think I do.” He smirked but continued no further with the topic and went back to the wedding. “They will be paying enough to be worth your time.”

Minimum wage was enough to be worth my time at this point.

“Yeah, that sounds like fun. Will the staff be shown how to greet them and all of the fancy-shmancy bits?” I knew nothing about royalty other than watching the random highlights from events that were sometimes on the news. And they weren’t even the same kind of royalty. They were humans, and that right there made what little knowledge I had not worth the brain cells used to store it.

“There isn’t much, but yeah, you will be up to date on the newest etiquette.”

He filled me in on the details. It all sounded easy peasy. And from everything I gathered, there weren’t any actual threats against the royal family, but they had to treat every situation as if there were.

I went to type the date into my phone, and there was a conflict. Not just any conflict, either, but one directly related to me being here in the first place.

“I lied.” I pinched the bridge of my nose.

“How so?”

“I can’t make the rehearsal dinner. Remember the job I told you about, the one that just laid off a ton of people?” I needed to find a new day job, too, if I was being honest with

myself. “They are having a fancy thing at the Main Hotel and Inn to celebrate all the employees who are still there. It feels eww, but I have to go.”

“That’s fine. As long as you can be there the day of the wedding itself, all should be good.” Zevo leaned back in his chair. “It’s weird. Objectively, this is a huge deal for the club. But also—it’s just another wedding. Does that make sense?”

“It does and it’s probably why they want it here. Can you imagine the fuss some people would make over them? They are just like us, but with a political job tied to blood.” Or so I assumed.

We hammered out some details, and he led me to the back door.

“It was great to meet you. We are happy to have you on board.”

“Thanks. It’s great to be here.”

The two of us were so formal, and the club was anything but. I stepped outside, and he stayed in. I was finally free... free to call my sexy owl. Not that he was mine. But the sexy part was true.

I’d always been a *wait until you found your true mate* kind of guy. but Kam...not so much. My cock was already stirring just thinking about him. It was a shame he wasn’t my mate. But you can’t change destiny and all that.

Casual dating with some orgasms was the best I could hope for and, honestly, maybe that was enough. I took out my phone and tapped away as I walked to the car.

Hi, it's me. We met at Animals. Not awkward. Not awkward at all. Nope.

He started typing immediately, and I stopped, just watching my phone. *I'm glad you messaged. How did your interview go?*

He was too sweet. I asked if I could call him and he called me instantly. "Is this okay?"

"Yeah," I said. "More than. Thanks for being my good luck charm." I started working my way back to the car again. "This job is going to be great."

"I've never been accused of being good luck before. I like it."

"I'm glad." I reached the car and fumbled for the keys because yes, my car was so old there were no fobs. But it worked great and fit my budget. "I was thinking. Can I take you out for dinner sometime, as a thank you?"

Could I afford to take him anywhere? Absolutely not. Was I going to let that stop me? Nope.

"I would love that."

I would, too.

Chapter Six

Edwin

It should have been one of the best days of my life. The rehearsal dinner for the mating, and I would be stepping into the full adulthood within the zazzle. Both my zazzle and my mate had spared no effort or expense to make this a memorable event. One decades in the making, which was part of the problem.

Neither of us wanted to be here, and walking into the club with him at my side, our hands linked as if we were lovers already, just didn't feel right. So we didn't do that. It was a beautiful night, with a golden moon in the sky over the cliff past where the arch was set up and if it wasn't the eve of my life going in a direction I did not want at all, I could have been really excited about the whole thing.

As I surveyed the setting, people were hurrying out with various items, setting up chairs, and adjusting cloths on the tables scattered around the outside area. Usually a rehearsal dinner among our people was followed by the wedding party going out for a meal—if they had a rehearsal at all. But, of course, we were far too special for this.

I had seen the menu for the evening and chuckled a little at the super-healthy, 100 percent vegetarian dishes ordered for the occasion. Everyone thought zebra shifters were herbivores like the animals we resembled, but it wasn't the case at all. We had pepperoni pizza every Friday night while watching movies while I was growing up. Fried chicken was a favorite, and

when we went to a restaurant, provided we weren't *known*, I'd seen some of our betas dive face first into prime rib.

But...not tonight. And to be honest, I did prefer veggies for the most part. And cheese. I love cheese. Everything that was being set out looked amazing, though. It was sure to impress everyone who needed to be impressed. Because my wedding party was not "friends and family" but representatives of other zazzles. Every bit of my "big day" or as it really was a "big weekend" had been arranged to reinforce relationships, political, financial, or otherwise.

Such a beautiful night, everything perfect, and all I wanted to do was run as far away as fast as I could. Was it a character flaw not to fulfill my destiny? Probably. Did I care? No. Maybe a couple of hundred years ago all this had been necessary, but in the twenty-first century? It was just unnecessary pomp and circumstance.

But if I didn't go along with it, I'd be letting down everyone who was counting on me.

And if I did, I'd be letting myself down.

The crowd was filling in, everyone in the wedding party and their hangers on, but my mate-to-be was running late, and even though this was only the rehearsal, I was glad. He didn't want me any more than I wanted him, and what kind of a life would we have?

It was cruel.

Unable to look at the setup for my imprisonment any longer, I stepped away from the patio, heading indoors after telling the wedding planner I needed to use the facilities. That

arch was creeping me out, with all its beautiful flowers and subtle bits of tulle.

A staff member directed me toward a side entrance marked *employees only*, explaining that they were just finishing decorating the bathrooms for the event. Which I had questions about. Of course, the zazzles want the very best, but what were they wanting done to the bathrooms?

Shrugging off questions, I went inside, but once the doors closed behind me, I didn't know where to go. I mentally flipped a coin and moved to the left, looking at each door I passed in the long hallway. It looked like storerooms and closets, mostly, and I knew I'd gone the wrong way, but by then I'd made several turns and didn't know which way to go back. The next T I came to, I could hear voices from the right-hand side, so I went that way. Someone would be able to direct me, surely. And it wasn't as if I really had to use the bathroom, so perhaps this was even better, this getting lost. Even if it only put off the inevitable.

This corridor ended in a huge commercial kitchen with dozens of people hustling about preparing dishes from a dinner I would prefer not to attend. I focused on a porcupine shifter who was sitting with a glass of ice water, clearly on a break. Porcupines were one of the most easily identifiable because no amount of product could control their hair which stuck up all over the place.

"Excuse me," I said, "I'm sorry to interrupt your break, but I..."

"Am lost?" The porcupine hopped off his seat.

"How could you tell?" My cheeks warmed a bit.

“It happens. Where were you trying to get to?”

“A bathroom. I was out on the patio, and apparently the accessible bathrooms there are being decorated.”

He grinned. “Have you ever heard of anything more outlandish? We do a lot of events here, but so far as I know this is the first time anyone wanted vases of flowers in the johns. Are you with the wedding party?”

“Yeah.” I didn’t want to tell him I was half of the couple about to rehearse their vows for reasons I didn’t need to examine to understand. “And I think it’s ridiculous, too.”

“In the bathroom; can you believe it?” He led me through an entirely different set of hallways than the ones I’d come through except the others had smelled kind of well, like lemon oil and vinegar and other sorts of natural cleaning chemicals that a quality place like Animals would use. Shifters and other paras were often sensitive to the more caustic versions. And of course the kitchen smelled like food. Sautéing veggies and baked veggies and roasted veggies...and dips.

But here there was a fragrance, or more like two of them, that kind of twined together to create a total greater than its parts.

Mates.

No, he’s not our mate. But we’ll make the best of it. This was the first time my zebra had called my betrothed mate. Maybe that was a good sign. Although it didn’t make sense.

Mates. Two mates. Mine.

I was even more confused, and with the tantalizing scent fogging my brain, I wasn’t sure what he was getting at. My

zebra not only didn't like the man we'd be mated to tomorrow, he'd never expressed an opinion about anyone else, either. We passed an opening to a room filled with plants, and the odors from there cleared my head just long enough for me to realize my zebra was not referring to the one my family expected me to mate tomorrow. The one I was supposed to "graze" on veggies with in about an hour. No...he wanted whichever two beings smelled so amazing. And he was letting me know that they were our mates.

The only possible worse time for this to happen would be tomorrow after the ceremony. But this wasn't much better. I didn't disagree with him. Whoever these beings were, I could spend the rest of my life wrapped up in their scents, but that wasn't an option, was it?

The rest of my life was going in another direction.

Despite the strong scent, my zebra and I both knew that our mates were not here now, but they had been. And would they be here tomorrow? How could I exchange vows with my "mate" in the presence of my real mates?

After refreshing myself, I returned to the patio where it seemed everyone had arrived. I walked through the evening in a fog, searching for a way out but finding none.

Chapter Seven

Kam

As I walked up to the club's back door with my cartload of farm fresh veggies and fruits, a voice greeted me from the patio area.

“Kam. Hey!” Oakley strode toward me, a big grin on his face.

“Oakley.” I leveled the cart and threw my arms around him. He was such a burly omega and so wonderful, impossible not to hug every time I saw him. I breathed in his wild-berry scent. His arms tightened around me, and I almost floated right out of my body, my owl yearning to take wing.

Reluctantly, I pulled back. “Are you the security guy to let me in this time?”

Grinning, Oakley produced a keycard on a little silver chain. “Yep. The boss said you texted from the parking lot.” He stepped forward and opened the door.

As we entered, Oakley hit the lights. I brought the cart over the last little step into the main food prep area and took a deep breath.

Suddenly, everything around me was sparkling and all my little hairs stood on end. My owl's feathers ruffled within.

Beside me, Oakley let out a strange grunt, the air whooshing from him.

The scent was like honey on the air, every cell in my being eager to lap it up.

I met Oakley's wide-eyed gaze. "What is that?"

Mate. My owl let out a long, "Whoa."

Oakley took a couple more quick, deep breaths and growled. "Mate. My bear keeps repeating the word."

"My owl, too." I frowned. "But there's no one here."

"This place was filled last night with the zazzles for the rehearsal dinner." Oakley took another breath. "I scent zebra. He's one of them."

I was about to say the same. It was zebra for sure, a pungent alpha zebra with just the right mix of flowery bee pollen fragrance to attract an omega bear and an alpha owl whose human had a sweet tooth on the side.

"We have to find him," I said.

Oakley nodded fast. "Definitely."

"Definitely," I echoed.

"The entire wedding party will be here this afternoon. I'll be here. I'm on duty all day, a twelve-hour shift to make up for not being able to work the rehearsal. But what about you?"

"I planned on helping out today. My staff is taking care of all the other deliveries. Zevo thought he might need extra servers and kitchen help, and I said yes because it meant I could spend more time around you."

Oakley shifted his feet. "Really? You did that?"

"Of course."

He snapped his fingers. "It's perfect, then. We both need to be here to meet him once he shows up." Then Oakley tilted

his head. “I wonder if he smelled us?”

“We can hope so. If he’s looking for us while we’re looking for him, it will make things so much easier.”

Oakley put his arm around my shoulders. “This is so great. I never in my life thought I’d find my mate. At least, not for a long while. The fact that it turns out it’s two mates, I’m double lucky.”

I nuzzled him. “Me, too.” I straightened. “This is for real, right?”

Of course it’s real. My owl made a frowny face in my mind, or as close as anyone with a beak can do that.

“If it’s some trick, my bear will become impossible to live with. He’s a bit spoiled. He always gets his way.”

“My owl is never wrong.”

Abruptly, Oakley said, “I feel like I want to shift.”.

“Me, too, but I got a van to unload.”

He patted me on the back. “C’mon, I’ll help.”

It took no time to get everything into the kitchen and packed away. The kitchen crew, double the usual number of employees, was due to arrive soon.

Oakley and I had a little time for a break before all hell broke loose. We wandered past the patio where the white chairs and huge, hand-carved wedding arch was already set up.

We ended up partway into the leafy, shadowed forest where employees and guests could shift in privacy, and found a log to sit on. We couldn’t shift right now. Oakley was on call, and I was supposed to hang out for any extra work

needed. But for a few minutes, we could sit and talk in relative privacy.

Oakley boldly reached out and took my hand. That gesture alone made me nearly giddy for him when already my feelings had gone way beyond my initial, first-meeting crush. I wove my fingers through his.

“How are you feeling about all this?” he asked, his bear voice soft as the sweet grass at my feet.

I wished I’d asked him that question first. I wanted to know his reaction so I could feel safer answering. But whatever was between us demanded full honesty. This was no time for playing around.

“I’m excited. But at the same time a little afraid. Maybe.”

“Afraid? Why, Kam?”

“Because what if—” I cleared my throat. “What if something goes wrong? I don’t want to lose what we feel. It’s so great.”

He took his hand from mine and hugged me again. I never got tired of his hugs.

“Kam, what I’m feeling isn’t going anywhere. And you just said your owl is never wrong.”

“I know. It’s a knee-jerk fear response. Call me nervous, that’s all.”

“I’m not going to call you anything. It’s all very sudden. Trust takes time to develop and grow.”

I leaned my head into the warm hollow between his shoulder and neck. “Instinct says to trust.”

Oakley pressed his lips to the top of my head. “Same for me.”

“But if—if anything goes sour, please stay at my side. At least for tonight.”

“Hey. I’m not going anywhere.”

“Promise?”

“Pinky swear.”

I felt like I was being a needy whiny baby and not the alpha I was. The way I felt with Oakley had taken over my heart and filled me up. I would be drowning if not for his arms around me right now.

I laughed. “We sound like a couple of kids.”

Oakley moved his hand to my back, rubbing up and down.

“That’s what it feels like to fall in love,” Oakley said quietly, staring off into the trees.

Words stopped up in my throat. My skin flushed all over. All I could do was lean heavier into his broad chest.

A few minutes later, his phone chimed.

“That’ll be the boss texting,” he said, flicking at his phone with his free hand.

“Yep. We have a full day ahead of us.”

“Says here we’re both wanted on the patio. The florist just arrived. Zevo says the guy didn’t come with a crew, and we have to change out all the flowers to fresh ones and add more. That includes that gigantic wedding arch and all that lavish decor.”

“Let’s get to work, then.” I got up and held out my hand to him.

Oakley took it and stood, then leaned in and gave me a quick kiss on the lips.

I was going to be floating through this job all day.

Chapter Eight

Oakley

Normally, I wasn't a morning person. Far from it. But the royal family wanted security to be there when Animals got their produce delivery for the wedding, and when Zevo asked for a volunteer, I jumped at the opportunity. It meant extra money and, for some reason, I felt like I needed to be there. Heck, my bear demanded it.

He must've been worried about our home or, as he called it, his den. Not being there for the rehearsal dinner meant I lost out on some huge money, and that was what we needed right now. Huge money. Or even mediocre money, I supposed. But, with my roommate living his best life and work hours being stagnant, I couldn't be choosy.

"Are you sure you want to get up this early?" I mumbled to my bear who was already wide awake and ready to go. "I can have an extra half hour of sleep and probably still make it." The *probably* being only if I broke some traffic laws, but, at that time of day, would they really be out enforcing them?

Up!

Well, that answered that. No extra sleep for me. I begrudgingly got out of bed and ready. The shower sort of woke me up, and the coffee I planned to pick up along the way would have to finish the job. What I had to do in the morning didn't really amount to much of anything, anyway. I was there to let the veggies in and to make sure no one stole the green beans or whatever else was delivered.

I grabbed my keys and headed outside to my car. It felt much more like night than morning. That would change soon enough.

I arrived a few minutes early, having no idea that my world was about to change. The produce guy was hot and he smelled great, but it wasn't until we were in the kitchen and scented our third that everything clicked.

The scent instantly wrapped around me and beckoned me to find the owner. Thankfully, Kam felt it too. Kam. The name tasted so wonderful in my mouth.

My mate's name was Kam. But not my only mate. I was still having a difficult time getting that. It was almost too much. How could I deserve such a gift?

Sadly, we both had work to do and, while I wanted to stay there and finish our conversation and more...others came quickly and we had to go our separate ways. We promised to get back together as soon as we were able.

Unlike me, Kam's work was localized. Mine? I ended up circling the building. I hated it because I wasn't able to find the scent I was looking for and follow it for clues. But I had to be patient. Fate didn't make mistakes. At least I chose to hold onto that.

"Everything is checked in." Kam came up behind me, hugging me to him. I was by the dumpster, hardly a sexy place to meet, but location didn't matter when you had your mate. "You still feel it?"

"Yeah. I was sure I would, but I don't know." I turned in his arms. "I guess I was hoping he would already have found

us and...this is rough. What if he scents the same thing but is not interested?"

"He will be and, yeah, it is rough." He rubbed his cheek against mine.

"Do you have another delivery to make?" I hadn't asked before and didn't know if we were on borrowed time.

"No. It was supposed to be my day off, but wedding of the century and stuff. You are here all day?"

"You can come with me and 'help.' We can hopefully find him that way. I mostly have to walk the place, so the royals feel important. As far as anyone can tell, the security is far more for show than actual concern." Which was good since technically this wasn't my field. I was big and could be scary looking when I wanted to be, but that wasn't the same as knowing what to look for in a serious situation.

"I'd like that." Kam intertwined his fingers with mine. "Oh wait. Is this okay with you working?"

"It better be because I'm not letting go.

We wandered through the club, the scent of our mate slamming into us from time to time then smoothing out. He'd definitely been there a while and not simply to grab something and leave quickly. If only he were still there.

The entire place was decked out for the wedding. It was so over the top, I couldn't even...

"Can you imagine? And they are shifters. It's not like the wedding is the valuable part in all of this." In flowers alone, they had to have spent a small fortune.

“Royalty is weird. Full stop.” Kam leaned in to my side. “What is that room over there being used for?”

He indicated an office turned dressing room. It would probably have gone unnoticed had it not been for the fancy signage telling people it was private.

“I think that’s where the wedding party gets ready. It’s normally an office.” We took a step closer, planning to go past it and down the hall, but, as we reached it, the scent hit us again. This time stronger than any of the others.

“Stay here.” I went to the door and from the second the door I opened it a bit, I knew. “He’s part of the wedding fiasco.”

I could barely contain my excitement.

“Our mate will be here!” Kam threw his arms around me. “I wonder who he is? Maybe he is the tailor or... Ohhh, what if he is that fancy name for a butler that sounds like a horse? You know the one I mean.”

“Equerry I think. Or something like that.” I pulled the door closed, not wanting to give anyone a reason for us to get kicked out before things began. “We need a plan. One that is not interrupting a royal wedding. Can you imagine how pissed off the prince would be if we had his *I dos* turned into anything less than the event of the season?”

“Off with your head, I imagine.” Kam giggled. “What time does Zevo get in? Maybe I can help bus tables or something. We’ve come too far to have our mate this close, only to miss him.”

“Zevo should be here in the next few minutes.” I kissed Kam. “You are enough. Know that. But also our third.”

“Our third. I am officially the luckiest bird to ever bird. Come on, my sexy bear, let’s go find your boss man.”

There were quite a few scenarios for how I suspected Zevo might react. Having him be almost as excited as we were about finding our mate wasn’t one of them. He promised to help us in any way possible and then regaled us with the story of how he and his *one who got away* found their third. His story filled me with hope that we too could and would find the joy he and his mates had.

Chapter Nine

Edwin

I didn't sleep a wink, but how could I when I was going to mate with someone I didn't want and who didn't want me. Add in the fact that not only did I apparently have not one but two mates, and they had been here. At Animals SD, the shifter nightclub that was serving as the venue for my mating.

They were here somewhere.

And there was not a damn thing I could do about it.

My fathers came in to my hotel room just after dawn. Despite the fact the wedding was many hours off, there were all sorts of other requirements I had to fulfill. My last hours of freedom... But complaining was not allowed. I'd been reminded of the fact from toddlerhood. As one who had benefited from the largesse of our people, I had certain responsibilities to deal with, obligations that would set me apart from others.

Crawling out of bed, I stumbled to the bathroom for a shower. I'd fallen asleep only an hour or so before, the scent of my mates still in my nose, and my zebra reminding me that he wanted them. Now.

I would have dressed comfortably, had that been an option, but every bit of today had its own "costume" planned. And none of them were anything I'd have chosen myself. Ever. They would have looked great on the cover of some sort

of British royalty magazine... from decades ago. Beginning when I got out of the shower, I was bundled into a tapestry robe in jewel tones and slippers, had a newspaper stuffed into my hand, and was seated at the suite dining table with a pot of tea, glass of juice, and plate of assorted pastries in front of me. Also a dish of marmalade. I never chose tea in the morning in my life, but that didn't matter since I only sat there long enough to lift a filled cup and then set it down and pick up a pastry, click, and set that down. I was, thank heavens, handed a cup of coffee and a sausage biscuit in the car on the way to the beach for more pictures, but that was the last time anyone fed me, and by midafternoon I was sick to death of photographers, tight pants, blazers, and the sight of my mate-to-be. Although we'd bonded in our misery. Something we might as well get used to.

Out of all these clothes, the only set I'd ever seen before was the one the tailor had fitted for the actual ceremony. These were, in a word, prissy and out-of-date. More than one word. But so accurate. And although we would have a short honeymoon after the ceremony, on our return we would be stepping into an active role of leadership in my zazzle.

Sitting on the beach in white shorts and an unbuttoned sand-colored shirt, I toyed with the idea of racing into the surf and swimming out until I couldn't swim anymore. Were there any islands I could escape to? Maybe one of those oil-company fake islands would be a good temporary perch while I considered my options. I couldn't, just could not go through with this farce of a wedding. Although royal marriages were often arranged, every shifter on the planet respected a fated mate. Everyone except, of course certain zebras.

While I was still considering the waves rolling up on the sand, Harl approached and held out a hand to pull me up. “They’re waiting for us.”

“You don’t want this either.” I knew my voice held a whine, completely un-regal, but I couldn’t bring myself to care. “You care about someone else.”

“I do. But I know my duty.” He shrugged. “And perhaps after a time, we can reach an arrangement. After we provide the required heir and spare, of course.”

What the unholy... This zebra was planning to mate me and then, what? “You can’t be serious.”

“But I am. It’s a fine old tradition. We won’t even have to share a room after a while.”

If I’d thought I was walking into a nightmare before, I was mating with someone who was telling me that he would be taking a lover in the future and that he didn’t really care if I did too. I’d thought we were at least trying to put a good face on the whole thing. And I would never take an oath I didn’t intend to keep. Maybe nobody else would know, maybe they wouldn’t care, but I would know and I would care.

I let Harl help me up and followed him to the town car that had been ferrying us around all day. There was no way I could let this happen. If I went through with it, if I mated him, I’d spend the years living a multitude of lies.

Sitting in the back seat, I kept as much distance between us as possible. My brain spun with the need to find a way out of the match, but how? It was going to happen in just a few

hours. We went directly to the club where a changing room had been arranged so I could get ready for the ceremony.

So we could get ready. I was relieved that Harl had his own room because I couldn't stand to be around him anymore. We had been doing okay today, and I'd almost convinced myself that we could do the best-friends-as-mates thing if we put our minds to it. And then I learned that he had no honor. With the scent of my mates still in my nostrils, if I took those vows, I would keep them.

But how could I?

In the changing room, I was left by myself to dress, but as soon as I had the suit on my body and the crown on my head, I paced back and forth and tried with every bit of my brain to come up with a way out of the situation. But there was no way, and the alternative, if I tried to refuse, was too horrible to think of.

"You about ready?" One of our footmen stuck his head around the door. "It's almost time."

"No, but I will be. Please leave me."

He didn't argue. They never did. It was their job not to. But, when he swung the door closed, a breeze wafted to me, and it held the scents I had been trying to forget with no success. And, suddenly, it was too much for me, and I rushed to the door and opened it a crack in case the footman was waiting outside. Fortunately, he must have decided to go pass along my reply to his question or maybe was outside goofing off. I didn't give a rat's tail what he was doing as long as he did not get in between me and the tantalizing scents that told me this time my mates were here somewhere.

If Harl had not revealed his true stripes, I might have stayed put. But probably not. Fated mates were a siren's call that an alpha would have one heck of a time resisting. And I just didn't want to try anymore.

The club was a maze, but I didn't need a map to follow my nose. I wasn't looking for a place. I was looking for people.

My mates.

And I found them in the kitchen. Standing together and looking into one another's eyes with such emotion, it made my heart twist. But not in jealousy. No. I was part of this, and I stepped right up to them and said, "Hello. I'm Edwin. And I think, no I know, you're my mates.

Chapter Ten

Kam

Edwin. His name was Edwin. It sounded so regal and perfect. And beautiful. Like him.

I couldn't quite get past the fact that my-our-mate was a prince! Not to mention the groom of the wedding that was about to take place here on the grounds of Animals.

I held tightly to his hand. Oakley, on Edwin's other side, clung to his entire arm. The kitchen was a busy bustle of excitement all around us. It was as if we were in a bubble of our own little world.

"Of all the days to find my true mates," Edwin said. "This has to be a dream."

He was so handsome, like Oakley, but in his own way. Head held high, striking in his height, his hair tossed back from his head as if he'd just run through a field in the wind. I could almost imagine him shifted, those powerful chest muscles, thighs to die for, a long mane and tail, and fast on his feet. And the stripes. I loved stripes. Zebras had just become my new favorite thing.

"To scent two fated mates one after another is an experience I never thought I'd have." I reached out to pat Oakley on the chest. "It's such a strange feeling, like I've known the two of you all along." Yet, I knew nothing. I had only had a chance to talk with Oakley a few times, and Edwin was a total mystery.

Edwin the prince. Oakley and I were completely outside of his class. If that mattered. I wasn't familiar with zazzle hierarchies and politics, but I had heard they were strict. Plus, the wedding had been planned for years. A lavish, luxurious, no expense spared *royal* wedding.

We three were about to cause a royal drama.

A shudder went through my entire body. My owl longed to take flight with both his mates firmly grasped in his talons. It was an absurd vision, but I understood the sentiment.

“Are you going to be able to handle all this?” I asked Edwin.

“I have no choice. I won't marry now. I never wanted Harl anyway. And he has a lover who he planned to give up only for long enough to supply the required heirs. This was all arranged by the zazzle when we were children.”

“What will it mean for you? Not to go through with it?” Oakley looked worried, his eyes big and dark.

Edwin's lips made a half grimace, half smile. “Hmm. Not a pretty outcome. When a zebra prince or princess defies the zazzle's choice in a mate, he or she is locked away, labeled insane. They are then counseled to see reason. If they don't come around, they're drugged and forced into the marriage.”

Oakley's mouth dropped open. “That's horrible! We have to get you out of here.”

I couldn't believe Edwin's casual tone. My owl flapped inside me. I would never allow our mate to be so abused.

“It's not the Dark Ages,” I added.

Edwin let out a big sigh. “There are cases in the history books of our race. These more forced marriages are stories told by manservants to their princes or handmaidens to their princesses. No doubt to keep us in line. There are rumors it still does happen, but before you two go all bodyguard on me, I have not been threatened.”

“Yet,” Oakley said, his frown almost scary.

“I know Harl will understand. He doesn’t want me any more than I want him. It’s my fathers and the king we have to break this news to. Fated mates is real even if a lot of people don’t believe. They won’t be able to deny that I could no more be loyal to Harl than I could harm another.”

Just then, a commotion by the kitchen doors took our attention. Two men in dark tailored suits held the doors open.

One said, “In here, Your Majesty.”

The other said, “Make way for the king. All hail.”

Edwin let out a sort of disgusted grunt. His eyelids shivered closed, as if he was blocking out the world for just that second. Then his eyes popped open with a determined gaze. Still holding my hand, he slipped from Oakley’s grip and went to his knees.

The zebra king made his entrance. “Edwin, there you are. The wedding party awaits you.”

The king came forward, hand out, and Edwin took it and allowed the king to lift him to his feet. As he rose, Edwin clung to my hand, took his own away from the king’s, and reclaimed Oakley’s.

The king was very tall and wore a long white robe with black stripes. The robe glistened, as if embedded with crystals. The man himself was ageless, with distinguished black hair all shining and loose down his back but held back in front by a half-crown of faceted ebony jewels. He exuded an air of charisma that stunned me and everybody in the kitchen; even the staff froze as everyone went silent and stared.

“Edwin?” The king stared at where Oakley’s and my hands were clasped in our new mate’s grip. “What is going on here?”

“Your Majesty.” Edwin sounded almost breathless. “Something amazing has happened.”

“Amazing?” The king looked from me to Oakley with distrust. “I don’t understand this nonsense. You need to leave this area and report immediately to the wedding party.”

“I can’t get married,” Edwin blurted.

My heart stopped. The sound of collective gasps came from behind us. Oakley and I exchanged shocked looks.

“Of course you are getting married!”

“No, Your Majesty. I can’t.”

The king’s eyebrows sharpened, one rising higher than the other. “And why, may I ask, not?”

“Because I just found my fated mates.”

It was as if all the oxygen had been leached from the room. No one breathed. No one moved.

The king’s glaring gaze met first mine, then Oakley’s. “Fated what?”

Edwin cleared his throat, and his voice rang loud and clear now. “I have met my fated mates, Kam and Oakley. They are who I belong to, now. They are the only ones who have a rightful claim to me.”

The king said nothing.

Edwin bowed his head, but his voice was still firm. “I’m sorry, but this is what has happened now. It can’t be undone.”

The king gave a single nod of his head, then addressed me. “Which one are you?”

“Kam, sir, uh, your Majesty. Owl shifter.”

The king blinked. “Is this true?”

“Yes, sir, your Majesty. Oakley and I scented our third mate here at Animals last night. It was, um, sudden.” I kicked myself for being so nervous. This man wasn’t royalty to me.

The king turned to Oakley, sniffing the air. “And you, you’re a bear shifter, right?”

Oakley nodded.

“Do you concur with this?”

Oakley straightened his back and lifted his chin. “I do with all my heart, Your Majesty.”

Now, the king leaned closer to Edwin. “One mate wasn’t enough for you? You had to find two, eh?”

“That is what has happened, Your Majesty.”

The king turned all the way around until his back was to us. I feared the worst. Wrath and damnation and hell raining

forth. Or something along those lines. Instead, he made a gesture to his aides.

“By my decree, the wedding is canceled. Spread the word.”

One of the suited men spoke into a device on his wrist. I noticed then that he was wearing a discreet earpiece.

The king turned halfway back toward us. “The party will, however, continue. We might as well celebrate our prince finding his mates rather than let all this food and decoration go to waste.” He held up his hand and headed for the door.

“Come along, then,” came the order.

Oakley and I turned to Edwin at the same time.

“Does this mean what I think it means?” Oakley asked.

“Yep.” Edwin let a huge grin spread over his face. “I’m off the hook.”

“We’re off the hook, you mean,” I said. “I thought for a second there I was going to have to fight for you or something.”

Edwin squeezed my hand. “Kam, that’s the sweetest thing anyone’s ever said to me.”

“Hey, I was ready to fight, too,” Oakley said.

“That’s also the sweetest thing anyone has ever said to me,” Edwin added with a chuckle.

My mind was still spinning. We were off the hook. It wasn’t even a terrible scene. Could it really be true? Did I now have two mates? And was I going to get to claim them both?

Mates, my owl said. True mates. Claim forever.

I was still reeling as we made our way out of the kitchen into the main area of the club.

Chapter Eleven

Oakley

My mate was free—free from his obligation to mate, anyway. Was he free from royal duties? I didn't even know what those might be or if they mattered at all when it came to our relationship. And really, it didn't matter. The three of us would figure all of this out. The only insurmountable obstacle had been the wedding, and we'd kicked its ass. Or rather, the king did. I wasn't sure if there was some sort of zebra law that said you couldn't mate if you had a fated or some shit or if the king was a romantic at heart. And really, I didn't care. I was over-the-top thrilled the wedding was called off without me having to get clawy. And I would've gotten clawy for sure. No one was going to separate the three of us, not now that we'd finally connected.

“We should go out there and face the music.” Edwin looked as if he wanted to do anything but.

“Or we could sneak into the walk into the pantry storage and steal some kisses,” Kam offered.

“That.” I grabbed both their hands and practically dragged them to the large room. It was filled with mostly paper products, but also canned and jarred goods. “Now what was the plan again?”

“I believe you were going to steal kisses, but I'm confused...” Edwin said. “Who are you going to steal them from? Everyone I see here wants to gladly give them to you.”

Kam opened his mouth to say something and must've changed his mind because the next thing I knew he had pulled Edwin to him by his shirt and sealed his lips to our zebra mate's mouth. It was hot as fuck. If ever I thought jealousy would raise its ugly head, that thought was long gone. Watching the two of them kiss had me thinking of doing a great many things, and none of them were work appropriate.

"You joining in, or are you just going to watch?" Kam teased when their kiss broke and they were both catching their breaths.

"Honestly, both sound fantastic."

Edwin took that as a sign to pull me to him in the same way that Kam did to him. His lips against mine had my stirring cock at full attention, my body heating up, and all rational thought fleeing my head. It was hot in a way I didn't know existed, and when Kam pressed his front against my back and kissed my neck, I almost came right then and there.

"Excuse me...sorry...I..."

We snapped apart and there stood a server looking distraught and pointing at the shelf behind us.

"We'll get out of your way." How Edwin could sound so composed when his pants were so tight that no one could ignore the massive bulge in them was beyond me.

The three of us left and joined what was now a huge ass party. I was expecting people to be pissed. But they all seemed to be enjoying the celebration, even if there was technically nothing to be celebrated. There had been no wedding, nor would there be one.

“Your family went all out with this shindig.” I held onto Kam’s hand, Edwin on his other side.

“They do like to show off their well and specialness.” He rolled his eyes. “Let’s find Harl and do the nice nice, and then maybe we can sneak out of here and get to know each other better.”

“By better, do you mean...naked?” Kam teased.

“Ummm, yeah.” Gods our mate was perfect.

It didn’t take us long to hunt down Harl. Any worry we had that he was going to get his feelings hurt were for nothing. He had his tongue down some guy’s throat while that same man had his hand down Harl’s pants.

“We came to tell you that we were sorry to mess things up,” Edwin said when they broke apart long enough to see we had walked into the coat room they were currently enjoying. “Thinking we can hold off on that.”

“How about I thank you, instead? Now that the marriage is off, I’m considered damaged goods.” He fist pumped the guy he had just been making out with. “Now I am no longer worthy of an arranged anything. They are letting us get married instead!”

“Best thing that could’ve happened,” the other man said and held out his hand. “I get both my ring and my man.”

None of us shook it, having just seen where it had been. “Name’s Piper.”

“This is Oakley and Kam. My mates.” Edwin brought his attention to Piper, “Have we met?”

“Probably not.” He leaned in closer and whispered,
“Human.”

How had I missed that? No wonder Harl had been willing to follow through with the understanding he could keep his side piece. He wasn't a side piece at all. This was his mate, and one his family would never have agreed to. Royalty and their stupid matings and marriages and crap.

“We're happy for you,” Kam said.

The three of us excused ourselves and went back to the party. There were a few people that Edwin had to show us off to, not because he particularly liked them and wanted to share this piece of his life with them, but because it saved face for his family.

Aside from being a snobby lot, everyone was nice enough. A few even danced with us when the chicken dance came on. But as nice as it was to have yummy food and to dance with my mates, I was ready to get out of there.

Chapter Twelve

Edwin

It happens fast with shifter mates. And especially when there is a reason for fearing we might be drawn apart. The king approving us was more of a shock than I'd been willing to reveal either to my mates or to His Majesty himself. He was not known for his willingness to bend once he'd made a decree, and I'd been prepared for disaster.

Okay not prepared. It all happened too fast, and from the moment he entered things were precarious. More than my mates could possibly know. The stories told by nannies and other staff about what could happen to those who refused their matings, or anything the king declared, were actually lighter versions, I'd learned. Although nothing so dramatic had happened in this king's rule or possible even one or two before him, those who defied their absolute ruler were subject to any and all penalties up to a grisly execution worthy of humans of earlier eras.

So while I didn't really expect to be drawn and quartered, I also did not expect him to agree to our mating and let the party go on! Up to and including the mating of Harl with someone of his mate's class right in front of the gods and everyone. Our zazzle had borne the lion's share of the expenses for this event, so this was pretty extraordinary.

We stuck around for exactly the minimum time we could pull off, which was not long. Both of my mates were technically working the event, but Zevo sent a text to them

both that *Nobody should have to work on their mating night*. It seemed that word had gotten around, but of course it had. The couple who stood under the arch did not include me. The king did want it known that he supported, perhaps had even made the decisions involved. He had been benevolent, but he had his pride.

Once we were outside the club, there was another decision to make.

“So, where do we go?” Oakley asked, clinging to our hands tightly.

“It should be somewhere really special,” Kam put in. “Maybe a hotel? Do you have a room already, Edwin?”

“Sort of.” The one I’d been in was not likely to be available. “I stayed in the honeymoon suite of a very nice hotel last night, but I feel that it will have other occupants in a while.”

“The happy couple.” Kam shook his head. “Makes sense. Well, we could go to another one or one of our places.”

“Actually, I do have another idea.” I was still a prince of our people making the estate nearby where, fortunately, the king chose not to stay this trip to San Diego, available. Probably. “Just let me check and see if it is open.” I texted my assistant, who was at the party but who had access to all the calendars on his smart phone. “One minute.”

Is anyone at the estate? Since it was only available to the royal family, and my alpha father was the king’s brother, and there was a whole floor of suites booked at the hotel, which was near the club and very convenient to continue the party.

Nobody scheduled. Shall I note you as exclusive?

Please do.

I stuffed my phone in my pocket and smiled at my mates. “All right. Who’s driving? I came here in a hired car.”

“As long as you direct me where to go, I will. My car is not very fancy, I warn you.” Kam arched a brow, as if maybe he expected me to object and insist on a Rolls Royce or something.

“Sounds great.” I kissed him and then Oakley for good measure, almost unable to believe I could do this with impunity. Twenty-four hours ago, I hadn’t even met them, had only the tantalizing trace of their scents to tell me they existed. And now we were piling into a smallish import car with our omega bear in the back seat and me riding shotgun to give directions.

I did have a car, but it was back in the zazzle because nobody expected me to do any of my own driving this weekend. The official honeymoon had involved air travel, and I wondered if Harl and his mate would take advantage of it. They might as well, and I wished them a long life of happiness. Hopefully the ability to be with the one he really wanted would keep my ex-betrothed faithful and happy in the future. But the realization that it was none of my business and not going to affect my future in any way allowed me to put all of that out of my mind.

Fate had me up against the wall, but somehow found me worthy of a much better life than the one my zazzle, my family, and my ruler had in mind for me. I hoped I’d never forget to be grateful. As we took the long drive down the hill

from the club, I listened to my mates talk about what they'd had to eat in the kitchen before I wandered in and felt at peace. Nobody could predict even the next day, but when Fate stepped in, as they surely had done here, we had a good chance of happiness.

Growing up, I'd heard those who had fated mates talk about how it felt to meet them, how everything changed in a moment, but since my life was planned for me, I didn't pay too much attention. It wouldn't be good for my mental health to dream of what I could never had.

Just like it wasn't good to dwell on what ended up not happening.

"Which way?" Kam asked, stopped at the bottom of the drive.

"Left." And with that I threw myself back into the moment. The very, very good and happy moment.

I chose not to give a lot of detail about where we were going because I hoped my mates would be delighted with the location of our mating night. Sure, my ex had the honeymoon suite, but what Kam parked in front of was essentially a honeymoon castle. The zazzle had owned this huge piece of land for generations, and an early king had taken an active role in the design of the gorgeous home he built there.

To my pleasure, they were stunned into silence. Depending on what happened in the future, I might not be able to offer this amenity to them, but I wanted them to fully enjoy it now. As would I with that possibility in mind.

“Is this a B&B?” Oakley asked. “It’s gorgeous.”

“No. Just one of the properties owned by my extended family. I booked it for us. Sometimes there are a bunch of relatives here, but they’ve all got other plans tonight.”

“So this huge place is...we’re the only ones here?” Kam asked.

“No, but we are the only guests. There’s always some staff around. We won’t see them unless we need them.”

No response to that at all. What had been normal to me growing up was anything but to most people I guessed. Something I might have to get used to as well.

I had a card key for the building and since it was a family home there were no other doors locked unless someone inside wanted privacy. We’d had the outdoor lock upgraded a while back because keys kept getting lost and for some reason the cards in wallets did not.

Promising them a tour the next day, I led them to the room we all would be most interested in. The suite I always used when I went there with its huge bed, fabulous en suite, and a balcony large enough to host a party on. Among other things.

“Shower?” I asked but before the words were out of my mouth, clothes began to fly. Shifters were known for not waiting once they met their mates, but I hadn’t expected the kind of speed that was happening. Speed I more than participated in. I wanted to see my mates, every inch of them, and I also wanted nothing between us.

We came together with what amounted to a body slam, tumbling together onto the bed with arms and legs tangling.

Oakley landed on the bottom, and that worked out just fine for me, giving me the opportunity to kiss him. His mouth was warm, and as my hand crept down between his legs to grasp his cock, he writhed under us. Vaguely aware of what Kam was doing to Oakley, most of my focus was on the omega. His scent, his slick, were driving me wild, and I got on my knees and pressed his legs up to his chest, bending to draw in a breath of his arousal. “Omega, I can’t wait.”

“Don’t wait,” he moaned. “I need you inside me.”

I was pressing my cock to his hole, coating it with his copious slick when I heard a click from behind me. A glance over my shoulder showed Kam holding up a bottle of lube. I didn’t even know where he got it but then remembered there had been one in the nightstand drawer. He raised a brow in question, and I nodded, wanting all of us as close as possible as soon as possible. I’d never been taken there before, but my mates...yes, I wanted this.

Oakley reached for me, drawing me down closer as I drove into his hot tight hole, feeling it milking me already. The tight envelope of his body distracted me from what was going on behind me until I felt Kam’s lube-coated fingers working me, stretching and preparing me for something I wasn’t sure I could take.

But I would because it would mean the three of us would all be connected to one another, Then as I moved in and out of Oakley, the head of Kam’s cock prodded thrust past the tight, virginal muscle ring to fill me with his thick, hardness. “Relax, alpha,” Kam breathed. “Push back and let me in.”

“Yes.” I was still moving in and out of Oakley, and Kam’s rhythm matched up, so when I retreated, he filled me deeper and then when I was sheathed in our omega’s slickness, my own hole was holding tight, trying to keep Kam inside.

It was an extraordinary time, the connection, the bonding, the mating, and when I could no longer hold back, I let out a very un-zebralike roar and poured my cum into our omega, my knot swelling and keeping me in place.

From behind me, a slap on my ass was followed by searing heat filling me, an extraordinary sensation I’d never experienced. Panting, I reached for Oakley because I wanted him to come with us, and in three short strokes he spilled over my hand.

I bent down and sank my teeth into his neck at his shoulder. As soon as I eased back, Oakley grabbed my arm and pulled me closer again, returning the mark. Ecstasy rolled over me, and if I didn’t know better, I’d say I came again, it was that intense.

It was all happening with a freight-train’s speed, and when my knot finally shrank, I rolled to the side and brought Kam with me, marking him and being marked in return. I lay panting, holding tight to both of my mates until exhausted sleep took me away. It had been a very long day.

Chapter Thirteen

Kam

When I woke up, I was lying on top of someone. Naked. I rubbed my eyes and saw a smooth, firm chest. I breathed in the scent of my mate. No, *mates*. Fresh berries. Sweet honey. Oakley and Edwin, the two most beautiful names I'd ever heard.

I felt warm and secure between the thighs of my lean-muscled alpha zebra with my omega bear's arm thrown over my shoulders. Edwin slept peacefully on his back, one hand resting on my ass, his other underneath Oakley's head. Oakley was all curled up with his forehead pressed to Edwin's upper arm.

We three completed a circuit, not merely because we were touching, but because the claiming we'd done last night had created a link between us.

Some described links or bonds between mates like a constant current of awareness that always tingled just under the skin, growing stronger with proximity and, of course, lovemaking. They weren't wrong. For me, it was so new I was still getting used to it, like I could actually feel my mates sleeping, their heartbeats matched with mine, their breaths like one. Our desire, even in sleep, focused on each other as if we'd all fallen under some love spell never to recover. A sense of peace and contentment surrounded the three of us. Nothing could interfere.

Then my stomach gave an angry growl.

Edwin stirred first. “Oakley.” His voice came out sleepy and soft. “Did you just growl?”

Oakley let out a muffled hum. “No. Did you?”

“I don’t growl.”

They both said in unison, “Kam?”

“Owls don’t growl,” I lifted my head. “But stomachs do.” As I spoke, I heard a rumble that wasn’t me.

“Okay,” Oakley confessed. “That was my stomach this time.”

Edwin lifted his upper body, causing me to fall to one side and Oakley to roll onto his back. “I think we all worked up an appetite last night. We should order breakfast.”

“We can go out if it’s easier,” Oakley said.

“What? Why? I’ve got a huge kitchen and staff.” He chuckled and leaned over me to reach for his phone on the nightstand. His body rubbed enticingly against mine.

“Name it. I’ll text it.” Edwin lay back, holding the phone up and over his face. “Whatever you want. They’ll have it up here on fancy carts and silver trays with cloth napkins rolled up in hand-blown glass rings.”

“Anything?” Oakley asked.

“Yep. If they don’t have it, they send someone on a run to get it.”

“I just like eggs and bacon,” I said.

Oakley nodded. “And pancakes. Can they be blueberry pancakes?”

My stomach made another rude noise. “Oh, that sounds fantastic.”

“All of that sounds great,” Edwin said. “How about a bowl of fruit, too? Oh, and some English muffins. You guys like muffins?”

“Actually, they’re my favorite,” Oakley said. “How do you stay so slender with so many choices?”

“Oh please.” He smacked his flat stomach. “I am getting a paunch.”

I frowned, putting my face closed to his belly button. “A paunch? Where?” I kissed him, and Oakley joined me.

Edwin began to giggle and kick his legs. “All right, guys. Stop that. If you want breakfast now, I need to focus.”

“I see breakfast right here,” Oakley said, kissing lower.

I watched, grinning, as Edwin’s beautiful cock began to fill.

“Hey, food first, okay? We need energy if we’re going to be doing more of what we did last night.”

Oakley let out a short whine. “Oh, all right.”

We gave our order to the kitchen staff, who reported immediately that they’d be up in twenty minutes with our food. That gave us time for a shower. One shower, at least. So we decided to share.

Of course, Edwin’s shower was fancy, like the rest of him and his abode, with rock walls and a waterfall. If I wasn’t starving to death, I could’ve spent a long time letting the water crash over my body.

When I got out, Edwin produced matching robes for the three of us, soft and fleecy.

I checked my phone, texting my delivery guys to take over my route again. Oakley called in to his job, though I didn't hear what he told them.

When the food arrived on several trays complete with candles to top off the romantic atmosphere, we tackled it as if we hadn't eaten in days.

"This is fantastic," I said, scooping perfectly scrambled eggs onto my butter-soaked English muffin.

"The best pancakes I think I've ever had," Oakley added, devouring his food.

Edwin poured us all mimosas from a pitcher. "I know it's early but it's just champagne. We deserve to celebrate." His tone went low and serious. "I can still feel the claiming bites sparkling all the way through my heart. It's like the two of you live there now."

Oakley's eyes danced in the candlelight. "I haven't finished with Kam, yet," he said.

I winked. "Nor I, you, omega mine. But I can still feel you through Edwin."

Oakley bit at his lip. "Me, too."

We'd exchanged bites last night with Edwin. All three of us. Edwin had claimed me and Oakley and we'd claimed him back. Oakley and I hadn't had time to fully claim each other, though. Just the thought had my body instantly hot and flushed. Great. Now I had to finish my delicious breakfast with a raging hard-on.

When we finally retired to the bedroom, Edwin brought the candles in and set them on each nightstand. His room was already high-ceilinged, huge, and ornate, with floor-to-ceiling purple-and-lavender satin curtains, and a crystal chandelier over the foot of the bed, but the candles made it even more fairytale-esque. I felt like I'd been whisked off to a magic castle to offer my soul to the prettiest zebra prince and omega bear in the kingdom.

It wasn't far from the truth.

We'd all been hungry, and breakfast had been lavish, so we took a little time to digest our food. As we lay together in Edwin's massive bed, we talked about how we'd come to San Diego and what our dreams were.

Edwin said, "My only dream was to find my true mate. With the upcoming marriage, I thought it would never happen."

"Fate had something else in store all along, I guess," Oakley said.

"Do you believe in fate?" I asked.

Edwin reached out and touched the top of my hand. "I didn't, really. Until now."

"I believed," Oakley said. "I like all that sort of psychic magic stuff. I just didn't think it would happen to me. At least, not so soon."

"Even though my owl has a sort of sixth sense, and he's never wrong when he tells me stuff, I still wasn't sure. I mean about the mate thing. I figured if you fell in love, that would be your mate and you'd form a bond of trust and love. But this

happened so fast. And right at the perfect moment. Another day, and you'd be married, Edwin. I guess I'm a believer now."

"If you weren't, I'd make you a believer right now." Edwin leaned forward and gave me such a sexy kiss, my back arched and my legs spread.

My towel parted at my thighs to reveal how ready I already was for the two of them to do whatever they wanted with me, and for me and Oakley to claim each other.

Both my mates came to me, one at each side, their hands pushing my robe all the way off and skimming my naked body. Quickly, they had me in such a daze I couldn't think. I let myself succumb to the heat and the feelings. My body hummed. My cock arched up and back over my lower stomach. A hand gripped it. Then a wet, warm mouth lowered over the tip and down the shaft, slowly sucking.

My head rocked back. Oakley was there, immediately latching onto the muscle between my neck and shoulder, biting down. I spun in ecstasy. When I thought I could take no more, Oakley, still biting and sucking, straddled my hips. Edwin was holding the base of my shaft, gently milking me as Oakley lowered himself onto my cock. As an omega, he produced natural slick and didn't need much prep at all. Oakley rocked me inside him, again sucking on the bite he'd made. When he let up, I grabbed him with both my hands around his neck and pulled him to me. I was on the brink, ready to fall into exquisite, torturous pleasure. As I flung myself into my impending orgasm, I bit him.

He cried out, his body clinging to me, his insides milking everything I had to give.

Edwin was right there, licking at the bites as well, kissing where he'd bitten us both the night before.

I lost track of time, space, reality —everything but my two mates. As my spent cock slid from Oakley, I felt myself turned in the bed and someone stretching me, entering me.

Edwin thrust into me with a wild shout. Oakley grabbed us both in a huge hug and kissed Edwin, then me. Suddenly, the three of us were entangled in a blissful kiss, lips and tongues searching for deeper intimacy. As Edwin took me, Oakley wrapped his strong hand around my cock and his and milked us through to another strong orgasm as Edwin came inside me.

Comfort and love surrounded me. The pleasure of Oakley and Edwin resonated alongside my own as if their emotions, also, were mine. Now I had the two of them like little flames inside me, forever flickering, never to go out.

The claiming was now complete.

Chapter Fourteen

Oakley

We stayed naked for two days. I loved getting to know them in this way. And there was nothing better than running my fingers over where they marked me, knowing they were mine. But I was getting itchy to get out of this place. I wanted to go home. Not that my home was any great shakes. It was a shitty apartment, but still...

“What do you both think about coming to my place today? I can get some fresh clothes, and you could see where I live.” One of the many discussions we needed to have was over where we would begin our lives together.

“Honestly, I’m ready to get out of here.” Kam stretched his arms over his head. “It’s one of those beautiful places to visit, but also one you don’t want to be at for too long. Does that make sense?”

“You don’t like the royal life?” Edwin teased. He looked around and then whispered, “Cause same. Let’s go see our sexy bear’s den.”

We took a long shower together and headed to my place. It wasn’t until we entered my neighborhood that the reality of what I was about to do hit me. My mates didn’t live like I did. They had money and a business. I had a shitty apartment I needed a second job to afford. Why would they want to come here and, worse, would they think less of me if they did.

I should’ve known I didn’t need to worry.

“This is it.” I opened the door and stepped inside. “I used to have a roommate, but he got a new job. That was why I was working at Animals. I needed the money. I was so pissed at the entire situation at the time, but now I’m so happy it happened.”

“Are you telling me this place is the reason the three of us are together?” Kam asked.

“Yeah, in a way, I guess it is.”

“Then it is my third most favorite place.” Edwin plopped onto my couch. “Should we hang out here today? Maybe watch movies and be all boring?”

“Boring sounds lovely.” Kam joined our mate on the couch.

“It really does.”

After a tour of the place, we opted to go to the grocery store and buy a bunch of junk food to eat during what had morphed into our movie marathon plans. We were each going to share our favorite movie with the others—Kam’s idea.

“We have enough food for the entire apartment building.” I looked at the nearly full cart and did some calculations in my head. We were spending more than I allotted for an entire month.

“Hey,” Edwin gripped my shoulder and brought his lips to my ear, “I got this.”

“But you shouldn’t have to.” Our relationship was so off-balance when it came to finances. I was the bottom earner by a significant margin. It didn’t feel good. I wanted to give back as much as they gave.

“Ahh, but should and shouldn’t doesn’t come into play. I want to. It makes me happy.” He gave my shoulder a squeeze and then let go to push the cart another spot in line up.

I thanked him, and the three of us unloaded the food onto the belt.

“If the royal wedding guests could see me now.” He set a huge bag of tortilla chips on the conveyor belt.

“They would be jealous.” Kam rested his head on Edwin’s shoulder. “Look at our mate. How could they not be?”

They were officially the sweetest mates ever and, by some miracle, I got to call them mine.

The first movie we watched was my favorite. It was a silly favorite to have, but my grandfather had loved it and, consequently, we watched it time and time again when I was growing up. And after his passing, I took it on as my favorite.

“I never even heard of this before.” Kam ran his fingers through my hair. I lay between my mates with my head on his lap and my feet on Edwin’s as the opening credits rolled.

“You never heard of *Babes in Toyland*?” I twisted my head to look up at him. “How can that be? It’s a classic. I hope you love it as much as I do.”

Both Kam and Edwin laughed so hard while watching the little “mouse” run around and when the soldiers came out human-size. And in the end they both declared their love for the classic.

From there we moved to an action film followed by a rom com. We were all wearing my pajamas. There was something inherently sexy about seeing your man, or, in my case, men,

wearing your clothing. The pj's didn't fit either of them well, but I'd never seen them sexier.

“Should we go out to eat, order in, or finish our junky binge?” I asked as the final credits began.

“Honestly, what I want more than anything is to climb into bed with my mates and fall sound asleep.” Kam had missed a chunk of the last movie. He was tired. That and he was used to getting up at inhuman times.

“It will be snug. I have a full-size.” I climbed off his lap and stood up, letting out a yawn and stretching my arms high in the sky. I hadn't realized how sleepy I was. Kam's idea of going to bed sounded delightful.

“That means I will need to be snuggled up close.” Kam popped up. “I love the sound of that.”

“I call middle.” Edwin pushed himself to stand. “I need to make sure I don't fall off the bed.”

“You do remember the tour of my room, don't you?” I giggled. “No one is falling off the bed. There's no room.” A full was the only bed that fit in the space.

We cleaned up the snack fest and got ready for bed. It was nice like this—being home and with my mates.

“Don't think this means I'm ungrateful, but I am glad we are here tonight.” I was pretty done with fancy—at least fancy that belonged to someone else.

“Same.” Kam nestled into my side.

Edwin never took his claimed his spot in the middle, instead offering it to me. “We need to keep our omega from

falling off the bed,” he said, even though we’d just established that wasn’t possible. He was all kinds of adorable.

“I’ll make sure this side is safe.” Kam’s body flanked my own. “You know...because duty.”

“Thank you for today.” I couldn’t hold back the yawn escaping my lips. “It was nice being here with you both.”

“It was.” Kam kissed my cheek.

“So very much so.” Edwin intertwined his fingers with Kam’s, they rested them on my belly, and I drifted off to sleep.

Chapter Fifteen

Edwin

I had lots of things to do, despite not mating and moving into the role laid out for me. Even before this, I had plenty of jobs as a prince, and although I would have preferred to stay with my mates, I dropped them off at my temporary place and went off to deal. That meant facing a whole lot of people who were not thrilled with me. The king's word stood, and it had, from all accounts been quite a great party only getting better after we made our escape

I was sitting at my desk signing various things when my assistant came in. "Those could have waited, you know." He was a cousin and probably would have been better at the prince thing than me although he was only a lord of some kind. I couldn't keep track. "Nobody expected you to come back until your...that is we weren't expecting..."

"You don't have to tiptoe around. My official mating was canceled because I met my fated mates. It's not a secret. You were at the celebration." And had made the arrangements for the estate.

"It was weird. Expecting one thing to happen and then something entirely different? But it was good in a different way. Want to know a secret?"

Trepidation crept up my spine. No, I didn't want to know any secrets about that night. But I had to ask. "Sure."

"The food was really good, but about halfway through the night, when most of the old folks had left, someone had the

kitchen make pizza.”

Laughter spilled from my lips. “Pepperoni?”

“Is there any other kind? The king and his toadies all want everyone to think we’re herbivores, but I’d bet they stopped for burgers on the way home.”

“Oh! That stand His Majesty loves.” I chuckled. “The one he thinks nobody but his inner circle knows about. Anyway, I am not on the honeymoon that was planned, and I’m not sure what I’m going to be doing, so I thought I’d get in here and clear my desk.” I instructed him in various projects that he probably already knew more about than me, and then I was ready to return to my mates. A few hours away from them felt like an eternity.

I kept picturing them at the estate and wondering what they were doing. Were they eating some food from the kitchen? Watching a movie? Maybe they’d gone outside for a walk or a run? Or were taking a nap, all curled up together. The image made it hard for me to keep from pressing my foot harder on the accelerator. The offices were a pretty good distance from the house, something made worse by the traffic that had steadily gotten worse every year.

But when I pulled down the drive on the property, my muscles eased from tension I wouldn’t have even been aware of otherwise. Even after such a short time, my mates had made a real improvement in my health and well-being. My mates not being had not even occurred to me until now. But they weren’t my prisoners or anything, and they probably had things to take care of as well. I hadn’t even thought to ask, since they just seemed to be a part of me now. I’d need to watch that; having

been a prince might make me less considerate than I should be.

And who wanted to even be a prince?

Wow.

Was that an option? To walk away entirely? Was that betrayal of my family...and did I have any skills to help support my new mates and myself without my crown and the income it brought?

I did have a certain amount of income from a trust that my grandmother left me, but without ever having had to pay rent or utilities or insurance or anything else that people had to take care of in the “real” world. In my life I was privileged, and I knew how things worked. But if I gave up my role in the family, my mates would have to teach me a whole lot. Was that fair to them?

I'd had my car brought to the offices, another benefit of my rank, being able to just have things like that done at my convenience, so when I was done for the day, I took the elevator down and found it in my usual parking spot. One of the premium ones right by the door. I started for home in my freshly washed vehicle. Nobody ever brought me my car without washing it.

At least I knew that there were places to go where I could pay others to do that—if we could afford it. A lot to think about. I steered the car toward where my mates would, hopefully, be waiting for me while trying to think my way through all of this.

They were waiting for me, around back, in the pickleball court. This was a relatively new activity within the zazzle but also really popular, and I had just started to play it myself. Strolling around the outside of the building, I let my mind and body ease and anticipated seeing my mates again. The court came into sight just as a cheer came from our omega bear, and I stopped strolling and broke into a run, wanting them so much I could hardly stand it. Wanting to hug them and kiss them and touch them. Oakley jumped up and down and landed facing me. “Edwin!” He raced toward me and threw himself into my arms. Luckily I had to me to brace because our bear outweighed me by a bit, all muscle. “I won! I beat Kam two out of three.”

Kam was right behind him, and we shared a three-way hug for a long moment before I stepped back. “You guys still playing? Or shall we go order some dinner?”

We played a while longer, taking turns two on one which probably wasn’t regulation, but was a great deal of fun especially when loser had to kiss winner or winners each time. Then we wandered up to the house and to the little dining room where a staffer came in and took our orders for the very low-brow burgers and fries we all wanted.

While we waited, I asked them about their day and listened to their stories about exploring the estate and how they were both off work, at least at animals because a produce guy’s work is never done. But even Kam had managed to take a break and get his guys to cover for him. I was shamed that I hadn’t managed to do the same.

“I should have stayed with you. I wanted to.”

“We understand.” Kam took Oakley’s hand as he spoke. “Royalty has its downside. You get to stay at this beautiful house...but maybe you don’t have time to really enjoy it?”

“It’s true.” I let my head drop, gaze fixed on the table. “I have to ask you two something.”

“Go ahead.” Oakley reached for my hand with his free one.

“What’s up?” asked Kam.

“I am thinking I’d like to step back from my role in the royal family. It would mean giving up a lot.”

“Like this?” Kam waved their linked hands. “The use of the mansion?”

“Maybe. Probably. I’m not sure. But I would need a lot of help because I’ve never worked or lived anywhere else.”

The staffer returned with our meals, and I waited until she left before continuing. “I am not sure how well I’ll do.”

My mates stood and came around the table to hug me tight. Finally, I patted Oakley’s arm and leaned away. “Your burgers are going to get cold.”

“We have your back, mate,” murmured Kam before he stepped back.

“Both of us, no matter what you want to do,” continued Oakley. “And truthfully, I’m glad. This place is fun, and I’m sure there are good aspects to being royal, but I’m afraid I wouldn’t fit in.”

“Me either.” Kam sat down and lifted his burger. “We had the same thing to eat for lunch. I’m not sure how long the

employees here would tolerate our low-class tastes.”

I ran a fry through a blob of ketchup and held it up. “It’s what I always order.”

Their laughter was like music, and made me so happy.

Chapter Sixteen

Kam

“I have been longing to see you both in your animal forms,” I said. “Dreaming about it.”

“Hah!” Oakley playfully punched me in the shoulder. “When you’re not dreaming of us naked.”

I scrunched up my face. “I don’t know what you’re talking about, Oak.”

Edwin led us through the maze of hallways of his elaborate home to the outside back entrance. “Twenty-five acres of gardens and fields all walled in away from the world. We can shift to our hearts content out here. And there’s a pond with a big rock waterfall. Not natural, of course, but it was here when I moved in. And Kam, there are tall trees for you to sit in and view the estate.”

“That’s fantastic.”

I knew Edwin’s estate was huge, but we’d been so enamored with his bedroom for the last couple of days, I hadn’t really had a chance to notice. Claiming and all that—it was like a honeymoon. I hadn’t really kept track of whether it was night or day.

We crossed over the entrance and into a huge, raised deck patio area with a complete outdoor kitchen and indoor-outdoor couches and tables and chairs. I walked up to the railing and looked out over the grounds past a huge swimming pool.

Little hills rolled away into the distance, dotted with trees. It was San Diego, so the hills were more brown than green, but the meadows around the trees were thick with foliage, flowery bushes, and little natural grassy areas. I saw pathways leading through areas that had been tamed into gardens, and those places were the greenest, and most lush. A little breeze came up, bringing with it the scent of roses.

Oakley joined me at the railing. He bounced on his toes. "I wanna go!"

"Let's not delay, then." Edwin motioned us to a curving set of marble stairs that led down to the grounds.

Oakley grabbed my hand and together we followed Edwin down. At the bottom of the steps, up against the side wall, were two little cabins, no bigger than shacks, but each one looking like a cute Victorian tiny house. Benches and chairs were placed all around. The swimming pool, complete with slide and diving board, hummed just beyond as the filter ran, making little bubbles. The water glimmered like a diamond.

"What are these little houses?" I asked.

"Changing rooms, for those who are shy about shifting or changing into swimsuits in front of others." As he spoke, Edwin was already pulling off his shirt. He tossed it to a bench and sat, toeing off his shoes.

Oakley and I joined him. I marveled at the landscaping around the pool where at least a dozen lounge chairs sat. I was most intrigued by the way a willow bent toward one area of the pool, creating natural shade, its thin fronds almost touching the water. A large inflatable swan toy floated against the long leaves.

“Do you swim a lot?” Oakley asked, setting his shirt to one side.

“It’s heated year round. I swim in the mornings. I love it.”

“I like to swim, too,” he said.

“Me, too.” I stood up to pull down my pants, only to turn and see I had an audience. Both my mates were staring at me, Oakley licking absently at his bottom lip. They were still clothed from the waist down. Unfair.

I did a little sashay, making them laugh, then put out my arms and let my owl take me. It was always the wings that I felt first, stretching and ruffling. My eyesight became clearer than my usual 20/20 vision; everything had an extra edge of light to it.

I flew up to the bench. Edwin put out his arm and I lighted gracefully upon it. “You’re gorgeous, Kam.”

Oakley reached out and ran his fingers lightly over the thick feathers of my ruff. “Kam,” he said softly.

My owl preened under such praise. I put out my wings, pressed my talons against Edwin’s arm, and took off to the top of the willow by the pool. The branches were thin and rocked under my weight. From that vantage, I could survey the grounds along one side of the mansion, manicured gardens between two lines of live oaks. I gave a soft hoot of approval.

Looking down, I saw Edwin and Oakley quickly divesting themselves of the rest of their clothing. Moments later, a brown fuzzy bear and a radiant zebra stood gazing up at me. The bear jumped and leaped after the trotting zebra. They passed the willow and headed toward the meadows.

I soared around them, lighting on Oakley's back then taking off and landing on Edwin's back and taking off again. The two began to run, the zebra the swiftest, of course.

Edwin's rump muscles rippled under his striped hide as he ran. He was lean and moved like water over the land, seeming to melt into his environment.

Oakley tossed his head back, then reared up with his paws out and turned in a circle. He looked like the damned cutest teddy bear I'd ever seen.

Omega mine.

I had a vision of myself, naked and human, all curled up in his arms like he was a big bear chair that I used for napping away the stresses of the day.

A hum went through me like a current of wind, followed by what felt like chuckles. My mates had sensed, if not seen, the image. I must have projected it. They sent me ripples of love through our bond. We hadn't actually said those magic words "I love you" yet, but I felt it from them sure as the breeze on my wings. I sent the emotion back and felt it swell between us, back and forth.

I flew in circles around them as together we three explored the vast acreage Edwin owned.

When we returned to the little changing cabins by the pool, we sat naked on the bench side by side, marveling at the beauty of life the way people intoxicated by love tend to do.

"Thank you for this experience," Oakley said to Edwin.

"I love this place, but I don't own it. I wish I could invite you two to stay here and live with me, but I can't live here

forever. Is it too early to talk about living arrangements yet?”

“I don’t want us to be apart at all,” I said. “How do you two feel?”

“Same.” Oakley, who sat between me and Edwin, leaned against Edwin.

Love flowed through our bond settling around me like the petals of a flower. I placed my hand on Edwin’s naked thigh and made soft circles with my fingertips.

“Is your zazzle pressuring you? Pushing you out?” I asked.

“Not yet. I can stay as long as I need to until we have someplace of our own to go to, and you two are welcome as well. There’s no rush. But I want us to think about it.”

“I only have a tiny apartment right now,” Oakley confessed.

“I have my own house. You’re both welcome to come live with me. Or we can sell it and start fresh somewhere that we all choose together.”

We sat talking about our ideas, finally agreeing that we all wanted a new start. We added house hunting to our amazing new list of things we all wanted to do and experience together.

As we slowly got back into our clothes, I said, “Hey, I just want you guys to know something. Especially after this conversation. I hope it’s not too soon to say it, but I-I just feel so much for you. It’s the claiming and the fated mates thing and everything and, well, I just love you two so much. It’s as if I’ve known you all along.”

They stared at me with wide eyes.

“I just thought I’d burst if I didn’t say it out loud.”

Still nothing from them. The bond between us had fallen silent.

“Is that okay?” My final sentence came out a little squeaky.

Edwin crossed his arms and put his chin up.

Oakley gazed at me with his eyelids half-closed, as if assessing, judging.

For a second, I fell for it —their little ruse —but suddenly, like a whoosh of fresh air, their love poured over me through the bond. They both rushed me at once, kissing me from all sides, pushing and shoving me between them with hugs and caresses and kisses. Laughing.

“I love you so much, Kam. You’re so sweet and funny. You looked desperately afraid for a moment there,” Edwin said.

“I loved you the moment I met you,” Oakley said.

Then they turned to each other. Edwin drew Oakley into a breathless kiss. When he pulled back, he said, “I love you both from the moment I smelled you. Omega mine.”

Oakley looked like he had tears in his eyes. “I love you, too, Edwin.”

Now do you see why I told you not to sell?

It was truly settled. The claiming and the bonding which had happened over the past days. Our first shift together. And now, finally, the three magic words.

My owl and I were whole.

Chapter Seventeen

Oakley

Kam was able to sell his house in record time. It was unbelievable how fast someone snatched it up. He had three offers the day it was listed, and every one of them above the asking price.

It freaked me out. If people were champing at the bit for his house, the market was going to be a rough one to get anything decent. At least, that was what logic and our Realtor told me. When we met her at the office, she had a stack of listings, each of them new that week.

We had a set of must haves, and a great number of wants. I had to give the woman credit. She managed to find a bunch of great homes for us to tour. By noon, we had seen six houses and liked them all. Liked but not loved.

“Any you are considering making an offer? No pressure, but if any are on your list, I’ll put in a call letting them know an offer is on the way so they hold off signing another until you can get yours in there,” she said. The advice was solid, if any of them were our new home.

“I think no. Maybe after lunch we can look at the places with a bit more land?” Kam said, and she agreed.

We grabbed a quick bite at a food court alley and got back to work looking for our dream home. We gave up near dinnertime, and she promised to get more showings lined up for us.

“Are we being too picky?” I leaned back in my seat. “Should we look for *good enough*?”

“This is our forever home, and snagging something because it’s there is a shitastic idea.” Edwin turned on the ignition. “Let’s go home.”

Home was my place. It wasn’t even home, not really. Kam had his things in storage, and Edwin hadn’t bothered to move any in. It was a place where we slept, ate, and sometimes didn’t sleep.

My phone alerted us that there was an accident up ahead, and we opted to take the back roads to avoid it.

“This is a cute neighborhood,” I noted. “Maybe we should ask about properties in here.”

“I could see us living here. That’s the national park over there and look—a community pool. I thought those were only in movies.”

“Eww, does that mean this is an HOA?” Edwin wrinkled his nose.

The three of us had already decided HOA life was not for us. It might not be the same as living in a den or a zazzle, but it was close enough for us to be all nope.

Edwin pulled to the side of the road. At first, I didn’t understand why, but then I saw it. A Realtor was pounding in a for sale sign.

“Excuse me. Do you have a listing for this one?” Edwin called through the now-open car window.

“But of course.” The older man who was putting up the sign rubbed his hands on his pants. “Let me grab you one.”

He came back less than a minute later and told us that it was officially for sale starting in the morning, but he wasn't going to have another chance to put the sign up if it wasn't today. That meant that if we wanted to look at it, we could easily be one of the first. We thanked him and drove the rest of the way to my apartment, not looking at the listing just yet.

“I'm so glad you had a lease,” Kam set the listing on the coffee table.

He was referring to the fact that now that his house was sold we'd have had no place that wasn't posh to extremes if I didn't have this place. Truth be told, I was going to miss this place.

“But will we for long?” Edwin sat down and reached for the listing. “Let's see how many of the items we need are included.”

He read the listing aloud, and I pulled up the photos from online. The place was stunning, the architecture fit our style, and their asking price was super reasonable.

“I vote we call the Realtor now and see if she can get us in first thing in the morning.” Kam said, and we all agreed it was a good idea. Our Realtor did not, instead managing to book a viewing in twenty minutes. So much for staying home and being vegetables.

We met her at the house and, as amazing as it looked on paper, it was doubly so in real life. We had an offer out there in record time, one they couldn't refuse. My mates insisted that

we had the money and asked what was the point of being financially sound if it wasn't to have a good life. Less than an hour later, we had a signed offer.

The sale moved at lightning speed. It was amazing how much quicker everything happened. Within two weeks, the place was ours, and we were moving in.

"I love it so much." I stood in our foyer, taking in the scene before me. The place was far bigger than what our small family needed, but I wanted to be a dad one day, and this place was family ready.

"I do too." Edwin came up behind me and rested his chin on my shoulder. "But not as much as I love you—both of you."

"Which is not as much as I love both of you," Kam added.

"Which is not as much as I love both of you," I piped up.

I turned around, and the three of us hugged, just soaking in the day and what it meant. This was our home. Not my apartment or Kam's house. It was ours.

"We really should unpack." I leaned into them both. "Why do we have to be responsible?"

"We don't." Kam slapped my ass playfully. "We can christen the rooms in the house instead."

"In a way, that is responsible," Edwin said. "It has to be done. Might as well get right to it."

There were so many reasons why we should hunker down and get the work done. I was sure of it. But could I name a single one? Nope.

“I mean, if this is what responsibility looks like, who am I to argue? Where should we start?”

Before any of them could answer, the doorbell rang. It was the movers with a bunch of paperwork for us to sign. I never liked paperwork. This wasn't changing that opinion.

Edwin shut the door, the movers gone for real this time, and I pulled my shirt up and over my head, letting it flutter to the floor.

“I guess we'd better get back to being responsible.” I said.

Chapter Eighteen

Edwin

Every day with my mates was better than the one before. So far, I hadn't gotten a job, although I had looked a bit, but with our new home it seemed as if there was always something that needed doing and with my two mates working so much, I had managed to find a temporary niche as a house zebra alpha.

This was the job I might be least qualified to do, but I had always loved a challenge, and taking on a variety of tasks I'd either expected someone else to do or never even knew needed doing was the biggest one in my life. When I got up in the morning, my clothing was not laid out over a chair ready to be donned. I had to go to the closet or dresser and select it myself. Which was an issue to start with because so few of my clothing was suited to a casual life of scrubbing toilets. Which was where it all began.

That's right. Edwin, Prince of the Bowl Brush. With three males, no matter how careful, the porcelain bowl and surroundings required frequent cleanings. I had never in my life faced a less-than-pristine bathroom, and the first morning I did, I'll confess I felt a little dizzy. But my mates were off earning a living, and how could I just sit around all day and play video games while they did so. But this was not within my skill set. I was good at decision making. Behind a desk. Wearing designer clothing. And having someone bring me freshly ground and brewed coffee while I did so.

My mates had made a pot of coffee before leaving, and I drank a cup while I tried to figure out what to do about the dirty toilet. Executive Prince Edwin wanted to call someone to deal with it. Surely people who didn't have their own servants called someone? Everyone to their own abilities and knowledge and this bathroom with toothpaste on the sink and wet towels slung over the rack was not in mine.

But why not? I was here, Kam and Oakley were elsewhere, and to be honest the idea that the bathroom looked like this would bug me all day even if I wanted to sit down and do nothing. And, I didn't want to do that.

What did someone do when they wanted to learn a new skill?

Obviously, they could go to school, but was there a school of toilet cleaning? And if so, would I want to attend? The king and my dads would faint at the thought of my cleaning this room. Attending a school for it? They'd die of shame and shock. Plus, it couldn't be that hard, right?

Barring that, I got out my laptop and did an internet search. Turned out there were more things on YouTube than I'd ever dreamed. Of course when I went there before it was to look at videos about cars and travel and such things. But, shrugging, I typed in, How to Clean a Bathroom, doubting I'd find much. But...no. There were tens of thousands of search results, so I narrowed it down to Toilet Cleaning. Still so many, but I clicked on one at random and ended up gagging. How could anyone allow their facilities to get to this state? I watched a man go into something called a "hoarder house" and start his work with a shovel and a large trash can. Which

he dumped into a larger “dumpster” parked on the street outside. Over a period of days, he removed thousands, maybe more, of items in various stages of horrific decay until he got down to the house itself and then and only then did he start to do what I needed to learn. Clean a bathroom.

I’d never dreamed anyone lived in such a way, but the guy whose channel I watched said it wasn’t even one of the worst he’d seen, and he was glad to be able to get in and out in only two weeks or so.

The video was not just one, and while the hours passed and I drank more coffee and at some point ate some cold leftover pasta, I binged the entire series. All ten hours of it. My mates came home to find me sitting there in the dark with the flickering light of the vids I’d transferred to the larger TV screen still going.

They seemed mildly surprised at my choice of viewing and teased me a little about “how the other half lives” but then we ordered takeout and ate dinner and one thing led to another until those things were bedtime and naked time.

I couldn’t care about cleaning when it was naked fun time.

But the next day while they were both gone, I pulled it together and found a video of cleaning a bathroom just in a regular home with a regular amount of mess, and I carried the laptop into the bathroom along with any cleaning product we had under the sink and proceeded to take matters into my own hands.

I cleaned and scrubbed and wiped and cleaned again, made some notes about things I could do better and products or equipment I’d like to try, and when my mates returned, I

immediately dragged them into the bathroom to see what I'd accomplished. "Come see what I did all day," I bragged, waiting for their compliments, maybe a small burst of applause?

They looked at one another and then at me. "Is something wrong with the bathroom?" Kam asked. "Do we need a plumber?"

My jaw dropped. I'd even mastered the washer and dryer in order to deal with the dirty and wet towels. Maybe they were just wet...but they needed to be cleaned. According to lady on the video, at least three times a week.

"Nothing's broken. Can't you see it?" I could feel my lower lip thrust out in what was probably not an adorable pout. "Really?"

"No." Oakley shook his head. "Did you buy new soap? Seriously, we can see it." Then I saw the twinkle in his eye. "Let me take a closer look at your work, Your Highness." He bent close to the toilet bowl. "I had planned to make a run at this tonight. Seriously, the bathroom looks—" He dropped to his knees and clutched the seat. "I—"

He was not looking anymore but defiling my pristine bowl with—with vomit! "Oakley, what's wrong, mate? Are you sick?"

But he wasn't able to answer, and by the time he could, the toilet was filthy and I cared not a whit. We helped him to bed and brought a cool cloth for his forehead. "Let me call the royal healer, mate. I am still family."

They protested and argued, but on this I would not be dissuaded. I'd spent my whole life being obeyed, with only the king and my dads over me, and half an hour later, the healer arrived at our home.

He was not thrilled by our ordinary house, but he knew better than to say so. He let himself into the bedroom and closed the door firmly behind him.

“Should we go in?” Kam asked.

“He has absolute authority in the zazzle where his work is concerned, and my fathers had a hard time convincing him to come. We need to let him alone, I think.”

“You are comfortable with him in there with our mate?” He looked doubtful.

I hurried to reassure him. “Yes. I've seen him in action, and he's the best.”

After the longest ten minutes of my life, the door opened and the healer emerged, stripping gloves from his hands.

“Is everything all right?” I blurted, revealing the nerves behind my calm façade—or what I hoped had been one.

“Of course. He's a strong young omega. He should have no problems with this pregnancy.”

Neither of us fainted, but we did have to support one another as we streaked past the healer and in to our mate. Our wonderful, pregnant, going to give us a baby with his amazing body mate.

Chapter Nineteen

Kam

Oakley radiated life and vitality. So much energy. His pregnancy made him shine.

Edwin and I were sitting on the couch watching TV when he walked through the front door after working a shift at Animals and proclaimed, “What are we doing tonight? Do we have plans? Let’s go out!”

I glanced at the clock on the TV. It was ten p.m.

“Oaks? What’s up?” Edwin asked. “It’s quite late.”

“I’m starved. Let’s go out to dinner, guys.” He walked over to the couch and inserted himself between us.

“I was just about to go to bed.” I was up at five or earlier every morning five days a week to make my deliveries.

“What? It’s early and I’m eating for two. Unless it’s twins!”

Twins. What a concept. I had been getting used to the idea of one baby, but two? My owl perked up, seeming to like the idea.

“We had pizza for dinner. We got a whole one for you,” Edwin said. “Everything on it but anchovies the way you like, plus extra cheese. Just needs heating up.”

“I can do that for you,” I offered. My instinct to take care of our pregnant omega was strong. I wanted to bring him food, bring him pillows and anything else that would comfort him.

Oakley rubbed his belly. “Well, that does sound good.”

I jumped up. “A hot pizza coming up.”

When I brought the pizza into the living room, the cheese still sizzling, Edwin’s eyes got big. “That looks fantastic.” He started to reach for a piece and Oakley batted him on the wrist.

“Hey, that’s mine. You already had yours.”

Edwin pouted. “You’re going to eat the whole thing?”

Oakley was leaning over it, inhaling the rich salty-spicy scent. “Maybe.”

“Edwin, I can make you something,” I offered. “There’s also a half-eaten fruit platter still in the fridge.”

“I’m up to my eyeballs eating fruit. Pizza’s my favorite.” He let out a little fake sob. “Oh well. I’ll survive.”

Oakley immediately turned to him, slice of thick pie in hand. “Edwin, I’m sorry.” He put on his best chagrined look, biting his lower lip. “Here.”

As I watched them, I tried not to roll my eyes.

Oakley moved the piece of pizza in front of Edwin’s face. “Here,” he said again. “You can have a bite.”

Edwin opened his mouth and Oakley waved the pizza closer, then at the last minute pulled it back and stuck half of it all the way into his own mouth. “Mmmm,” he said as he chomped on it. “So good. Thanks for heating it up, Kam.” He folded the piece in half and literally gulped the rest of it down.

“Oakley, you ate that in two bites,” I pointed out.

“I told you I was hungry.”

“You little tease.” Edwin kept pouting.

Oakley, complete with cheese grease on his lips, leaned in and gave Edwin a big kiss.

“Am I going to have to break you two up?” I asked, arms crossed.

“Nope,” Oakley said. “This is how we bears and zebras fight over our food and we like it.”

“Hmph,” Edwin turned his head away.

Oakley brought another piece of pizza to Edwin but this time Edwin kept his head turned away.

“Come on, love. I won’t take it away this time.” Oakley leaned in and kissed him on the cheek. He waved the pizza in front of his face. “Come on. Open up.”

Edwin shook his head. “Save it for the baby. You need to eat to keep up your strength.”

Oakley laughed. “I feel great.”

“I already told you you didn’t have to work two jobs. Or any job. You should work on keeping that baby healthy,” Edwin said.

“The baby is fine,” Oakley argued. “And I like my jobs. Especially the one at Animals.”

When Edwin turned his head back and opened his mouth, again Oakley took the pizza away and gulped half of it down.

This time, Edwin grabbed his wrist, leaned in, and took a quick bite out of the other half of the pizza.

Oakley, still munching, grumbled, “Thief!”

Edwin leaned in for more and Oakley quickly put what was left of the slice into his mouth. But Edwin kept coming toward him until their mouths crashed together.

Suddenly, I was staring at my two mates tangled on the couch, arms around each other, lips locked, legs twining and pillows flying.

“Guys! Get a room. Please.”

They ignored me, grunting and pawing at their clothes.

Oakley’s sex drive had gone a little wild since getting knocked up, meaning he was slick all the time. It didn’t take more than one whiff to get us alphas riled up for him and bending him over whatever convenient furniture happened to be nearby.

Both their scents, combined with the hot pizza, had me hard in seconds. I picked up a slice of pizza and knelt in front of my writhing mates.

“Oakley.” I made my voice into a purr. “Pizza, my sweet omega. Right here.”

He turned from Edwin, who had both their trousers all the way down now. Oakley toed his off, then spread his legs as Edwin put a pillow under his hips and grabbed his cock, giving it a lovely tug.

Oakley’s mouth opened. “He’s got me pinned, Kam. Can you feed it to me?”

“Of course, sweetheart.” I cupped his chin and pushed the tip of the pizza inside his mouth just as Edwin pushed the tip of something else inside him down below.

Oakley groaned. “Oh, yes. Please, Edwin. Take me. Please, Kam, feed me.”

“You kinky boy,” I said, folding the pizza and shoving more of it into his mouth.

Oakley chewed, eyes rolling up, and swallowed. “I just love pizza. That’s all.”

When it was my turn, Edwin, who was much more well-mannered and dainty than I, fed Oakley with neat little torn-off bites, while I heated up our omega even more.

Pregnancy in our house was, so far, like a party that never seemed to end.

Chapter Twenty

Oakley

I was a homebody to my core. Being home with my mates was always my first choice. But today? Today I needed to get out and do something fun. I wasn't even sure what, but it had to be something not here.

What time are you done today? I sent a quick text to Kam.

He messaged back a few minutes later that he was just about to leave for the day and asked if I needed anything. It was sweet as could be, but even if I needed something really essential, I'd have taken a pass. I wanted him home and stat. I'd been away from his arms for too long.

"You okay?" Edwin crossed the room to me.

"Better than. Kam is on his way home. Let's do something fun." I put my phone on the counter.

"Fun? Or fun?" Edwin looked me up and down, his eyes topping at my growing middle. Both he and Kam loved the way my body was changing. I did, too. It was a visual of our love, as cheesy as that sounded.

"Fun." I bopped his nose with my finger. "Any ideas?"

"No. But I am going to handy-dandy google it right now."

He did that while I peed for the tenth time. When I came out, Kam was home, and the two of them were talking about something Edwin found on his phone. When I walked in, they both stopped talking.

“What?”

“Just glad you’re here.” Kam kissed my cheek. “I’m going to take a shower, and then we can head on out.”

“Do I want to ask what that was about?” I asked when Kam had already left the room.

“Probably not. Go put your comfy shoes on. We have a date.” He slid his phone into his pocket.

“Two things. The first is that I think it’s adorable that you think I can tie shoes on my own right now with your huge baby in the way—”

“My huge baby? They are in your belly.”

“Do not interrupt me with things like facts.”

He pretended to lock his lips.

“As I was saying. The second is that I want to know where we are going.”

“I know you do.” He pressed a sweet kiss to my forehead. “And you will as soon as we get there. Now, how about I help you get your comfy shoes on?”

“Okay.” I fake pouted. “But be warned, this trip is going to cost you money. Daddy needs some ice cream.”

“Then, ice cream you shall have.”

We left about a half an hour later, and not only did they not tell me where we were headed, but they also put a sleep mask on me so I couldn’t watch as we drove and potentially figure it out along the way.

“What makes you two think I like surprises?” I wiggled in my seat, trying to get comfortable.

“The way you giggle every time we have one for you,” Kam stated matter-of-factly.

“I do not giggle.” *Much.*

“If you say so.” Kam was far too amused.

I was, too. I loved it when we could just be silly like this. I had to admit that when I discovered one of my mates was royalty, I assumed my life would be boring and filled with official garbage. This was a thousand times better.

“We are almost there.” Edwin said. “Would you like to eat before or after?”

“Eating isn’t part of the surprise?” I tapped my lips with my finger. “Hmmm, I think after. I’ll be too distracted to eat.”

“Fair enough.” Edwin said.

Less than five minutes later, he parked the car and turned off the ignition.

“Can I take this off now?” I grabbed at my mask.

“Fine,” Kam said, and the car door opened.

I pulled it off to find myself in a parking garage. “So much for being able to see.” I giggled and then could only shake my head at myself. It turned out that giggling while being surprised was a thing after all.

Edwin helped me out of the car, and the two of us walked toward the pedestrian exit sign. That was when I saw where we were. The museum. I didn’t hate museums, but when I

thought of a fun way to spend a date, they weren't the first thing that came into my mind, either.

“Do you know why we are here?” Kam asked.

“To go to a museum, right?” Was it a trick question? It felt like a trick question.

“Excellent.” He took my hand. Edwin already holding the other.

It wasn't until we walked into the museum lobby that I figured it out. “They have a Laurel and Hardy traveling exhibit?”

“Yes,” They both said.

I was practically bouncing, I was so excited.

“And do they have anything from *Babes in Toyland*?”

“You'll have to see.”

Not only did they have some pieces and props for people to view, they'd also recreated a few of the sets. I got to go in the little old lady's shoe and see Santa's workshop. Heck, I got to try the stockades. It was one of the funnest, most memorable dates I'd ever been on. At a museum. Who knew? My mates did. That's who.

We stayed until the museum closed then went to grab dinner at my favorite Thai place. It was the perfect date with my perfect mates. Days like this had me wondering if this might all be a dream. If I was going to one day wake up and discover I was still working a shitty job, eating crappy instant noodles three meals a day, and lonely as fuck. There was no

way I deserved to be this happy, and yet here I was, living my best life.

“I couldn’t eat another bite.” I climbed into the car. “It was so good, though. I couldn’t waste it.”

“It was only half as good as the company.” Edwin shut my door for me. It was old-fashioned and gentlemanly, and I adored it.

He walked around and climbed into the driver’s seat.

“So no ice cream tonight, right, guys?”

“Who ever said that?” There was no way I was passing up ice cream. That was for sure.

“Not me,” said Kam. “The flavor of the day is my favorite — Pistachio Delight.”

“Well, I sure didn’t say that. There’s always room for ice cream. I think today might be a mint-chocolate-chip kind of day.” Or not. I wouldn’t know for sure until we got there. Pregnancy cravings were weird like that.

“Then ice cream it is.” Edwin turned on the car. “Ice cream it is.”

Chapter Twenty-One

Edwin

“I have to go somewhere, do something!” Oakley stomped into the kitchen for the third time in as many minutes. “I’ll lose my mind.” This had become a theme of the pregnancy.

Our bear was one of the most even tempered of his kind I’d ever met, but he’d recently hit a point in his pregnancy where he was uncomfortable in any position. Sitting, standing, lying down...he tried so hard not to complain, and when he did we knew it was serious. Not necessarily anything wrong serious. But he was carrying kind of oddly, or at least he was to me. Straight out in front in a baby bump that entered the room well before him and kind of big for as far along as he was. And hard.

The healer said he was fine and not to worry, in fact he’d said that to me when I called him at three this morning. The irritation in his voice might have bothered me if I hadn’t been raised royal. Even if I wasn’t working in the family business, my rank was still above his. But his unique position in the zazzle, the only one the king allowed to treat him or anyone in our family, made me hesitant to argue too much. He 100 percent knew his business. And I was kind of on the edge of being able to take advantage of my status. So, I thanked him with all the graciousness my dads had taught me and promised not to call unless it was a “real” emergency. Although how I’d know that without calling?

It was beyond me.

But if I became an alarmist, what was I doing to our mate? Calm. Must be calm all the time. Oakley seemed to do okay when he was working, but when he tried to relax, he was all too aware of his changing body and how it made him clumsy and generally feeling off. Since we knew he was well, and since relaxing at home, what we'd had planned, was clearly not a good choice, I threw a suggestion out there.

"I was thinking we could go to Julian and maybe have apple cider and lunch, do a little antiquing?"

"What a great idea!" Kam was right there with me, something I appreciated very much. "It's the perfect time of year for a visit there, and it's supposed to be clear and beautiful today. What do you think, omega ours?" He set a plate of eggs and bacon and toast on the table. "Come and eat."

"As long as it's out of this house, I'm up for it." He sat down at the table and grumped. "I'm sorry, guys. I don't mean to be such a grouch, but by the time the baby is born I'm going to look like I have the world's biggest watermelon inside me."

"You look amazing," I hurried to say. "And of course it cannot be comfortable to be growing a whole person in there. Just eat your breakfast and we can pack up and hit the road."

An hour later, we were on the road to one of my personal favorite places. A little, out of the way town, but one that attracted a pretty fair number of tourists especially in fall when cider was being pressed from its famous orchards. The cider,

of course, could be purchased all year, and I thought there might still be apples available. My mouth watered at the thought. There were all sorts of outdoor activities to do up there in the mountains, but for today we would limit ourselves to what our bear could and would enjoy. A gentle wander and a good lunch.

Because my mates' schedules varied, they tended to both work on weekends, so we were arriving on a quiet day. It made it so nice to shop and just look around. The buildings were historical, many of them and there was even a little museum which unfortunately wasn't open that day. But we could come back another time.

As we wound our way in and out of the various shops, Oakley's mood visibly lifted, and I was very glad to have made the suggestion we come here. The air was so clear and clean and crisp. Like the apples that thrived in the mountain area. "This is one of the few places in the US where you can still see the Milky Way," I informed the others, information I'd just gotten from a chamber of commerce pamphlet. "We'll have to come up and do that one night, maybe make it a weekend."

"That sounds amazing," Oakley said. "I want to see everything, like that shop over there." For a bear with a bulge, he was sure fast on his feet today, darting into a store that had all sorts of textiles, many of them, according to a small sign in the window, hand woven and dyed. "Oh look at this."

We followed, but he was already in the back of the store, lifting some blankets and pressing them to his cheek. "So soft."

He was right, they were amazing, but I wasn't sure we needed a dozen of them. Especially at the price they were asking, but my investments had been doing well, and the expression on Oakley's face was everything. We were trying so hard to make him feel better, and although he'd liked a lot of things we saw, he had not wanted any of them until now.

"Let's get them," Kam whispered to me. "No matter if we have to put a second mortgage on the house."

"They're not quite that high, and I just got a dividend we can use," I whispered back. "Maybe we should check out now before he wants more?"

"Good idea." Kam moved in to where our bear was doing everything but rolling in the soft blankets. They were such nice colors, too, earth tones and sage green, just easy on the eyes and when I touched them, I could see why our mate loved the feel. "Okay, Oakley, let's get these up to the register so we can take them home with us."

"Really?" His eyes were wide, his smile trembling a little. "They are too expensive. And I don't even know why I need so many."

"Doesn't matter." I took them from his arms. "Only that you do. We can put them on the sofa and chairs, in the guest room, lots of places. We haven't really done much decorating, right? Maybe it's time we did."

There were so many, and they were so large, it took all three of us to carry them without trailing them on the floor. And they truly were too beautiful for that. We left them in the car, then and went to a little restaurant recommended by the sales clerk at the textile store.

“I know I should eat more carefully because despite what the healer said I’m way too big already for how far along I am.” Oakley studied the menu. “I should just have a salad.”

“Don’t you talk about our mate like that,” Kam protested. “We think you are perfect in size and every other way, and you are out on a date with us. Eat exactly what you want.”

The place we’d chosen was also a bakery, and it smelled incredible. I had always been taught to eat carefully, especially in public —note the herbivore scam —but today I was giving myself license to eat anything I wanted as well.

“I am going to have the pot pie,” Oakley decided. “And some desserts.”

Kam had an incredible soup and salad combo and I gobbled a turkey club before we ordered the dessert sampler. And then we all went home for a nap, promising each other to come back for a long weekend after the baby came.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Kam

Oakley clutched the purple blanket and wouldn't let it go.

"It needs a wash, sweetheart. Please." I reached out.

Oakley shook his head, shifting his position in his nest so his back was to me. He had created a lovely circle of pillows and all the stuffies we couldn't resist buying for the baby. At least, they were supposed to be for the baby. Many of them were bears, of course, large and small. I picked up a fluffy brown bear with big golden eyes, knelt down at my mate's side side, and snuggled it against his shoulder.

"This guy is my favorite. I hope it's the baby's favorite, too."

Oakley blinked at the bear, then at me. "Yes, I love him. He's so soft."

"Can you hold him for me for a minute, Oaks? I don't want these other bears over here to fall over."

"Okay." He took the bear in his arms and gently cuddled it. The purple blanket fell away.

"You know," I said, slowly pulling the purple blanket out of the nest with all the other blankets we had bought on our trip to Julian. "I think he needs a name, so, when our baby is old enough to ask we can tell him."

"The baby?" Oakley frowned. "I thought we hadn't decided yet."

“No, a name for the bear.”

“Yeah, okay. Well, how about Fred?”

“That’s awesome. I like it.” I bundled up the blanket and hid it behind my back.

“Yeah. It’s good.” He hugged the bear again, moving to lie down on his side against soft cushions and pillows. Lately, Oakley had been feeling tired often, especially after making his nest, which was a total one-eighty from the first part of the pregnancy when he had high energy and was horny all day and all night.

I set the purple blanket outside the bedroom door, came back in, and covered him with a new dark blue blanket fresh from the wash. He was naked except for loose shorts and I didn’t want him to get cold. His stomach was round and firm and entirely sexy to me. I never realized how much I would adore having a pregnant omega around. His beauty radiated, nearly blinding me. I couldn’t take my eyes off him these last months.

I patted his head and said, “I’ll be back in a minute to check on you. I’ll bring you some yummy snacks, okay?”

“Not hungry,” he mumbled. His eyes closed.

Oakley was always hungry, so his tone worried me a little, but he was safe in his nest, and I tucked him in and left.

As I walked down the hall, my owl spoke.

Mate. Nest. Eggs. Mate. Nest. Babies.

After putting the blanket in the wash, I called Edwin, who was at a meeting regarding his trust. Separating from his

zazzle had left him free from the politics, but not the money. He still had to oversee investments and charity donations on his own.

Edwin answered my call right away.

“Hey, Kam. I’m about finished here. What’s up?”

“I—I think you should come home. Oaks has stopped eating. He’s sleeping now, but I just have a feeling.”

“Did your owl speak to you?”

“Yeah. His message is: *Mate. Nest. Eggs. Babies.*”

A big whoosh of breath sounded through my phone. “Your owl is never wrong. I’m coming home now!”

“Good.” But already I was speaking to dead air.

In the kitchen, I put together a tray of fruit and chips and dip, along with bottles of water and some apple juice for Oakley.

My owl spoke again.

Stay by his side. Mate. Needs you.

I carried the tray as I ran upstairs and into our bedroom. I breathed a sigh of relief when I heard Oakley’s sweet, soft snore from the nest. He was still sleeping all curled up under the blanket with Fred in his arms.

I set the tray on the low table Edwin had set up beside the nest, grabbed some pillows, and sat leaning against the foot of

our bed. I was determined to listen to my owl and watch Oakley for the rest of the day and all the way into the night if it came to that.

It wasn't a hardship. I loved spending time with my mates even if it was just to watch them sleep. It gave me a feeling of wholeness and accomplishment, knowing I was needed.

I closed my eyes and focused on our bond. I immediately sensed Edwin's concern mixed with excitement. I could almost feel the movement of the wheels on pavement as he drove down the freeway headed for home.

Oakley's side of the bond was peaceful, silent as he slept. Until...I felt a nudge at the edge of the bond. A few seconds later, the nudge became a push. An edge of pain fanned outward.

Babies. Eggs.

I leaned over Oakley, my hand resting gently on his shoulder. His eyes remained closed. He was still breathing steadily in his sleep.

I monitored the nudges for a while, not wanting to wake Oakley but still concerned. Finally, a door slammed downstairs. That would be Edwin. His footsteps pounded up the stairs, and he came into the bedroom at a run, chest heaving.

"I got here as soon as I could. I can feel it in our bond. Is he —is he giving birth?"

"He's sleeping. But I think he's in labor. My owl said the words babies and eggs."

Edwin's mouth dropped open. "He's laying eggs?"

“The healer said it could happen. I know”

Edwin knelt beside me and pulled the blanket back from Oakley to look at him. Oakley still didn't move.

“Wow, he's out of it.” Edwin ran his hand gently down Oakley's rounded stomach.

“He's been really tired today.”

Finally, Oakley stretched and moved in the nest. His eyelids fluttered open. “Hey, guys. You're both here.”

“Yep. We wouldn't leave you, Oaks. Not ever.”

“What's going on?”

“We think you're in labor,” I said.

He stretched again, then his whole body gave a shudder. He groaned. “I think you're right. That was like a real sharp pain.”

Edwin was already on his phone to his zazzle healer, talking fast. He may have given up his place in the zazzle, but he still had those great benefits.

“Lie back on the pillow, Oaks. Get comfortable.”

“Oh, there it went again.” He strained, his whole face scrunching up. “Like a muscle spasm down there. It feels like I can't breathe.”

“You'll be just fine. How do you want to deliver? On your side, maybe?”

“I don't know.” Oakley spent some time exploring how he might want to do all of it, in between groaning with every rapid contraction.

Edwin came back from the bathroom with our birthing kit the healer had helped us put together.

He knelt beside me again and said, “The healer said we can do this ourselves and to only call if the labor goes on for more than a couple hours. Then that means it’s not eggs.”

“Oh, it’s eggs all right. My owl is sure.”

Edwin nodded. “It feels right to me.” He reached out to rub Oakley’s back. “Oakley, you doing okay?”

Oakley lifted his hand with a thumbs-up gesture.

The big bag contained clean towels, wet wipes, and other assorted goodies. In case we had a baby right away, we also had a clean baby blanket and umbilical cord clip.

Oakley’s contractions were coming one after the other now. Through our bond, I felt his pain, although dulled, and was so proud of him for handling it so well. When he started to arch his back, I knew things were imminent.

“Oakley, we need to get those shorts off now.”

“Yes. Get them off. Please!”

Edwin and I helped him out of them then spread the towels beneath and around him. We were barely in time as we saw an egg begin to emerge. I couldn’t believe it. It was possibly the most beautiful moment I could ever remember having.

“You’re doing great, Oaks. Just push a little more.”

He cried out for the first time as the egg moved farther out of him.

“That’s amazing,” Edwin said. “Oakley, you’re amazing.”

I caught the egg as it dropped and let it down on a fresh towel. Right away, Oakley began to pant and arch his back again.

“There’s another one,” Edwin shouted.

Three. Three eggs.

“My owl reminds me there are three,” I said.

Edwin glanced at me. “You knew? You never said.”

“Three?” Oakley groaned. “Fuck that.”

“In my species, we can have up to six to a nest,” I explained.

“That should have been disclosed at the claiming,” Oakley complained.

Edwin laughed. “You still would have said yes, omega ours.”

“You have one already out. The other two will come easier.” I spoke the words without knowing if they were true.

When the next egg emerged, I caught it and put it on the soft towel with the other. They were about the size of my fist and all white. Pretty and perfect.

Oakley roared through the last egg birth, but at least it went quickly. I now had all three eggs wrapped in a soft, fluffy towel. There was no afterbirth with eggs, so Oakley was able to immediately sit up and take them into his arms.

“Oh, look how cute these eggs are.” He cooed at them while Edwin and I cleaned up.

When we returned, Oakley said, “I have to keep them touching me, keep them warm all the time, right?”

I nodded. “We’ll help.”

Then we all sat together, proud papas, admiring our new, soon-to-be brood.

Chapter Twenty-Three

Edwin

He would not leave the nest.

And it was becoming a problem.

If questioned, and we did question him, Oakley would swear he trusted us 100 percent or even more if that was possible. But he refused to leave the nest except for trips to use the restroom because that was unavoidable. And what wasn't unavoidable?

Showers.

He could eat and drink in the nest, read books on his eReader, watch movies on the flat screen in there if he chose to dig it out, do a lot of things. But sponge bathing with wipes was only partially effective, and after a bit, his fragrance that had always attracted me even from yards away, had begun to change. It had a sour note that did not indicate good health. It wasn't that it put me off. Nothing could do that. But I did want to know for sure that our mate was doing well. The babies would depend upon him. We'd be there for them, of course, but only he could make milk for them, and his devotion could be duplicated by nobody.

That was the reason we ended up in the situation we did. Our bear's love for our babies was the most beautiful and natural thing in the world, but if we couldn't get him to clean up, the babies would never come out of the shells, and who could blame them?

“Omega, why don’t you and I take a walk around the block?” Kam suggested. “It’s a really nice afternoon, and you’re looking a bit pale.

“Oh no, you two go.” He went back to staring at the eggs, readjusting them slightly before settling down curled around them. “I’ll be here with the kids.”

“Oakley, they kids aren’t here yet, and they are fine on their own for now.” I almost slapped a hand over my mouth at the look of outrage on our bear’s face, but I had gone too far to stop now. “It’s not healthy for you to stay inside here all day.”

“At least a shower,” Kam pled. “We will both stay with the eggs. We’ll even turn the water on so you can just go when it’s warm enough and save time. Please?”

“You think I stink, don’t you?”

“No, of course not,” he protested. “But you haven’t changed clothes in a few days, either, and don’t you want to be all fresh and clean and looking nice when you meet the babies?”

“In person,” I added helpfully. “We should all look our best.”

“They’re babies,” Oakley said. “They don’t care what we’re wearing.”

This went on for a bit until we were all a bit tired and hungry, and I went into the kitchen to make us some sandwiches. I had come a long way from being the prince who wouldn’t even have known how to cook anything at all. Since we bought the house, I’d become quite the house husband, learning how to care for the house and cook and even start the

home improvement projects we had in mind. I was convinced YouTube could teach anyone anything. Including how to have a YouTube channel, something I planned on trying in the new year.

When I returned, my mates were still discussing whether Oakley should take a shower, and I finally hit my end. Setting down the tray of sandwiches I went to get a tablet and returned with it logged on to my favorite YouTube. Surely we weren't the first shifters with a mate who wouldn't get off the nest for various reasons. And surely someone had offered a solution or two. Honestly, he was approaching eye watering. And I was pretty sure he was getting a rash.

“What are you looking at?” Kam came to stand beside me, after a while, a sandwich in his hand. “Is that what I think it is?”

“Yes, it certainly is. What do you think?”

“I think it's a very good idea. Can we order them?”

I studied the screen. “I think so, but we'll have to find them. The couple here never say where they got them, but how hard could it be?”

An hour later I was willing to call it impossible. I'd been searching for two hours and hadn't found a single source for the key to our freedom as well as a sweeter-scented home. In the end, I found a set of patterns and downloaded them. A trip to the fabric and hardware store, and I was all ready to go.

Kam kept Oakley occupied so he wouldn't know what I was up to. I had a vague idea that if he did know, he'd object

in some way. Probably silly, but I hadn't had must rest lately and was breathing fumes from a man who if he was in a cartoon would be surrounded by winged insects. The man needed to clean up.

But when I finished my task, I was so excited I rushed to my mates with my creation. Or maybe since it was someone else's idea and pattern, my recreation? I wasn't sure. "Look!" I held out the bags I'd sewn with the special liner to protect the eggs. "Now you can shower."

We had to stand outside the shower holding the bags the first couple of times, but they were such a success. He began to have his meals at the table with us again, which we loved. And he even sat outside in the sun some, breathing the fresh air. The bags enabled him to take the eggs with him wherever he went. I had learned to sew to make it happen, but I'd learned so many things lately, it just made sense.

Chapter Twenty-Four

Kam

All three eggs were warm to the touch. Alive and healthy. I loved stroking them —until Oakley would get possessive and make me stop.

“I’m not going to hurt them,” I would always complain.

“I didn’t say that.” Oakley held them close to his chest.

Usually, they were in a little blue padded sack that wrapped around his shoulders. Each egg had its own velvet bag lined with bubble wrap. That way, Oakley could leave the nest wearing the sack when he wanted to join us in the living room for movie nights or have dinner with us at a real dining table. When he wanted a shower, he left the sack with me or Edwin. Both of us were thrilled when we got egg time.

Incubation was about five weeks, sometimes less. The time seemed to fly by. It was barely enough time to get ready for so many babies at once. We needed three of everything, and Edwin and I shopped a lot to get the nursery re-configured for the little ones.

By day thirty, we were all more nervous than ever. The eggs could hatch at any time now. We were constantly checking them, looking them over for pips, which were what the teensy dents were called.

The healer had told us they would hatch as owls then quickly shift to human infants, but not to assume they were 100 percent owl shifters. Some children developed the ability

to shift into two different parent animals. We could still have a zebra and/or a bear.

We had talked about calling our families when the hatching started, but in the end we decided we wanted it to be a private moment for us to forever remember without a lot of drama and ruckus. We wanted to spend a quiet time with our children before inviting guests over to see our new family.

Oakley had been on paternity leave since before laying the eggs, so he and Edwin had been spending a lot of time together. Edwin had an easier time convincing Oakley to come out of his nest than I did and, tonight, which was Saturday and a rare weekend day off for me, we planned a lovely evening together watching movies and eating good food.

Edwin had bought the best of everything to furnish our home, never saying a word about the cost, simply insisting he would take care of his mates in the best manner he saw fit, and we were not to argue. We lounged on our huge, sectional leather couch together with the biggest flat-screen TV I'd ever seen hanging on the wall facing us.

Oakley got to choose the first movie of the evening. He liked comedy-drama. As the movie played, we ate and laughed and snuggled together under a giant fleece blanket.

Suddenly, Oakley sat up straight, one hand cupping the bag at his chest. "I just felt something move."

"What?" Edwin and I came to full attention.

"I swear." He frowned in confusion. "But that's impossible, right?"

“If someone’s poking from inside the egg, the egg might shift,” I said.

“Oh gods. We’re having triplets!” Oakley gently took each egg from the sack while the movie still played, though Edwin had muted it.

Each of us now had an egg bag in our hands. As one, we opened them and placed the eggs in the palms of our hands.

I touched the warm egg with my fingertip, and slowly spun it, looking for a pip. My mates were doing the same. As I turned mine, I saw a little dent. When I put my fingertip to it, I felt the tiniest of knocks. Something inside the egg shifted.

“Here! It’s here. Mine is starting to hatch!” I let out a sort of strangled yell.

“Mine, too!” Edwin pointed at a little crack in his egg.

“They all are,” Oakley said. “They’re all hatching at once. What should we do? Edwin, call your healer.”

“There’s nothing he can do until they’re out. They must hatch on their own. We can’t help them,” I said.

“I’ll call him anyway,” Edwin said with a smile. Such a good sport, for Oakley’s sake.

We set all the eggs in the bowl of the sack on the coffee table before us.

“Shouldn’t they hatch in the nest?” Oakley asked.

“If you want to take them in there, we can,” I said, keeping my voice calm, though I felt anything but.

“No, it’s fine here, I think. But run upstairs and grab the baby blankets and towels, please.”

I jumped up to obey my omega mate.

When I came back downstairs with all the loot, Edwin was just getting off the phone with his healer.

“He says it could take hours.” Edwin sat next to Oakley and put an arm around his shoulders. “We should get comfortable, settle in, and call him only if there is an emergency with any of the babies. But there shouldn’t be. He checked the eggs last week and pronounced them healthy. They just need to get themselves out of those shells when they’re ready.”

Oakley slid his butt off the couch and onto the floor, moving closer to the table. “Look at them. Three healthy eggs about to hatch.” He looked over one shoulder at me and then at Edwin. “We did this. All of us. We did.”

“Yep,” I said. “We sure did knock you up, Oaks.”

Edwin chuckled. “It was a lot of fun, too.”

One of the eggs twitched. “Look!” Oakley pointed like a little kid.

Edwin and I leaned forward to watch. “This is so much better than some movie,” I said.

“You guys are so the best. Thank you for knocking me up.”

The only time during the entire evening that any of us left the egg watching was if we had to go to the bathroom. We already had drinks and snacks, so we were set for the night, no matter how long it took our little ones to hatch.

Our claiming night, which lasted into the next day, had been fantastic and formed our bond. But this —I would say this night strengthened our bond more than we could ever have imagined. We were truly one as we watched our babies poke at their shells, ready to meet the world.

As we waited, we quietly talked about our future and our children's future. We discussed names again, but decided we had to meet our progeny before we were sure about what their names should be.

At exactly one-thirty-five a.m., our daughter emerged from her shell. She was a wet, writhing owl one moment and an infant human the next. Oakley caught her in his arms, and I snatched up a towel to wipe the albumen from her, and little bits of eggshell.

We all took turns holding her, gazing at her beauty, before wrapping her securely in a baby blanket.

“One down, two to go,” Oakley said.

The next to arrive was our son at five minutes after two a.m. He shifted rapidly into a screaming baby boy, and we couldn't wait to hold him. As soon as we determined he was beautiful and perfect, we wrapped him up and set him between us beside his sister. Now, both babies were sleeping, but we all knew that wouldn't last. It was going to be chaos at our home for the foreseeable future.

Baby number three, our second son, arrived at quarter to three a.m. He was a little smaller than the other two, but boy did he have a voice.

At that point, our daughter had already awakened and was suckling at Oakley's breast. Edwin and I held the other two until their turns.

It was amazing to watch Oakley give milk for the first time. I was jealous that I couldn't.

Oakley looked so beautiful nursing our children. Before long, they were all three full and sleeping and wearing their first zero-sized diapers. We made a few texts to our friends, and Edwin made one to his healer, and after that we were wiped out.

"Are we still thinking about names?" Oakley asked.

Edwin and I yawned at the same time. "Tomorrow," I said. "I can't think or do anymore tonight."

We tiredly made our way upstairs to our bedroom, where we'd put three identical bassinets by the bed so the babies would be close for the first few weeks, and we literally fell into bed.

I would never forget this night. Not ever.

Chapter Twenty-Five

Oakley

“I can’t believe we are dads.” The three of us were standing over the bassinets where our Noah, Sebastian, and Hailey slept.

I was the first to admit that hovering over a sleeping baby was not the way to get a baby to sleep well. But here we all were, just like we were at morning nap and half the time in the middle of the night. We were at the stage where we didn’t want to miss a thing.

“We should sleep when the baby sleeps.” Kam quoted the book I’d stupidly bought. It had a thousand don’t dos when you had a baby and relatively few dos. The *sleeping while your baby slept* was one of those dos.

“We could, or we could watch our beautiful babies sleep,” I said.

“What we should do is put bassinets in their so we could do both,” Edwin said. “A second set so if we need daddy time, we could put them down for their naps in here.”

“We mated well, Kam,” I said.

“We sure did.”

The three of us decided not to do the *it has to be quiet so the babies sleep* thing, fearing it would make it harder for them when ideal conditions couldn’t be arranged. So far, it had been working out for us, but given it had been an entire three weeks of fatherhood, that wasn’t saying much.

“Why don’t you take a shower, and Kam and I will watch them?” Edwin said.

“Because I smell?” I sniffed my armpit, and it didn’t make my stomach want to revolt. I tried to think back to the last time I’d left the babies long enough to shower. Yikes. It had been a while. When I thought how hard they’d worked to get me to shower when the babies were still in eggs, I felt like a hypocrite. “I mean, thank you, mates. I’ll go quickly.”

“Or take your time. They are asleep.” Kam said. He and Edwin were holding hands, laser focused on the bassinets.

I agreed and padded to the bathroom. They were right. While they slept, the babies were easy. But, once they woke up, it was all hands on deck. They were good babies. They weren’t fussy or anything like that. But when you had three going through the cycle of eat, poop, sleep, and eat again, it became much to handle.

And chest feeding had was challenging because on the rare occasions they all demanded food at the same time the first week, we had been screwed. That was when I discovered the need to pump. That way, all three of us could be active in their feedings the way we did for diaper changes.

I turned on the shower and let the steam build while I got undressed. I looked down at my significantly flatter belly. I still had stretched-out skin and wrinkles in places I didn’t know it was possible to wrinkle. And more stretch marks than I could count. But when I saw myself in a mirror or looked down like I was doing now, I couldn’t help but be filled with pride.

My body grew three babies. Three. It blew my mind and almost didn't feel possible, even though I was there in real time watching it happen.

I climbed under the steamy spray and took my time, washing and conditioning my hair, exfoliating my legs, and cleansing myself from head to toe. Somehow, showers had become a luxury. I was always on the *go go go* with the kids. I wouldn't have it any other way, but sometimes I got tired. Today was one of those days.

I came out, toweled off, and dressed in sweats and a T-shirt. I wasn't sure if we planned to go for a walk today or not. We had been doing it most days. The kids loved the breeze, and I enjoyed spending the quiet time with them. Everyone was a winner.

When I got back to the nursery, my belly dropped. All three babies were awake. Kam and Edwin were handling them fabulously, tag-team diapering. I absolutely adored that my alphas weren't afraid to get into the trenches of poopy diaper explosions.

"I'm back." I took the baby who was fussing the most. "Come here, Noah. Let's get you fed." As soon as he was brought to my chest, he latched on and ate in earnest.

We managed to play musical babies and get them all changed and ready to go on our walk—if we were even taking one. I hadn't gotten far enough to ask.

"Three adorable babies fed, dressed, and wide awake. What should we do? Play mat time? We have the new one from Zevo with the bears on it we haven't shown the kids yet,"

Kam said, cradling Hailey in his arms while I held Sebastian and Edwin held Noah.

“I guess,” Edwin said, his disappointment at the option not even close to masked.

“Edwin, what are you thinking we should do?” I asked, hiding my grin. I knew what he’d say, and I was all in.

“Walk to the park and get Papa ice cream from the cart?” The cart filled with character-shaped ice-cream pops.

“I’m in.” I placed Sebastian in his bassinet and told him I would be back in a couple of minutes.

We had a few configurations of strollers: random single-baby models, a few for twins, and our prized possession, a triple. It was awful for when we went to a store or something, too long to make tight turns at the end of aisles. But for walks? It was sent from the gods.

We ended up taking the triple because it allowed us to walk side by side. The kids were happy about the trip, cooing the moment we got them outside. Shifter babies tended to like the outdoors best, and our babes were no exception.

“Around the block and then to the park?” Kam suggested, and we all agreed.

I loved our neighborhood. We weren’t on top of other houses, and yet we had the feel of being in a community. Mrs. Jenson across the street often stopped by with muffins. Mr. Tyson a couple of doors down gave us enough gardening advice to fill an entire book. And Riley, the teen next door, offered to watch the kids if we wanted a date night. We hadn’t taken them up on it yet, the babes needing more work than one

teen could handle, but we'd had them over as a parents' helper a few times while we were home, and it made both their day and ours.

“Bets on whether Mr. Wint will coincidentally come out as the babies pass and try to give them candy?” I chuckled. He was the sweetest old man, nearing a hundred and, in his mind, you gave kids candy to make them smile. The fact that they were itty bitty didn't play into his plan at all. The first time we declined and could see his heart break in real time. Now we simply thanked him and took it *for after dinner*. The way he beamed at that was everything.

“Not today. He's going to his great-grandson's wedding,” Edwin said, and it hit me.

This wasn't just a neighborhood. It had become our de facto pack without all the politics. This was our home, and so much more. That detour so long ago had been Fate, too. This was where we were meant to be.

We reached the pack and took a small walking path that had been all but forgotten by anyone but us. It took a bit of clever tinkering, but Edwin had replaced the stroller wheels with some that were great for this kind of terrain.

“It's my turn today.” Kam smiled bright.

We had taken to shifting for our babies one at a time, giving them one-on-one time with each of our beasts.

The small clearing we often used was far enough away from the main park area that even my sexy zebra could be hidden. As we reached it, I grabbed our blanket and laid it out.

While Edwin and I got the babies out of the stroller and onto it, Kam undressed and took his feathers.

His beast never failed to impress me. He was magnificent.

I sat with Edwin, watching the babies giggle with delight over seeing their father in his animal form.

“They are lucky to have Kam as a father.” I leaned into Edwin’s side. “Both of you.”

“Huh, that’s what I think about you, daily.” He kissed the top of my head. “I sometimes think about the way I was raised and the expectations placed upon me at such a young age and... .” He choked up a bit and I pulled him into a hug.

“That’s what makes you such an amazing father and mate.”

Kam hopped over and rubbed his cheek against Edwin.

“See? We are all in agreement.”

Hailey fussed.

“Sounds like she wants a show,” Edwin said, and Kam hopped a few steps away. He took to the sky, and all fussing was replaced with full-on baby laughs.

“I love that sound so much.” I even recorded it on multiple occasions. It filled up most of my phone’s memory, but I didn’t care. It was glorious.

“As much as I love my mates, my family, and my new life?”

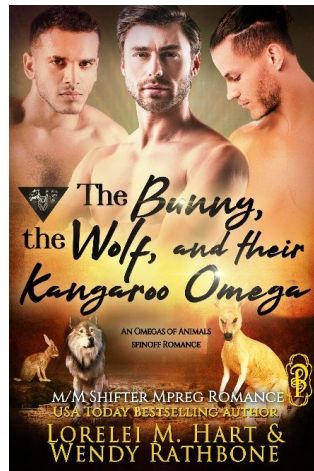
“It depends. Do you love your mates, family, and new life as much as I love mine?”

“I think I do. Possibly more.”

“Then it’s a tie.” I pulled out my phone and showed him my baby giggle folder, and he pulled me into a hug.

Just over year ago, I was about to lose everything, and now? Now I had more than any one omega could ever dream of. And I had Animals with a little help from fate to thank for that.

An Excerpt from *The Bunny, the Wolf, and Their Bear Omega*



Chapter One

Archie

I've never been a bigshot, nor have I ever wanted to be. When I was younger, I was often teased because as an alpha, everyone kind of expected me to want fluffle power. I did not. My brother was first in line to be fluffle alpha, and that suited me just fine. It made it possible for me to go about my life without muss or fuss.

But even without wanting to, I couldn't miss the undercurrent of distrust and discontent lately. When I came into a room, people would cut off their conversations and offer me sly smiles. Generally I shrugged it off and went about my business, but generally they didn't all look at me as if they knew a secret.

My father was getting quite elderly and there were noises being made about his stepping aside either willingly or otherwise, but I couldn't see how that would concern me. I didn't think anything about any of this should or would, but somehow I was starting to get an awful feeling that it might.

"He's a better choice," muttered one of the betas. "His brother will just push everyone around."

Of course he would. He was a born leader, and I was born not to be one. It was entirely my preference. They only wanted me because they thought I'd be a pushover, and they weren't wrong. As the second son, I'd been raised by our parents not to make trouble. They hadn't wanted the two of us ever to come to any kind of argument. Sure, we'd had our moments as kids where we fought over a toy or something like that. And

there'd been a year where we both wanted one guy to be our best friend and he'd loved being the center of attention and played us against one another, but those were childish things. When it came to bigger issues like who would be alpha, we had no issue with one another.

But somehow along the way when I wasn't paying attention, there had become some sort of discussion in the fluffle about which of us was better qualified. I'd had nothing to do with it and, of course, neither had my brother. Why would he?

But after a week or so of hearing all of this, I knew the time had come to make a decision. All our parents' careful rearing to be sure we'd never fight one another for the top position could not stop the others in the fluffle from having opinions, and if my brother was going to be able to take over in peace, I saw only one solution.

I did not want to go away, but I'd never forgive myself if anyone got hurt or if the fluffle suffered because my brother and I had a power struggle. A completely unnecessary one as well. But I didn't have a lot of savings, having worked for the fluffle since I was old enough to hold a job. And jobs in the group didn't pay much. They generally included living expenses and a small amount of cash for necessities.

And after all these years, I had an idea that I might like to earn my own paycheck. Something I could point to as mine and use as I saw fit. Most of the rabbits in our fluffle had a much more community attitude than I did. Maybe.

They said there was no "I" in fluffle, which made no sense to me at all. Why would there be? But I got the idea.

And it made me surer that I was not someone who could just give my all and receive what others chose to bestow.

Also, the distribution of resources never quite seemed fair.

All of those things made me want out, and I began to put in for jobs I thought I might be qualified for. I could do some accounting and had other office skills and hoped that I could find something that would work out for me. Recognizing that I'd have a lot to learn, I broke down all my skills on my resume and prayed someone would think I had potential.

The climate in the fluffle was getting worse by the moment, and I had not managed to get a word in with my brother to discuss it with him. Which had me even more worried than what I was hearing from others. We'd never been the most bosom buddies of brothers, but we'd always gotten along fine.

I feared he thought I was trying to take over as alpha, but if I couldn't get him alone long enough to reassure him that I was not, I couldn't see things going anywhere but from bad to worse.

I checked my email morning and night and sometimes in the middle of the day, too, but most of the employers I'd submitted my information to didn't even acknowledge my resume or application. Finally, I decided that if I didn't hear back by the end of the week, I'd just leave anyway and hope to find something in person.

This political mess was not me, and I didn't want any more of it in my life.

As a single rabbit, I lived in a dormitory sort of situation, with four others, and we'd always gotten along well, it was nice really. Until now. One of my roommates was friends with my brother and managed to convince the others that I was a disloyal traitor—was there any other kind?—and was trying to steal my brother's birthright.

With no idea where they got that idea, my desire to leave grew.

Our lands were beautiful, and our family had been among the original founders of the fluffle, but my time there was limited. Packing all my clothes into a duffle bag, I crawled into bed on what would be my last night at home. In the morning, I'd head for somewhere, I didn't know where, but wherever my old beater car would take me.

I waited until all my roommates were off doing whatever they did for the day—fluffle jobs or errands mostly—before heading for the car. Our cabin was not anywhere near the alpha house, but I still didn't want anyone questioning why I wasn't at work and maybe stopping me from leaving.

It wouldn't be the first time someone had that experience. Not that they'd be locked up or handcuffed or anything so ridiculous, but peer pressure is a strong thing in the bunny community, and I had caved on any number of things in the past due to that!

I started for the back gate, the one that almost nobody ever used because the road was partly dirt and poorly maintained at that. Politics had me sneaking away from my home and family...not good, but it was what it was.

I climbed out and opened the gate, drove through, and closed it behind me. Another reason nobody liked using this one, the front entrance was automatic. But I wouldn't be back here anytime soon. Would I ever?

I hoped so. With me out of the picture, I doubted anyone else could be put forward to take over when Dad stepped down. His health was not good and it would be soon. The fluffle was not an "any alpha can challenge" sort of leadership but had been in our family for a very long time.

I was halfway to town, driving north, when my phone chimed with a notification. Assuming it was someone at home realizing I'd left, I ignored it until I stopped to fill up with gas.

When I pulled out of the gas station, I turned back the way I came. Not because I'd been summoned back but because I'd gotten a job offer I'd accepted with a simple texted *yes*.

It wasn't the job I would have chosen, in fact, there was a certain irony to it at all...but it was the one I got, and it was all the way in San Diego. My new home on the coast.

Chapter Two

Ren

My pack alpha leader, Marcus, firmly turned his back on me and faced the big window of his office that overlooked a rolling vista of the mountain chain we called home. It was dusk. The sky burned that sort of golden-pink color that rattles the senses.

I was rattled all right. From more than just the sunset.

“I’ll hear no more from you, Ren. You’re banished. You have until morning to be gone from here.”

“But if you’d please just let me explain.”

“I know your side of the story but you have no alibi, no proof. I can’t trust you. This is my final decree.”

“Please.” I hated my voice in that moment. Begging. I couldn’t help it. I was being forced to leave my pack, my job, and the only place I’d ever known as home. All for something I didn’t do.

Marcus lowered his voice to a growl. “Leave this building. Now, Ren. Don’t make me call security.”

In truth, Marcus didn’t need security. He was huge, six foot seven with a barrel chest and arms the size of my thighs. If he wanted to, he could pick me up himself and put me outside.

“But I have nowhere to go.”

“Not my problem.” Marcus let out a real wolf growl this time.

Shaking, I turned and headed blindly for the door. Once outside of his office, I blinked away my tears of anger and loss and headed down the hall for the elevator.

My heart raced. In the last couple of days, my entire world had turned upside down. My sister, Seli, had been arrested. Again. She was looking at a minimum of ten years in prison. My parents were distanced from it all, not speaking to her for the past two years, and barely speaking to me because I had contact with her. My opinion was that Seli was my blood, and I thought there might be something I could still do to help save her from her wild, darker nature.

The pack was in an uproar for firm justice. They wanted me out, too. Marcus would never hear my words no matter what.

I hurried to my truck, closed and locked the door then sat back and closed my eyes. My hands shook. I clasped them in my lap to keep them still. I wanted to scream. To yell and pound my feet on the truck floor. I wanted to cry.

Get hold of yourself. You're a full adult now. You have a two-year college degree. You'll be fine. Haven't we been howling to see the world?

My wolf was extraordinarily calm. An unexpected voice of sense in what had quickly become the whirling chaos of my life. He should have been pacing, freaking out at leaving the safety of the pack. Instead, it was as if he'd been the one planning this all along.

"I have nowhere to go," I said aloud. "I have eleven hundred dollars to my name and a paycheck coming next week. That's it." As a part-time waiter living in a studio

apartment, and just out of school, I hadn't had time to build any sort of nest egg.

We can always live in the woods off the land.

I sputtered. Certainly, my wolf would be happy with that. But not me. I might be a wolf, but I was human, too. I had no intention of becoming a feral shifter, adopting my animal form for all my needs. I had goals. Dreams. Human dreams.

I took a few deep, cleansing breaths. The clouds cleared a little from my mind. I opened my eyes and stared at the dark dashboard of my truck. It grounded me. At least I did have my truck. It had a camper shell. I could technically live in it for a while if I had to. For a minute, I pictured myself driving around the California interstates, using all my money for gas, living on beef jerky and cherry slushies, and sleeping at Flying J's in the truck lots.

Pathetic.

I pulled my phone from my pocket and scrolled through my contacts. One contact seemed to flash brighter than the others, as if the universe was pointing a finger of light at the name. I blinked at the ridiculous delirium of my mind in my time of need. But he and I had been close as kids. Aras. My cousin.

Remember when we were cubs together? He was the oldest, but always had your back since you were one of the littlest. All those holidays back when times were better were so good. I like Aras. He's an honest wolf. Call him. He's our blood.

I was no good at asking for favors. But I watched as my finger inched toward the little phone icon beside his name. Suddenly, it was ringing. Almost immediately, a voice said my name.

“Ren? It’s been a long time. How are you?”

“Aras?”

“Yeah.” A chuckle. “Dude, *you* called me. You sound surprised to hear my voice. Is something up?”

I cleared my throat. “You could say that. I’m sorry to be calling so late.”

“Late? Naw. We just got Gregor down, and it’s movie night. But don’t worry. It’s on pause. Zevo and Humphrey are in the kitchen getting snacks. It sounds like they’re actually cooking something. That means I have a few minutes. So, cuz, what’s up?”

His tone sounded so sane and normal, like fresh air. I envied his family, his life. He’d found his true mates. They had a child together. My own family was so screwed up, my parents divorced and losing their home just as I’d turned eighteen, and Seli, at sixteen, going from hotels to apartments wherever my mom ended up. There was no more stability. All the love had seemed to drain away from what I’d remembered in my earlier childhood.

“I—I—” I gulped. I didn’t know how to say the words.

“Ren. Hey, are you in trouble?”

“Marcus just threw me out of the pack.” There. I’d said it. Shame washed over me in a weird heat.

“Wait. What?”

“Seli got into a heap of trouble. She used my truck for some of it, and they can’t be sure I wasn’t helping her. I wasn’t though. I swear. They found things at certain crime scenes and at that hovel she was living in with that Dogstar wolf gang. And apparently my truck was on several street cams in the vicinity of two carjackings and a store robbery. She’s going to prison, and Marcus says the pack can’t trust me and they want me out of here by morning.”

“Oh, Ren. I’m so sorry. That’s terrible. Do you need money? How can I help? What do you need?”

“I don’t want to take your money, but thank you. But I have to be gone by tomorrow. I have nowhere to go. What I really need is just a place to park my camper until I find a job. I can put a mattress in the back and totally sleep there. I just need a place to park it. I know you have your mates and your kid and I don’t want to interfere. But maybe for a few days? This was all so sudden. I didn’t think Marcus would just callously toss me from the pack the way he did.”

I hated asking. It was so hard for me.

“Marcus. Oh hell. That alpha was always a hard-ass. I couldn’t wait to leave when I came of age. When you’re an alpha and you don’t get along with the pack leader, it’s a huge problem. I never agreed with Marcus.”

“Aras, I wouldn’t have called you. But I’ve got no one else.”

“Hold on.”

I bit my lip and tried not to get upset again at having to tell my sob story to my one sane relative. As I listened, I heard echoey voices in the background. Aras was no doubt talking to his mates.

Finally, I heard some cracklings, and Aras came back on the line. “Ren?”

“Still here.”

“I talked to my mates. We’re in agreement. You can’t sleep in your truck. That’d be ridiculous. I mean, we have the room for you to park it, but it’s summer and way too hot.”

“Oh, of course. I understand.” My mind started to whirl with other possibilities of where to go. My wolf perked up with a little whine, but I quickly shushed him.

“But,” Aras continued, “we have a lovely spare room. In fact, we have two spare rooms you can choose from. They’re both airy and big and have their own bathrooms. And you’re welcome to one of them.”

“Aras, wow. That’s a huge offer. Too much. I mean, your mates don’t even know me. Really, I just need a place to go. Maybe only for a couple of days.” It felt like what he was offering wasn’t quite real.

“They know me and trust me, and I’m vouching for you. You were always like a cub-mate to me. Like a little brother. I want to help in any way I can. We’ve all been there ourselves, Ren. We all need a helping hand once in a while. You can stay until you get work. Two days or two weeks or however long you need. So, the only question is, when can you get here?”

“That’s super generous. Thank you.” I couldn’t quite catch my breath. “But really, be sure, Aras. I would never impose.”

“We’re sure.” He must’ve had me on speaker because I heard two more voices I didn’t recognize chime in.

“We’re sure,” said a deep, booming voice. That had to be Zevo the bear.

“Yep. Aras vouches and so we’re good. Through the bond, our animals are all in agreement.” The second voice that piped up was a little higher, and very energetic. Humphrey the dragon.

My wolf bounced inside me. *Good wolf and bear and dragon. Friends. Let’s go now.*

Aras repeated his question. “How soon, Ren?”

I could pack in a few hours. I’d have to leave what little furniture I had behind, but I didn’t care. It was all secondhand. San Diego was about a three- to four-hour drive.

I knew I wouldn’t be able to sleep tonight. I would only worry and make myself miserable. If I spent the night packing and driving, I could be there in no time.

“Tomorrow morning?”

Aras laughed. “In a hurry, huh? I don’t blame you. It’s a deal. We’ll expect you for breakfast.”

“Thank you, Aras.”

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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Wendy Rathbone

I have been writing since the age of twelve, everything from short stories and poetry to fanfiction.

In the last decade, my love for mm romance has taken the form of novels. I have several dozen of these in many subgenres including contemporary, fantasy, sci fi, vampire.

But my current obsession is Omegaverse, both shifter and non. I love the idea of alphas and omegas, mpreg, and the balance/imbalance of power between them in all different settings. I always long for a happy ever after.

I have three Omegaverse series: The Omega Misfits, Captive Alphas and my newest and first shifter series: Moonrise Academy.

I live in the high desert of southern California, Yucca Valley, with two sweet dogs and five (all strays) cats. I am a voracious reader and love to collect rings. I also love designing book covers.

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