



ALWAYS BEEN  
*Young*

A VALLEYWOOD NOVEL

KATY MANZ

# **ALWAYS BEEN YOURS**

**VALLEYWOOD SEASON THREE**

**KATY MANZ**

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**BRYCE MAXWELL**

“**B**ryce, will you be returning to the ice soon?”

“Paxton said that you will be retiring at the end of the year. Is that true?”

“Mr. Maxwell. Do you have any comments regarding the rumors that Jensen Diggs made regarding your future with the Crows?”

*Keep your head down, and walk ahead. You don't want to give them an opening.*

The telepathic message from my bodyguard, Bruno, had me picking up my pace.

The reporters had been camped out in front of the hospital all week. They were hungry for any bit of news they could snag about me and my ability to continue in the hockey world.

Reaching the limo, relief washed over me at escaping the press. They had been hounding me all week since my last game in Chicago.

My other bodyguard, Hector, opened the door to the back seat so I could easily slip inside while he and Bruno protected me from the bloodthirsty paparazzi.

“Bryce, is it true that last week's game will be your last ever?”



*Ignore them*, Bruno reminded me as the car door clicked closed behind us.

“Bryce, is it true that your relationship with Timothy Nichols was a publicity stunt?”

*Idiots*, Hector growled into my mind. *You haven't been with Timothy for months; it was one date.*

*They are just doing their job. I knew what I was signing up for.* I kept my gaze down on the floor as the limo started up and pulled away from the crowd. More questions were shouted at me, but now that we were safely enclosed in the limo, it was more like an annoying hum I could block out.

“It still doesn't mean they have the right to ask the same ignorant questions fifty times whenever they see you.” Hector switched to his outward voice instead of keeping the mental link going. “I swear, how often do they need to ask you about your romantic entanglements before they realize they won't get an answer?”

“They're hoping that one day, someone will slip and spill all the deep dark secrets. The public devours that shit in a frenzy; you can't really blame the reporters for asking the questions the fans are dying for answers to.” Bruno handed me a bottle of ice-cold water from the refrigeration unit beside him.

“Sure, I can.” Hector tossed a bag of trail mix from the snack cabinet into my lap. “Eat that and hydrate yourself. Your wolf wants meat, but we have to get out of this city before we can stop somewhere and get him a steak. That mix will have to tide him over.”

“This is perfect.” I filled my mouth with a handful of the salty-sweet goodness and groaned. It had been forever since I ate something, even though it had only been a couple of hours. The healing my body was attempting was draining my energy. It would take a few more weeks to get full mobility once again.

“Have you and Alex spoken about your next steps?” Bruno knew my manager would have been hounding me for my

decision. I had a lot to decide, some of which would affect everyone who worked for me.

“I’m still going over my options. We both agree that I shouldn’t return to the rink as a player, at least not anytime soon. If those scans and medical reports were ever leaked, people would realize how impossible my recovery would have been if I hadn’t been a shifter mixed with a powerful witch bloodline. It would lead to too many conspiracies and drama in the human world.”

“I agree with that.” Hector placed a hand on my shoulder and squeezed. “Maybe you need this small vacation away from everything in Chicago.”

“I agree about the vacation. But are you sure you want to head back to Valleywood?” Bruno took a swig of his water and recapped the bottle. “You don’t have to attend the charity gala this weekend. We can tell Alex to call the organizers and explain the situation.”

I thought about everything in my hometown and everyone out there waiting to see me again after years of being away pursuing my dreams. An invisible string tugged at my chest like it had been doing for the last decade. I was done running from the pull, done chasing fantasies out in the human world and ignoring the true desires of my heart. I was ready to return to the place that made me the shifter I was and to the boy who still held my heart in his.

I stared out the window, the rushing of the street signs and cars reminding me of one of the other reasons I needed this escape. I had almost lost the true nature of myself. “I need to go. I’m being called home.”

\*\*\*

“Papa, are you home?” I let myself in through the front door of my childhood home after Bruno and Hector dropped me off. They had gotten a room at L’Hotel Valeur and would be sticking around in case their services were needed. I told them to go to the Grand Escape resort since they needed the vacation anyway. But they refused my offer to pay for it, so they went to the Value Hotel instead. I’d give them until



tomorrow to find me for directions to the resort. I had a feeling that Valleywood may be where those two needed to be. They had been in the human world for way too long and needed some of this town's magic.

“Bryce?” My papa ran out of the kitchen and embraced me in a giant hug. “I wasn't expecting you until tomorrow. Are you hungry? I made beef stew. Can I fix you a bowl?”

Chuckling at his excited chatter, I squeezed him tighter. “I'd love a bowl, Papa. I decided to come straight here from the hospital instead of waiting the extra day. Hopefully, that's no issue.”

Papa swatted my arm as he pulled away from me. “Of course, it's no trouble. This is your home. Your father is still at work but will be just as happy to see you here.”

“I missed you, Papa.” I followed him into the kitchen and sat down at the table near the bay window overlooking the backyard. “It's good to be home.”

“It has been too long.” Papa ladled the stew into a large soup bowl.

My mouth watered at the delicious smell of beef and vegetables. “I think I am home to stay this time. This is where I am meant to be now.”

“I always knew you would be back. And if my intuition is correct, there is a certain someone who has been pulling you back here throughout the years, and it isn't necessarily your father and me. Have you seen him yet?” Papa placed the bowl in front of me and sat in the opposite chair.

“No.” I picked up my spoon and took my first bite. “This is delicious. Thank you.”

“You're welcome. But, tell me, will you call Connor now that you are home?”

I put down my spoon and wiped my mouth with my napkin. Leaning back in the chair, I closed my eyes. Perhaps Papa could help me figure out what to do about Connor. “I'm not sure what to say to him. I've thought about him every day since I left, but he has never called me. He told me that staying

in contact would be too difficult. What if he's changed in the time I've been gone? What if I am the only one holding on to hope of being something important to one another?"

"Stop thinking of what-ifs and start taking action. You'll never know if the pull you feel is still real unless you speak with him. I have seen him often over the years, and there is a reason that boy is still single and hardly dates."

I growled at the idea of Connor dating anyone other than me. He was my omega. The moment I returned to Valleywood, I was here for good and would be making Connor mine. If another man was sniffing around, I would have to prove I was the better match.

Chuckling, Papa patted my hand. "Go find him and make him understand you won't be leaving this time."

"You don't think I'm too late?" I needed some reassurance from the man whose judgment I trusted most.

"You will have some work to do in claiming your omega, but I know my son, and when you decide something is meant to be yours, you don't give up easily. So, the question is, do you truly believe Connor Hughs is meant to be yours?"

"I think so, Papa. Something is pulling me home, and, when I close my eyes, I only see his face." And when I dream, it's of a future with him in my arms and a dozen pups running around our feet. An image of the two of us in our favorite forest, shifting with two pups, formed in my mind, and I want it so badly to become reality.

"Then go tell him that."

**CONNOR HUGHS**

I was just finishing my first cup of coffee for the day when my phone alerted me to an incoming call. Checking the caller ID, I saw who it was and answered the call on the third ring. “Hello.”

“Connor, this is Evelyn. You know, your very understanding agent.”

The thought of this woman being described as understanding made me chuckle. She’d been a part of my life way too long for me to ever associate understanding with her. At least not when it was work-related. Two months from the deadline, calling every day to ensure I was working on my next release was suffocating.

“Yes, Evelyn.” I pulled my calendar closer on my desk and made a quick note of her calling again. “And what can I do for you today?”

“I was calling to check your progress with the manuscript. Will you have it for the editor by the twenty-fifth?”

“Of next month?” I double-checked my planner and the desk calendar to be sure and saw I was definitely in the correct month. “Of course I will. Is there a reason why you doubt me? I have never been late before, not even when I got sick from exhaustion that one year. I was two weeks early then, if memory serves.”

“Oh no, hun.” I could hear Evelyn typing on the other side of the phone line. “I was just trying to make sure the publishers wouldn’t have a reason to complain.”

“Evelyn, you have known me for over sixteen years now. We’ve gone through school and started our careers together. We have worked hand in hand to get my work to the right press for my audience and been through good times and bad. Not once have I ever changed a deadline or even come close to not meeting the original dates set. Why are you so nervous this time?”

Evelyn sighed loudly, and my gut tightened. “The publishers have had some drama going on lately with other authors. They recently announced their decision not to proceed with quite a few works for my other clients in the last few weeks—”

“Is my book being threatened?”

“Oh no. I’m sorry for making you worry that you were next. It’s just that with them doing that, I’m nervous. What if the one time you need to request more time is the one time you won’t be able to get it?”

I looked at my notes and outlines, the nearly finished draft in my files. “I’m not worried at all about meeting that deadline. I promise you that nothing could cause me to be late on the project. Okay?”

“I believe you, Connor. I’m sorry for being so annoying lately.”

“Evelyn, don’t even sweat it. You’re my agent, but above that, you’re my friend. I’ve seen you in worse states and still love you.”

“Funny.” Evelyn giggled, and it was nice to hear her relaxing. “I’m stressed out. Especially with Bryce returning this weekend for the gala.”

*Wait, what? I didn’t hear her right, did I? Is she saying Bryce is returning to town and will be at the same gala I am obligated to attend? Fuck.*

My wolf whimpered, and I closed my eyes to ground myself.

“Evelyn,” I whispered into the phone once I’d calmed. “What do you mean about Bryce returning to town?”

“Didn’t you know?” The edge in her voice returned, and if I had been freaking out internally, I may have felt guilty for causing that. “He told his parents that he’d arrive tonight and attend the gala. I thought you’d see his name listed on the website. Since you’re attending, aren’t you paying attention to the announced celebrities?”

“No.” I leaned back in my chair and gripped my aching chest. “I never expected him to return so I never really thought to look. Why would I care who else would be there? It’s only him that I—”

“I’m so sorry, Connor. Do you need me to leave the office early and visit your house? I could bring some ice cream and chocolate. Or margaritas and tamales. You tell me which one would help you more in this instance.”

“Can you find me a good excuse for why I can’t attend the gala?” I put my head on the desk and closed my eyes, breathing deeply. “What am I going to do?”

“You are going to let me help you relax tonight. You are going to vent to me and drown your past in liquor and carbs. Then, tomorrow, you will remember that you are no longer that heartbroken teen who watched the only boy he had ever loved ride off into the sunset without him. You will go to that gala and show Bryce exactly who you have grown up to be.”

*Oh, great. I will show Bryce that I’ve gone from a heartbroken boy who let him go so he could live his dreams to a brokenhearted man still in love with my childhood best friend.*

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“What am I going to do?” I sat on my bed with my calico cat Ren on my lap. “I can’t see him. I need to figure out a way out of the gala. Or a way to avoid him while there.”

*Meow.*

“I’m being silly.” I petted his furry tail, finding the sensation of the soft hairs the perfect sensory input I needed in times like

this. Stressed out and spiraling in my thoughts, I relied on my furry companion for comfort. Ren had grown used to the little chats. “It’s been ten years, and I should be over him. I’m sure he is over me. He probably has a line of puck bunnies lined up after every game. Or a secret boyfriend he protects from the vicious paparazzi. He isn’t still hung up on the stupid boy he loved in high school. So why am I still hung up on him?”

*Meow.*

“You think I should go talk to him? Take a leap and confront my fears, huh?” I scratched Ren behind his ears, and he stretched his back and purred. “But what if he breaks me even more? I barely put myself back together last time.”

*Meow.*

“Are you actually lying here, pretending to have a conversation with your cat?” Evelyn strode into my bedroom and sat on the edge of the king-sized bed.

“Um. No?” I scooted lower and covered my face with the blanket. “Maybe.”

“I won’t tell anyone this time.” Evelyn uncovered my face. “But can you speak with me instead? I am your best friend after all, not just your agent. And I guarantee I can give more feedback than just ‘meow.’”

*Meow.*

Ren jumped off my bed and walked out of my room, tail high, taking one last look at Evelyn before leaving. I swore I could feel the attitude of my cat radiating off him, and I shivered from the scorn he showed my best friend.

“I think you made Ren mad.” I sat up and smacked Evelyn’s arm. “You’re going to clean any mess he leaves now. Last time, I found regurgitated tuna in my favorite pair of sneakers. I think he blames me for letting you hang around.”

“Fine. I’ll do any cleaning that comes from Ren’s meltdown. And I’ll bring him kitty treats next time I come over, okay?” Evelyn rubbed her arm and grimaced. “Did you have to pick the arm I got my vaccination on? Geez, Con. That hurt.”

“Oh shit. Sorry, Ev.” I leaned in and hugged my friend. “But, seriously, try not to piss off the cat. He already doesn’t like you after you brought that dog over here last year, and it peed on his toys.”

“I bought him new ones.”

“He holds a grudge.”

“He takes after you, I guess.”

“What?”

“Well, you’re holding a grudge against a boy you told to leave town and follow his dreams. You’re blaming him for not understanding you were completely in love with him and actually wanted him to stay with you.”

“But I didn’t. He had a dream, and he had to follow it. If he stayed, he would have hated me.”

“Then why have you avoided his calls the last ten years, and why are you thinking of how you can get out of the gala, so you don’t have to see him?”

“Shut up.” I almost smacked Evelyn again but remembered her vaccination spot at the last minute and stopped myself.

“You can’t avoid him forever.” Evelyn grabbed my hand. “You need to be an adult now and face your past. Maybe he can become your future.”

“I don’t know about that, Evelyn. How can I stop hurting long enough to speak with him?” *How can I let my guard down and let him in again without certainty on how it will all end?*

“You just do, Connor. You tell yourself that you must heal that wound to see what can come next.”



**BRYCE**

Entering the charity gala at city hall, the tingles of nerves radiated through my body. My wolf paced internally and kept pushing at my skin. I even growled at the parking attendant for not grabbing my keys quickly enough. I hated being an impatient prick but, right now, I had little control over it. *If I am lucky, I will see Connor earlier than not and gain some calm after speaking to him.* I closed my eyes and imagined my body growing roots into the floor, grounding me to the moment. Trying to invoke calming energy, I played with the Blue Lace Agate I kept in my pocket, one of the last gifts I received from Connor before I left town ten years ago.

My papa had confirmed that Connor would be attending the festivities. Papa had also been able to verify the fact that he was still, in fact, single. I hadn't asked him to do such detective work, but, when once I was back for good and told him I was still in love with my high school sweetheart, Papa's romantic scheming side was unleashed. And all the elders in town probably already had plans of helping make Connor mine. Would Connor accept me after all these years apart? After all, we've had no contact. What if he had changed or if he thought I had? Ten years was a long time.

There was enough security that Bruno and Hector stayed at the hotel, though they'd have their phones nearby if I called. They confirmed the details of the event with the organizers

and familiarized themselves with the building and staff in case they needed to rescue me. I was glad this allowed those two alphas to relax away from their regular lives. I believed Valleywood had a plan for them.

“Bryce, is that you?” Turning, I found my high school friend Benjamin McCauley walking toward me from one of the tables to the left of the doors. His familiar green eyes were such a distinguishing feature that even after a decade of distance between us, I recognized him. I felt my lips stretch into a smile thinking of all the shenanigans we use to get into growing up. I’d missed more than Connor since I’d been gone.

“Ben? It’s been a long time.” Hugging the man, I gave his back a couple of friendly slaps. “It’s great to see you here. How have you been?”

“It’s good to see you as well.” Ben smiled and looked around the room. “It’s been a good life for me. No complaints. Man, I wasn’t sure you would be here. I was shocked when I saw you on this year’s attendees list. I thought for sure you’d avoid the area, since Connor is coming tonight.”

“Why would I do that? There’s no bad blood between the two of us.” I would never avoid Connor, though he’d seemed to do that enough for both of us throughout the years. “I actually have been looking for him since I got into town. Have you seen him here yet?”

“I assumed it would be like any other breakup. Usually when two kids in love break up suddenly after years of dating, rumors suggest there’s going to be drama. But you’d know your relationship with him best, I guess. Yeah, I saw him tonight.” Ben scanned the crowd and pointed to my far right. “He was near those tables about ten minutes ago, speaking with Ashley and Noel Perkins. But I don’t see him there now. If I find him before you do, I’ll tell him you wanted to meet him.”

“Thanks, I appreciate it. I’d love to catch up with him. Now, tell me how you’ve been?”

As Ben discussed the last few years of his life in Valleywood and meeting his boyfriend, Lenard, I kept my eyes

on the area near the table where he last saw Connor.

*You can hide, Connor. But this wolf is good at tracking his prey.*

A wave of the most intoxicating scent overwhelmed me, and I leaned into Ben, sniffing. It wasn't coming from him though.

“What is that delicious smell?” I searched the tables around us, looking for some desserts that would explain the scent. My mind was having a hard time focusing on anything else. Even my wolf had noticed it. “It smells like freshly baked blueberry muffins. Don't you smell it?”

“I don't smell anything like that, man.” Benjamin sniffed and scrunched his nose. “Are you sure that's what you smell? I'm catching a mix of colognes but nothing like what you describe.”

“No, it's not cologne. It reminds me of my grandma's kitchen every fall as a child.”

“Odd. I don't smell anything like that. I wish I did.” Ben shifted his weight to his other leg and nodded to the area behind me. “Hey, look. There's Connor. Why don't you speak with him and we can catch up later? I heard from my dad you are out here permanently now, so we have time.”

“Sounds good. Thanks, man.” I patted his back and turned around. “I'll catch you later.”

It would have been lost on me if Benjamin had said anything after that. The moment I turned around and met Connor's eyes, the invisible tie between us flared to life and tugged me closer to him. His steps were hesitant, but he moved toward me as well. The closer he got, the stronger the scent of blueberry muffins became. Connor Hughs was my true mate, the first boy I kissed, and the only man I have ever loved.

Suddenly, Connor froze and shook his head. Eyes widening and his hand covering his nose, my mate turned and ran toward the hallway doors.

I chased after him, sending thanks to Fate for such a gift.

*Oh, Fate, you're a wonderful thing!*

## **Connor**

*Fate, you are an asshole!*

The spicy, comforting scent of eucalyptus and lavender assaulted my senses when Bryce cornered me in the bathroom. I had been entranced with his scent and the tug of Fate's lines between us for a moment before fleeing, overwhelmed with the idea that the boy I had loved and lost was meant solely for me. I thought I could seek refuge in one of the rooms at city hall, but none were open to the public, so the bathroom was my only choice. Unfortunately, he was able to follow me right in.

I closed my eyes as the emotions washed over me, losing myself in the memories that flooded my brain and the phantom stings that clawed themselves back up to the surface. A small whimper escaped me as he leaned even closer into my space. "Bryce."

"I've missed you so much, my sweet Connor." Bryce inhaled deeply into my neck where it met my shoulder and growled, his inner wolf present in the sound. A delicious tingle filled my body, and I closed my eyes, fighting the urge to give in to him. Oh, how I wanted to lean into his body and let him kiss my neck the way he used to when we were younger. "You always smelled good, but now you smell like mine."

"You left me." I paused and tried to put strength behind my words, making my voice less weak. *I am no longer that naive young boy. I am a successful author who has a damn good life.* "You chased your dreams and left me and Valleywood behind. Why are you here now?"

"For you." A wet tongue slipped out and licked the spot that would have been where his mating claim would go. Euphoric energy zipped through the touch, and part of my boundaries cracked. "I always was going to come back. I told you that."

There had always been a pull to come here and back to you, my true home.”

I needed to pull myself away from his enticing smell and the warmth of his energy before I did something I would regret, like letting him claim me in a bathroom at city hall. “It’s too late, Bryce.” I pushed at his chest enough to get some space between us. “It’ll hurt too much the next time you pack up and leave. You have your hockey team and fans out there needing you.”

“Don’t you hear me, Connor?” Bryce leaned back into the space I had created. “I said I was back for good. I am never leaving you again. I’m done playing hockey, but my soul was trying to tell me for years to return here, even if I wasn’t.”

“I don’t believe you.” I pushed back, slid out from his arms, and walked toward the bathroom door. “I’m done talking about this with you. Please just leave me alone. Pretend I don’t exist for the rest of the time you visit here.”

“It’s not a visit, Connor. I’m home for good.”

I couldn’t allow myself to believe him, couldn’t fall back in love with him and be hurt again. Fate or not, I had to protect my heart from the one man who had the power to destroy it. “Goodbye, Bryce.”

“Connor, wait.”

But I didn’t wait. I couldn’t. Once in the hallway, I ran out of the building and toward my house.

*Forget my car. It can stay there overnight. And screw what else Bryce has to say.*

He left me ten years ago. I wouldn’t allow him a chance to do it again—no matter what Fate says.

*Fuck you, Fate. Why are you ten years too late?*

**BRYCE**

“Can you really deny Fate, Connor?” I leaned against one of the white pillars of Connor’s porch, ankles and arms crossed. “Because I don’t think I can.”

“Bryce, what are you doing here?” Connor turned from the front door he had been unlocking a minute before. I made a mental note to remind him to be more conscious of his surroundings, since he was unaware of having an audience until I announced my presence. “I told you I didn’t want to talk about this anymore. Please go away.”

“You told me you were done talking about it, but I’m not. I’m not done trying to understand how you can scent that I’m the one person out in the world made for you yet walk away so easily—”

“Nothing about this is easy, Bryce.” Connor plopped down on the porch swing and sighed. “Nothing was that simple ten years ago when I had to watch my best friend and first love leave for his dreams of hockey stardom, and it’s definitely not now when that same person comes back into my life. Or for Fate to show us ten years too late that we were meant to be.”

“But it isn’t ten years too late.” I sat next to him, allowing a bit of space between our bodies. I needed to convince him to trust this. “I’m back in Valleywood. I can stay with you this time, and we can build a life together.”

“I don’t know if that is what I want anymore. Or if it’s what’s best for me, in any case. Can I trust you?”

“You can trust this.” I gestured between the two of us. “Even if Fate hadn’t shown us that we were perfect for one another, I planned on trying to win you back. I never forgot you or what we had together. Whenever I won a championship, I wished you were there with me. Whenever I asked my parents how things were going back here in Valleywood, I feared I’d hear you found someone new.”

“Yet, you never came back to get me.” Connor lowered his head, trying to hide. But a tear rolled down his cheek. “You could have come back and asked me to travel with you. We could have done a long-distance thing. But you didn’t call.”

“You told me not to.” I laid my head back. “I picked up the phone so many times, but I kept hearing you telling me not to call you or it would be too painful. And I guess I didn’t know better than to listen to that.”

“I’m aware I did something wrong, too. I shouldn’t have told you not to call. I could have found you after my parents died and asked you if you still wanted me. But I feared you would reject me, and I had already lost so much.”

“So, we both made mistakes. Let’s put those to rest and see what the future can bring.”

“What can I say, Bryce? When you went away, it broke me in a way I never thought I’d heal from. I have built a life here in Valleywood without you. Maybe it isn’t the one I always dreamed of, but it is one I’ve been happy with for the last few years. Now, you come back, and my mind and heart are torn on what to do.”

“Give us a chance, Connor. That’s all that I’m asking for. Give me a few dates to show you how great it could be between us as adults. Let me prove to you I’m here to stay this time.”

“One date.”

“Five.” I had to aim high.

“Two.”



“Three.”

Connor rolled his eyes. “Fine, three dates, and then you’ll have to leave me alone forever.”

“No promises. I’ll leave you alone, but I will give you more space while I try to convince you again.”

“You’re too frustrating.” The uptilt of his lips belied his true feelings. He always loved our banter. So did I, especially when it led to us making out afterward.

“I’ve been told that. But I also have been told I can be charming.”

“Whoever told you that was a liar.”

“It was you.”

Connor shrugged. “Well, I must have been drunk.”

I scoffed. “You were seventeen and too much of a good boy to break the law and drink.”

“Drunk on love.”

“If that’s the case, then I’ll just have to get you drunk on my love again.”

“Augh. Shut up.” Connor got up from the wooden swing and walked to his unlocked door. “Pick me up tomorrow night at six. You can plan everything else about the date.”

“Deal.” I stood and followed him to the door. “Can I at least have a good-night kiss to seal the deal?”

“Nope. Not tonight.” Connor opened his door and slipped inside. “But if you play your cards right, we’ll see about tomorrow night.”

## **Connor**

Lying in bed, trying to sleep, my memories of high school and being with Bryce bombarded me. I imagined us in our

matching tuxes for prom and the morning after when he was sneaking out of my bedroom window before my parents woke up. I could still taste the cherry lip balm he used to get every year on St. Nicholas Day and the white-chocolate imports he would share with me. I yearned for the heat of his body lying next to mine while we stared up at the starry night sky out at our spot. But then came the sadder moments. The day we said goodbye, the months that followed when I was so alone, I'd call him from other people's phones just to hear his voice. I'd never say it was me; instead, I'd hang up once I heard his 'hello.' I stopped after Evelyn threatened to tell him it was me if I took her phone again. I closed my eyes and got lost in a memory.

*The touch of Bryce's hand on the small of my back was enough to make me calm. The whole day, I had been anxious, like something huge was coming, but I had no idea what it was. I was powerless to the feeling. Luckily, my best friend was there to make me grounded. I could always count on Bryce to bring me back to reality.*

*"Have you made up your mind about the NHL Entry Draft? I know your dad was trying to get you to go to college first and try again in a few years after you got your degree." Bryce had been weighing his options for a few weeks. I'd felt his tension lately and wished I could ease it. But I wasn't sure how I could.*

*"My chances are high at being drafted, and I think I need to go for my dreams. After discussing it with the coaches, even if I am drafted, I'll most likely be sent to play either college hockey in the NCAA or I can go into the USHL. Like the college level, the junior leagues would allow me more time to develop my skills and gain experience. After that, I can make my debut in the NHL." Bryce rubbed my back, but his eyes looked off into the distance as if he envisioned this future. "How I am going to balance everything. I promised you we would go to college together but didn't get into the same one. I don't know what to do, Connor."*

*"Follow your dreams, Bryce." My voice was low, but I knew he could hear me because his arms tightened around me at my*

*words. "I can't be the reason you don't achieve them. I am staying in Valleywood, but you were meant for the bigger world. It's okay, Bryce. I will be okay. Be the hockey star you were born to be."*

A few months later, Bryce was gone, and I was broken. I had to let him go, but part of me always wished he had told me I was his dream. Not hockey. That was unfair of me, and he did what he should have by going for the draft. Every championship he won proved he made the right choice. I would never regret my decision to stay home with my parents and get to spend every last minute with them. I just wished I could get over myself and believe him when he said he was back for good this time. *Why is it so much easier to know what I need to do than to actually do it?*

*Meow.*

Ren pounced on my hand and demanded some ear scratches. I obliged, partly for my own benefit since petting him could double as a sleep aid on restless nights.

"Thanks, Ren." I turned to cuddle his tiny body in my arms, and he snuggled right in. "I'll give you extra tuna tomorrow."

*Meow.*

## CONNOR

“Am I stupid?” I lay on my bed and stared at my ceiling. “Is going out with him the correct thing to do?”

Evelyn sat next to where I lay and threw a pair of tight jeans at my stomach. “Put these on with that heather-gray Henley I bought you last Christmas. It brings out your eyes.”

“Fine.” I stood up and went into my closet for a bit of privacy while I changed. “But answer my question. Is this nuts? Should I cancel?”

“Of course you shouldn’t.” Evelyn looked through my top dresser drawer. “If I were you, I would have said fuck the dating part and gone straight to the mating part. But, apparently, you have to make things more complicated.”

“I am not—”

“Yes, you are.” Evelyn threw me a pair of the sexy lace manties I had hidden at the bottom of my drawer. “Go put these on. You need something sexy. For the confidence boost.”

“I already have briefs on.”

“No. I saw the ones you have. They are good for everyday wear, but you must put those lacey ones on for this date.”

“He will not see me naked tonight.”

“Of course not.” Evelyn rolled her eyes and shooed me away. “Go in there and change. Now.”

“Fine.” I closed the door this time to change. Thank the Goddess, I had a large walk-in. It made this so much easier. Once they were on, I bent down to pick up my jeans and put them back on but was startled by Evelyn’s squeal.

“Yes. Those are perfect.” Evelyn pushed her way through the doorway and scanned my nearly bare ass. “He will be begging to eat you up in those.”

“Evelyn. What the hell?” I pushed her out and closed the door. “I’m putting my clothes on, and you’d better stay out there.”

“Fine.”

“And I told you, no one is seeing me naked tonight.”

“We’ll see.”

“No, we will not see.” I strode into my bedroom wearing the outfit she had picked. “So, how do I look now?”

“Abso-fucking-lutely hot.” Evelyn clapped her hands. “You’ll drive him wild. Especially if you plan to play hard to catch.”

Shaking my head, I left my bedroom and entered the kitchen. “Do you want some tea or coffee before you go? I still have about an hour before he’s supposed to arrive.”

“Sure, I can use a cup of Earl Grey if you have it.” Evelyn sat at my kitchen table and opened the tin of butter cookies in the middle. “Oh my Goddess. I love these. Can I say how much I adore you when you get into your anxious baker mood?”

“Thanks, I guess.” I switched the electric tea kettle on and got out the Empress’s Earl Grey and Calming Lavender Chamomile teas I bought from Pink Coffee Cafe’s online shop. “I’m glad my nerves could benefit you, at least.”

“What? I think it’s cute that you bake when worrying about something.” Evelyn bit into her favorite treat that I made and moaned. “Remember that one summer when you had writer’s

block, and it was close to the deadline? I came over and had to help you take a bunch of pies and cakes to nearby families because you baked for three days straight?”

“I remember.” I poured the hot water into the white mugs and brought them to the table, placing a bowl of sugar and a spoon beside them. “I still have trouble eating pies and cakes after that one.”

“Well, I will eat all the cookies you can make.” Evelyn stuffed a third cookie into her mouth and chewed.

“Good. I have three more tins in my pantry, waiting for you.” I stood and gathered the cookie tins I had put aside for my best friend. “Take them to the office if there are too many.”

“I wouldn’t share my treats with those sharks if they begged. These are too precious for them. Although, if you happen to make some with laxatives in them—”

“No, I will not do that.” I sat down and grabbed a cookie out of the open tin. “Are things that bad? Really?”

“Nah. Don’t worry about it.” Evelyn waved the question off. “I’m annoyed by some changes that are taking place within the company.”

“Wanna talk about it?”

“Not now. You are supposed to be excited for tonight’s date. Not listening to me groan about office drama.”

“I’m here if you need a venting buddy, okay?”

“I know you are. Thanks.” Evelyn took a sip of her tea. “Now, can we talk about how Bryce looks after all these years? Is he still the cute boy from high school?”

“Fuck.” I sighed, thinking of his muscular frame and manly scruff. “He is gorgeous. Part of me wanted to forget everything else and bend over and beg him to breed me.”

“Connor.” Evelyn gasped. “You did not just say that.”

“If you had seen him, you’d understand.” I shook my head. “I wish I could get over myself and the past years of pain and

give myself entirely to this. We are fated, after all. It's supposed to be easy."

"Who said anything about it being easy?" Evelyn put down her half-eaten cookie. "Fated only means you two fit together in the most perfect way possible. It doesn't erase human miscommunications and misjudgment. It doesn't make the pain disappear. You need to process the past the way that works for you. Once you have, you can move on to the future. All kidding aside, I think you are doing the best thing for you two by taking slow steps and trying to build trust again that, this time, no one is leaving. If you jump in, who's to say you wouldn't burn it all to the ground the first time he's late coming home from the store, and you freak out thinking he left you?"

"I don't think I would go that crazy."

"Maybe not. But I've met omegas who have, like my own papa. My father always tried to make up for something he hadn't been aware he'd done. But Papa couldn't get over that he had left him pregnant with my brother. It was a one-night stand, and they reconnected a couple of months later, claiming each other once they realized they were mates. But Papa never let himself slow down and heal first. He jumped in, and everyone paid the price."

"They are happy now, though, right?" I always thought her parents had finally gotten over the issues that plagued them in our teenage years.

"Yeah, but think of the three decades it took them to get to that place of being truly happy." Evelyn picked up her cookie and took a bite. "Maybe by taking the time to date now, you are saving yourself and any future children thirty years of fighting and crying."

Evelyn's words gave me something to think about and more confidence that what I had decided to do was the right path for me. I needed time to heal the wounds Bryce's leaving caused. It wasn't his fault or mine, exactly. But the hurt was still there. And if we addressed it before we mated by building a solid



foundation of trust and friendship again, perhaps I would get that Happily Ever After I'd always dreamt of.

**BRYCE****Bryce**

“**W**hy am I so nervous?” I turned to Papa and held out my tie. “Can you do this for me? My hands won’t work right tonight.”

Chuckling, he came closer and fixed my tie. “You’ve known Connor since you two were in diapers. And now Fate has spoken and shown you that he’s so the perfect match for you. Luckily you are both shifters and grew up with the same set of beliefs. He’s aware of the concept of true mates and how that works. This should be simple. Why are you two making things harder on yourselves?”

“I need to prove to him that I’m serious about staying in Valleywood and with him.” I understood where Connor was coming from, even if I did wish we could jump straight into our happily ever after and not do this will-we-won’t-we dance. “If this is what he needs to give himself completely to our connection, then I am willing to go on a thousand dates to prove it to him.”

“He does realize he had a part to play in what went down ten years ago, too, right? He chose not to tell you how much

he didn't want you to leave. He decided not to go with you. He cut off all contact, thinking it would be easier for you both." Papa brushed a piece of hair out of my face. "If he hadn't, you two could have done a long-distance thing even. I know both of you, and neither of you would have strayed. It would have worked for you guys. So, he needs to take responsibility, too."

"I acknowledge we both had a part to play in the past." I turned and grabbed my watch from the table. "And I think he realizes that as well. But sometimes, it's still hard to move on. I'm going to proceed the way he needs us to. At least for now, and we will see. I won't let him put all the blame on me. But I also want to prove that I hear him and care about his feelings."

"You're a good man, Bryce. I'm proud."

"I'm a good man because you and Dad showed me how to be." I kissed Papa on the cheek and headed toward the door. "Now, wish me luck. I have a date to impress."

Driving to Connor's house, I went over my plans for the evening. The pressure of wanting it to be perfect was almost suffocating. I pulled over about a mile from my destination and shut off the car. I needed a moment to ground myself.

*Breathe. Everything will work out. Fate is on our side. We need to show Connor we are still the man he was in love with ten years ago and worth the second shot.*

My wolf pushed against my skin in the comforting way he did when I needed confidence.

Calmer, I restarted the car and finished my journey to Connor's.

As I walked up to his house, I realized he had purchased the place we always said we would own one day together. Part of me was sad that he had gone ahead and done so alone. Another part of me was hopeful that this was a sign that he had always known, even if subconsciously, I'd be back for him.

"Hey." Connor answered his door, ready to go, slipping right out into the night and locking up. "Where are we headed to tonight?"

“I thought we would grab dinner and see where the night takes us. I do have a few ideas if nothing spontaneous pops up though.” I opened the passenger side door for him and closed it once he was settled inside.

Getting into the driver’s seat and starting the car, I spared another glance at my date. “You look really nice tonight, Connor.”

“Thanks.” Connor sat with his hands in his lap, fingers fidgeting with the ring he wore on his right hand. My ring, a family heirloom I had given him in our senior year when I told him he held my heart.

“You still wear it.”

Connor looked up at me, his eyes wide. “Oh. Um, yeah. I \_\_\_”

“I’m glad.” I had hoped he still had it, but I never would have imagined he wore it still. The fact that my ring graced his finger sent tingles of satisfaction down my spine. I could only see this as a positive sign.

“You are?”

“I gave it to you and meant it when I said my heart was yours. It always was and always will be.”

“Oh.” Connor looked back down at the ring, and the silence grew until I turned on the radio to a low hum after starting the car.

A thick tension filled the air around us now and I wanted to vanquish it, so I decided corny jokes would have to do. “Why did the witch stay at the hotel?”

“Seriously?” Connor turned to me, but the upturn of his lips told me I was doing the right thing.

“Yup.”

“I don’t know. Why did she?”

“She heard it had great broom service.”

“You are such a dork.” Connor rolled his eyes, but the humor in his voice couldn’t be hidden.

“Come on, it’s a good one.”

“If you say so.”

“Like you could do better.”

“Oh, I can.”

“Prove it.”

“Fine.” Connor tilted his head the way he always had when thinking hard about something. Several moments later, he smiled. “How do witches write spells?”

“How?”

“In Cursive.”

Laughing, I shook my head. “You’re right. You are the king of corny jokes.”

Connor turned back to look forward in the car, but his smile was wide. “And proud of it.”

And I was proud I could still make him grin.

Soon, we were at our destination—El Sabor del Sol. I picked the authentic Mexican restaurant due to its focus on seafood. One of the first dates I had ever taken Connor on in high school was for seafood. We hadn’t gone here, and we had gotten sick, but the thought was still the same. I wanted to remind him of our past and then show him how great our future could be.

“I love it here.” Connor gestured around the large outdoor dining area. “I’ve only been here once before with Evelyn, but it was amazing. Thanks for thinking of it. Better than those fish tacos in high school.”

*Yes, he remembers.*

“I heard the food here won’t send us to the hospital, so I figured that was a win for a first date.” I scrolled through the menu. “I think I’m going to have the daily special.”

“That does look amazing. I think I am going to order that as well.”

Once we placed our orders with the waiter and received our margaritas, the energy around us relaxed and was like it used to be when we were younger. I was always able to feel energy, and I was thankful for that gift now since it helped me read the signals from my mate.

“I love the atmosphere. These palm trees and heating lamps... I bet it’s beautiful year-round.” Connor’s face shone with excitement, eyes bright and a wide smile stretching his lips. I had never seen something more beautiful.

“I’m glad you like it. I wanted to bring you somewhere special.” I sipped my drink to save me from speaking too much. Something about Connor always made me want to spill all my truths.

“Thank you, Bryce.” Connor reached out and held my hand. “It’s perfect.”

## CONNOR

“How was the date?” Evelyn sat down next to me on the porch swing, her travel mug in hand. “You were supposed to call me last night when you got home.”

“Sorry.” I took a sip of still-warm chai. “We spent several hours out here last night talking after dinner. When he headed home, I fell into bed with all my clothes still on and crashed. I’ll make sure to call after the next date.”

“Oh, so there will be a date two?” Evelyn gave me a gentle shove in the side. “Is Connor thinking Fate got something right here? Are you ready to get over the past?”

“Maybe.” I put my mug on the table and pulled my legs under me. “Yesterday was amazing, and I was reminded of all the good times we had together while realizing all the incredible moments we could have ahead of us.”

“But?”

“But,” I sighed, “I’m scared.”

“I know.” Evelyn wrapped her arm around my shoulders. “But I think you need to stay open to the possibilities here. I really do feel that you are on the right path.”

“I love you, girl.” I rested my head on her shoulder. “What would I do without you?”

“Go insane or live a boring life.”

“Most likely.”

“Love you, too, Connor.”

We sat there swinging for several minutes, the gentle motion grounding me, the perfect thing for a morning. Sadly, we were interrupted when Evelyn’s phone rang.

“Augh.” Evelyn moaned and held up the device so I could see the screen. “It’s my manager, and I’ve got to go. I’ll check in on you later tonight.”

Watching my best friend run down my steps and get into her car, I realized how stressed and worn out she looked. Her usually radiant skin lost its glow, and her voluminous hair lacked its normal luster. The next time I saw her, I really needed to ask her why she looked so ragged.

*What kind of friend am I that we only speak about my issues lately?*

Drinking the rest of my coffee, I walked into the house and refilled my mug. It was now time to start my writing for the day. I had a daily goal of five thousand words and figured it would be a full day of writing and self-edits. The good news was that the manuscript was almost complete. I thought by the end of this week, I should have the writing parts finished and just need to revise and edit my grammar before sending it off to the professional editors the publishers hired.

*Meow!*

Ren rubbed himself against my leg and walked to his treat cabinet. I would ignore him for most of the day, so I figured he deserved a little yummy goodie as a bribe to be a good boy for me while I wrote.

I brought some treats to my office and dropped them into his area. I had a little kitty den set up in the eastern corner of my office for him, complete with a toy laptop he could lay his head on and mimic me. Ever since I’d gotten that for him, he had limited the times he jumped onto my lap or onto the desk while I was in my writing zone. It was truly a lifesaving tip when I found it on my local author’s chatroom.



Sitting in my oversized desk chair and crossing my legs, I opened my laptop and pulled up the correct file, renaming it with the day's date before beginning to type. As the words flowed through my fingertips, I lost myself in the story. It was only after I'd finished for the day that I noticed how many messages I'd missed throughout the day.

*Bryce*

"How was the date?" My father sat at the kitchen table drinking his morning coffee while Papa made pancakes for us at the stove.

"Good. We went to El Sabor del Sol for dinner then stayed up talking outside his house most of the night." I poured some orange juice for all three of us.

"That sounds really promising." Papa turned his head and smiled. "When's date number two?"

"Next week." I took the plates out from the cabinet and placed them on the table. "I would have taken him out tonight, but he does have a book to finish writing, and I probably should get started on sorting out some sort of plan for my future."

"Says who?" Papa brought the pancake platter to the table and joined us. "You have worked hard training and winning for the last decade. Take a break."

"He's like me, dear." Father winked at me. "We need to be useful."

"Well then, I have a few projects if you need something to do." Papa pulled a note from his pocket. "Here is the list of things your father hasn't been able to get to lately due to work. We would appreciate it if you could get some of these checked off."

My father put down his fork and reached for the list. "But don't worry if you can't—"

"I can do this." I folded up the list and stuffed it in my back pocket. It was hard for my father to accept help, even if he needed it. I wasn't going to allow him to turn me down this

time. I needed the distraction of hard work anyway. “I’ll start after breakfast.”

“Thanks.” Papa smiled and took a bite of syrup-drenched pancake.

Pulling out my phone, I texted Connor my plans for the day and then finished my breakfast. Going by that list from Papa, I was going to have a busy few days coming up. This was a perfect way to pass the time until I could see Connor again.

By the afternoon, my parents had clean gutters and a mowed front and backyard, and I was beginning to build a new shelving unit for Papa’s prepper pantry.

“You don’t have to do that.” My father walked into the garage and handed me the level I was reaching for.

“It’s no trouble.” I was pleased to see that the shelf’s ledge was even. “You work hard at your job, and Papa has trouble doing some of these things himself. I’m able to do it, so why not? I’m happy to help wherever and whenever I can.”

“So.” Dad sat across from me, on a red cooler, and handed me an ice-cold water bottle. “Things between you and Connor are going smoothly so far?”

“Seems that way.” I peeked at my phone and saw that my messages were still unread. “He said he would have to dedicate several hours to writing and editing every weekday for the rest of the month in order to meet his deadline, so I don’t expect to hear from him much. But last night went well, and I have hope for the future.”

“That’s good.” Dad nodded and gulped his water. “I always liked that boy. I never understood why you didn’t beg him to wait for you or even to go with you.”

“I wanted to. I argued with myself over not doing so every day since the day I left Valleywood. But I thought he needed to stay here. He’d decided not to leave for college because his parents were sick and needed his help. I didn’t want to take him away from them. I was confused about the right thing to do.”

“You could have spoken with me and your papa. We do know a thing or two about being in love and having to make tough decisions.”

“Would it have changed things? I probably still would have followed my dreams.” Or I would have given up all my dreams of playing hockey and stayed here and been mated earlier. I would have known we were fated if I stayed just one extra month. What if I had talked to my parents about feeling conflicted, and they had told me to wait that extra time? Would it have mattered? I wanted to say it wouldn’t have, but maybe it would have.

“You seriously didn’t even suspect you two were mates?”

“Nope. Do you think I honestly could have left if I had?” It would have been nearly impossible for me to have done that. It was almost too hard as it was. “We didn’t turn eighteen until after I’d already left.” The Goddess didn’t give our type of shifter the ability to sense our mates until we reached the mature and legal age of consent. That way, there were no issues with the matings of minors. “If I had known, I’m unsure I would have left. At least not without him. So, I think it’s best that it happened as it did.”

“I understand that. It would have been impossible if I had left your papa after we had scented one another.”

“It was nearly impossible to say good night to him last night and leave his house. My wolf demanded I shift and sleep on his porch all night.”

“Connor wouldn’t have found that charming.”

“He would’ve called the police on me just to prove a point.”

“He’s good for you.” My father chuckled and finished his water.

“I know. I just hope I’m good for him, too.”

**CONNOR****Connor**

“**Y**ou remembered.” I stared at the scenic view, my memories taking me back to the last time the two of us stood here. “I haven’t been here again since that day.”

We had driven a little way out from Valleywood and found the space we used to escape to as teenagers. It was still very secluded from the public and still absolutely beautiful to look at. It was also the place where we had lost our virginity to each other our senior year, a few weeks before graduation and two months before our summer birthdays. “I’ve dreamt about that day many nights since.” Bryce leaned back on the picnic blanket next to me. “I should have never left after that.”

“You were pursuing your dreams, and I wouldn’t have let you give them up for me. I’ve been hard on you for leaving, but I was the one who told you to go. I could have begged you to stay, but you would have only resented me if I had.”

We were silent for a while after that. Nothing was to be said. I was right. If he had stayed, he would have always wondered what could have been with his hockey career. And I couldn’t have left to go off into the world with him, leaving my parents

here in Valleywood, alone and ailing. Perhaps it would have been different if they had never gotten sick. But they had, and I needed to stay home and help them heal. Even though they never did, I didn't regret making that choice. I would have regretted not getting those last few years with my parents.

I closed my eyes and appreciated the slight breeze that blew over my skin, bringing all the scents of nature around us. Relaxed and grounded in the moment, I needed this. To be with my mate in this place that had always been special to us. The week had been long and filled with the stress of meeting deadlines and making sure the book I was putting out was the best it could be. But then, all that faded away; it was just us here. Me and Bryce. And the beauty of our place.

“Wanna shift and go for a run in the woods over there? This area has always been safe for shifters.”

I opened my eyes and saw Bryce gesture toward the large trees located on the side of the road where we had parked. I noted that no one else was around “It still is. Let's do it.”

Standing up, we threw our things in the car and walked into the wooded area. I hadn't shifted into my wolf form for too long, and my beast was yipping in excitement for his turn to play with his mate.

*Remember, no claiming yet.*

I was close to being ready but not quite there yet. Hopefully, I would get over my hang-ups soon because I really wanted to be with my mate without the ghosts of the past haunting us.

Once we were far enough into the woods, we allowed the shift to take over. Where our human bodies stood, soon were two wolves, and I took in the captivating beauty that was my mate's beast. Larger than I, his dark-brown and gray fur was whole and healthy, his mesmerizing gaze the same as always. I loved him in all his forms, but my own loved this one best.

Surprising him with a quick nip of the ear, I ran away from Bryce's wolf and made my way deeper into the forest. I loved the thrill of the chase and had missed this game since he left.

My magic slowed down my perception of time, while my body kept up with the quick pace I had set. I could use that skill to take in nature's wonders: the bright green leaves on the branches, the creatures who dwelled here full time hiding from the predators they perceived us to be, and the solid brown earth beneath my paws. I loved it all. Every moment of a shift was something I treasured, and I pitied humans who would never experience the world as much as we could.

Suddenly, I was tackled from behind, and my mate rolled with me a few yards until we stopped, his body on top and mine wiggling beneath him.

*Stop it, mate, or my beast may get naughty thoughts.* Bryce's voice crooned in my ear as his wolf playfully nipped at my neck.

*Too late. It seems we both had dirty plans for this shift.*

I sent him the message through the mental link we always could somehow have. That should have told me how strong our bond was even before maturity, but I always figured it was shared between best friends from our ancestral pack.

*Shift.* Bryce growled, and our fur receded, our features returning to their human form. As we lay on the forest floor, there was no denying where the thoughts had gone for us both.

His bare cock brushed against my own hardness, and I groaned at the velvet of skin touching skin.

"Fuck me, alpha."

Bryce leaned off of me slightly, his brows creased. "Are you certain? We don't have to—"

I cut him off with a kiss. "I want to. Just don't claim me yet. I'm not ready for that. Soon, but not yet. But if you don't get that huge cock in my slick ass soon, I might scream."

Bryce captured my lips again, and our tongues whirled together as we rubbed our bodies against one another.

"You feel amazing." Bryce groaned into my neck, licking the spot that would one day hold his claiming mark. "Don't

worry, baby. No claiming tonight. But I'm going to make both of us feel so good you will be screaming. In pleasure."

Bryce reached down and grabbed my length, gliding up and down with a small twist at the top that he had found made me needier. We knew each other's bodies, yet this was also new. We were older and mature and had so much more we could explore about one another. I snaked my hand down and grabbed a handful of his ass.

Kissing and touching, I lost myself in the moment. I had missed this part of living. And now that I had it back, I couldn't ever imagine not having it again. I needed Bryce—now, later, always.

"I need you inside me, alpha." I was desperate to be filled by my mate. To connect to him in that way. I rubbed my body along his seductively, needing to be near him, to smell him, touch him, to be joined with him. "I need your knot."

"You will have it, my omega. Get on your knees." His voice came out deep, a sign his wolf was close to the surface.

I repositioned to present Bryce with my ass, my hole ready and slick for him. He explored my opening with his fingers, preparing me for his cock. I arched into the touch, wanting more, needing to be filled. Soon, my wishes came true as the blunt tip of his hardness breached my waiting hole. The moment he was fully in, I moaned, and he growled.

"I am home." Bryce nipped at the back of my neck, and my cock leaked. The dominance of the situation turned me into a needy omega. His hand wrapped around my length. "I have never been with another, Connor. Only you."

His words brought a tear to my eyes. "Only you, Bryce. Only ever you."

Moving in a remembered rhythm, our thrusts grew more frantic. My orgasm built. "I'm going to come."

"I'm going to make you mine," Bryce growled as his cum filled my channel.

My climax hit me, and I spilled onto the leaves beneath us. Coming down from our high, Bryce moved to the side and

pulled me deeper into his chest. I whispered my only thought to him as sleep claimed me. "I've always been yours."



**BRYCE**

“That smile looks good on you, Son.” After dinner, my father walked out into the backyard, snapping me out of my daydream.

This was the third time this week since our second date last weekend that I had gotten lost in my thoughts and had my father poking fun at me.

“I’m just happy.” I couldn’t help it. Things with Connor were going amazingly. Even when he was so caught up in his writing and editing that he missed hours’ worth of messages from me. At night, he would reply to each one, and I loved it.

“I’m glad to see it. I’m taking a drive to Pleasant Rain Night Market and grabbing some groceries for your papa for tomorrow’s dinner. Wanna come with?”

“It’s seven already? Man, I didn’t know it was that late. Sure, I’ll come with.” I finished my iced tea and followed him through the house and out to the car.

The ride out to the market was uneventful; my father and I listened to a selection of music from the ’80s and ’90s and discussed the bands that were still active today from back then. I was surprised to find that the parking lot for the market wasn’t as full as usual.

“Do you have a list from Papa of what he needs?” I opened my door and stepped out into the night, noticing all the shifters and supernaturals that were out shopping tonight. “There are a lot of people here for not having many cars.”

“Yeah, I noticed that lately. Oh well. Let’s get going on this list so we aren’t here all night.” I walked behind my father, aware of our surroundings. An odd energy hung in the air, like someone was watching me. I almost called Bruno and Hector.

“Hey, what are you doing here?”

*Speaking of my bodyguards.*

“Hey, guys.” I waved at the two alphas as they approached my father and me. “Doing some nighttime shopping?”

“Yeah.” Hector nodded, but I noticed he was searching the parking lot. “Why don’t we all do some late-night shopping together? We missed ya, buddy.”

“Why not? The more, the merrier. Here, we need these.” My father was great at picking up on cues, and he’d understand my bodyguards had a reason to stick around. My father handed Bruno the shopping list and walked off toward the first section we needed.

“Well, you heard him. Let’s get going.” I walked forward and let the two men box me in and watch my area. I didn’t expect this for my shopping trip, but I was glad they were here. The energy of the area was still off-putting.

“We had a strange feeling,” Bruno whispered. “Hector did a tarot pull, and it told us to follow our instincts. So, we used the tracking spell to see where you were. Once we got here, we saw a black mist in the parking lot that concerned us.”

“Yeah, I was uneasy. I’m glad you guys showed up.”

“I will do some research into the mist energy. I don’t understand what it’s doing. It’s like someone is watching you, Bryce. Has anything strange happened?” Hector grabbed items off the shelves as we made our way through the list.

“Nothing really besides an uncomfortable feeling of being watched. The possibility of danger lingering on the wind, but

nothing has occurred that made me think I had been targeted with ill will.” I recalled everything that happened in the last week and couldn’t find any instances where I’d been attacked physically or magically.

“And you haven’t received any threats in the mail? Nothing in your email or on your social media accounts.”

“No. Nothing.” I had checked my accounts that morning and found only a few messages from teammates and management asking me if I had considered what I would do next.

“Then, we will just be cautious and keep our feelers out for anything. The longer we are in the store, the weaker it becomes. If the mist is gone when we leave here, then I’ll follow you home to be sure before Bruno and I head back to the hotel and start digging into what this could be.” Hector grabbed a couple of items. “We could use some things while we are here.”

“How is the hotel?” I was still surprised they hadn’t moved to the resort yet. There was something strange about the hotel. I was unable to relax my spiritual guards when near it.

“It’s a place to sleep. We are okay. But Bruno and I have been contemplating making this stay longer than originally planned.”

“Really?” Valleywood would grab ahold of my friends. “Liking the area?”

“It’s better than where we have been. There is something about Valleywood that calls to Bruno and me. But nothing is set in stone yet. You’ll be one of the first to know if it is permanent for us.”

“I hope you do stay. Valleywood may have some things planned for you two.”

“Perhaps you are right.” Hector looked over at his partner, a longing look on his face. The two alphas were in love with one another but would never admit it. I secretly hoped Valleywood would work its magic and change that.

“All right.” My father put a hand on my shoulder. “I think we have everything Papa wanted. If everyone is ready, we can

pay for this and head out.”

Finishing up at the market took only a few more minutes, and we were once again out in the parking lot, no sign of the mist or dread.

“We’ll follow you home and then figure out what that was.” Bruno helped us load our bags into the car.

“Sounds good.” I shook my friends’ hands. “Thanks for coming and checking on me. I hope you love what you got there. You made some great choices.”

“I’m sure we will. Let’s get on the road. It’s going to be a long night of research.”

On the way home, I thought about what that mist could be and what it could mean. In the end, I was as clueless as before, but Bruno and Hector would figure it out.

## **Connor**

“I wish you were here.” Sitting on my favorite picnic blanket near my parents’ gravestones, I did my weekly ritual of telling them about my life. “You told me Bryce would be back, and you should be here to say ‘told you so.’ I wish you were here to tell me to get over myself and let him mate me already.”

I missed my parents so much since they passed a few years ago. When they got sick in my senior year of high school, we all thought they would recover eventually. But a few short years later, they were both put to rest at Shady Pines Cemetery. Those were some dark days of learning to live without not only the man I loved but without my family. Evelyn and I had grown closer during that time, and she had helped me learn to breathe again, to thrive, and not just live. Since then, my parents had heard everything about her and every other important factor in my life. Some part of me knew that though their physical bodies were no longer here to hold me, their spiritual energy was still around. I probably could have spoken

to them in my living room, but being near the graves became an important part of my memorial rituals.

I spoke aloud to them about the last couple of weeks and everything that had happened between Bryce and me—well, the PG versions of it all. I didn't need to share the other details with my parents. That would be weird.

“Bryce has been amazing. Our connection is far more powerful than anything our teenage selves had experienced. If you two held a connection like this, then I understand why you two faded away together.” I fingered the picture of my parents, taken on their wedding day. They looked handsome and happy. Their smiles, brilliant and wide, showed how special the moment was to them.

I wanted that moment with Bryce, but part of me was holding back still, and I had to figure out soon whether I would let go completely of the bond between us or give up the future we could share. It wouldn't be fair to tie Bryce to a mate who couldn't trust him.

“I wish there was a way to know that I could fully dedicate myself to our relationship and not be afraid of breaking once more.” A chill filled the air as I spoke my words.

*Caw. Caw.*

Above me, in one of the trees, perched two crows. I was always told that crows could be the connection to the spirit world, carrying important messages from those who have passed on. Their stare locked on mine and I let my energy flow through me. I was open to receive any message they may carry.

A hot shiver of energy radiated through me, filling my mind with images of Bryce and me together, laughing, cuddling, loving each other. I saw a future together filled with promise and purpose. I saw children running around our house and a furry family frolicking together in our special spot. My parents had sent me a message that they were still watching and I could trust Bryce with my heart again. I had my sign. Now it was time to claim my mate.

**BRYCE**

**Bryce**

“**W**hat did you think of the movie?” Connor grabbed my hand as we exited the car near the restaurant. We had driven here from the Movie Theater VWMC, where he had picked the newest release in an action-adventure trilogy as our date for the night. I wondered if he remembered my crush on the main character from high school. Knowing him, that was probably the reason he picked it.

“I thought the director made the right choice in casting. I heard that Kai Carroll was supposed to play the lead but had backed out at the last minute. I’m unsure if I could have believed him in this role.” I guided Connor across the street to the restaurant where we planned to have dinner.

“I don’t know about that.” Connor opened the door to Mama Vee’s and motioned for me to enter first. “I think he would have made a fantastic—”

“Don’t you dare say that?” I pointed my finger at him. “He definitely would not have been the right fit.”

“If you say so.”

Connor gave the host his name. After a moment, we were guided to our table and given water, bread, and butter while we waited for our waiter. This restaurant was new to me, and a few things had changed in Valleywood since I'd been gone.

“Good evening, gentlemen.” A college-aged man refilled the waters we had already drunk. “Have you decided what you will order tonight, or would you like to hear our specials?”

“Do you mind reviewing the specials? There are usually some amazing choices, and I don't want to miss out.” I closed my menu and placed it on the table.

The waiter, whose name tag read Trevor, smiled. “Tonight, we have spinach and cheese manicotti, with a side Caesar salad and vegetable minestrone soup. We also have a rib eye with candied sweet mashed potatoes and seasoned Brussels sprouts. I have tried both and can verify they are delicious. It depends on whether you are in the mood for meat or pasta.”

“I think I will try the manicotti, please.” Connor closed his menu and handed it to Trevor.

“And I will have the prime rib.” I gave my menu to our waiter as well. “And can we have a bottle of the Luna Del Lupo Merlot?”

“Certainly, sir. I will be right back with the glasses and wine.”

Once Trevor walked away, Connor grinned. “Are you planning to give me half of your prime rib?”

“Why, of course. Isn't that how we always did it?” I reached out for his hand. “Sharing is caring, after all.”

“I missed my dining buddy. No one else understands that sometimes you need to split your meal with your best buddies, so you don't need to order both options yourself.”

“I'm glad to have my best friend back.”

“Best friend, huh?” Connor chuckled. “Is that all I am?”

“I think we both know that you are so much more than that.” I squeezed his hand, my heartbeat increasing as my wolf

begged for our mate to understand how precious he was to us. “You are my everything.”

Once dinner was over and we were walking to my car, that familiar tingle of warning zinged up my spine, just as it did the other day with my father at the market.

“Do you feel that?” I whispered to Connor as I picked up my pace.

“The air’s a bit heavy. How I feel when I enter a place I shouldn’t be.” Connor pushed himself closer into my side, his steps quickly keeping up with mine. “I don’t like this.”

“Me neither.”

As we approached my parked car, a black vehicle pulled up and the passenger rolled down their window. A fraction of my anxiety eased when Hector’s face appeared.

“Hey. We got that same feeling again as the other day. Thought we would come follow you home since we’re still unsure of the cause behind the foreboding sense you may be in trouble.” Hector tilted his chin toward us. “Hey, Connor. Hope Bryce treated you to a nice dinner.”

“He did. Thanks.” Connor waved to my two friends and bodyguards. “Why don’t you two follow us to my house? Bryce is going to stay the night.”

I whipped my head up to look at him as I opened the car door for him. “I am?”

“You are.” Connor slipped into the passenger side and closed his door.

“You heard the man.” I nodded toward Hector and Bruno and got into my car.

The farther we drove from the restaurant, the lighter I felt. The dark mist I had noticed at the market and the restaurant parking lot didn’t follow our vehicles, so I let my guard down and thought about the rest of the night.

The night was only beginning.



## Connor

Bryce had been the most amazing boyfriend when we were teenagers, up until the moment he left. I had decided to cut all ties to make it easier on us both. But the man he had become far surpassed the goalposts that had been set a decade ago for what a boyfriend should be.

He allowed me the space and time I needed to spend time with my friends to get my writing and editing done but never guilted me into making him a bigger priority. I had a place in his life, as he did in mine. Each day, I came closer and closer to fully committing to our mating. And at dinner at Mama Vee's, I knew it was time. I was his fated mate, and it would be silly to put it off anymore. It was time to move on from the past and embrace what Bryce and I had, what we could have. He was my past but also my present and future. He was everything.

But then that strange occurrence with the gray mist and eerie chill happened, and I wanted nothing more than to cuddle up in my bed, safe and warm in my mate's arms, in our home. And that is what my house had slowly become as we dated these last few weeks: a home for us. He didn't slept over every night, and every moment he was gone, I felt a void. It was time for me to ask him to officially move in and become what we were always meant to be—a family.

“Should I ask the guys to stay outside the house and ensure no one followed us?” Bryce parked the car in my driveway and turned the engine off. “I still have no idea what that mist was. But I felt and saw it the other day when I was out with my father, making me wonder if it's targeting me.”

“And Hector did mention getting a feeling to come to check on you, so something must have triggered his senses on that. He has a tracking spell on you. The protection one alerts them if triggered by you being in some sort of danger.” I released my seat belt. “Instead of letting them sit outside, invite them

into our home for coffee. I would like to get to know your friends.”

“Our home?” Bryce’s eyes widened, but his lips slowly slid upward. “I think that is a great idea.”

“Great.” I leaned in and pecked his lips softly. “Let’s go get our guests some coffee and maybe cookies, chat a bit. Once we’re safe, and they go back to their hotel for the night, you can claim me as your mate and make this house, for real, our home.”

When I entered the house, I went straight to the kitchen to make a pot of coffee while Bryce told his friends to come in for a bit.

“Thanks for the invite, Connor.” Bruno sat down at the kitchen table, followed by Hector and Bryce who carried a deck of cards with him.

“I thought we could play a few hands for fun while these two embarrass me by telling you about all my misadventures in hockey.” Bryce slipped past me and kissed my cheek before joining his friends at the table.

“Oh. I love embarrassing Bryce.” Hector grinned wickedly. “Should we start with the time you drank too much Wolf’s Tooth gin and ran through the hotel naked on a dare?”

“Or the time that you let Gregory hypnotize you, and you spent the whole game only able to snarl at opponents and not speak?” Bruno winked. “Or the time—” Hector started laughing before getting to the story.

“Okay, I would have started slow and built up to those, but that’s fair.” Bryce shook his head. “At least there are no puck bunny stories to share with my mate. Just hilarious tales of drinking magically infused drinks so my shifter side could get a buzz and letting teammates’ boyfriends put me under spells.”

“True. You always said no to those who tried to tempt you.” Bruno glanced at me and smiled. “And I finally understand fully why you did. And I would have too.”

“He’s mine,” Bryce growled, laughter hidden within the sound.

“Relax, big guy.” Hector held up a hand. “We won’t attempt to step in there. Bruno and I have our own mate out there somewhere. We just need to meet him or her.”

“Oh.” I placed the pot of coffee down in the middle of the table and handed out the mugs so they could help themselves. “You two are together, then?”

“We are.” Hector grabbed Bruno’s hand. “It was obvious the moment we met on the job.”

“That was ten years ago.” Bruno scooped two spoonfuls of sugar into his cup. “But we also always felt we were fated for a trio. That there is an omega out there somewhere for us. Just haven’t met them yet.”

“Well, perhaps you will soon.” I put a bit of cream into my coffee. “I hear Valleywood has a pretty good record for getting fated mates together. Have you thought about sticking around for a while or visiting Vale Valley?”

“We have.” Hector took one of the oatmeal raisin cookies I had placed out on the table. “We are going to stick around here for now. At least until we figure out this mist thing. And then see where Fate takes us.”

“That sounds like a great plan.” Bryce stirred his coffee and took a sip. “I definitely recommend following Fate.”

After dinner at Mama Vee’s, the night hadn’t gone quite as planned, but hanging out with Bruno and Hector was a blast. Even Ren enjoyed meeting new shifters and getting some ear scratches. I would have to tell Evelyn how Ren was adoringly all over Bruno and Hector. What kind of friend would I be if I didn’t remind my best friend that my cat liked everyone but her?

Unfortunately, the late hour led to less of a mating and more of a cuddling night between Bryce and me. Sadly, he had to go to help his father in the morning, but we had plans for the following week. I wouldn’t let the chance to be claimed slip through my fingers again.

CONNOR

Connor

Bryce's hand slid down my back and cupped my ass, pulling me closer to his body as our kiss got deeper. Bryce's kisses had always stolen my breath and sanity, but the last couple of weeks had proven how much he could turn me into goo with a simple sweep of his tongue against mine.

It hadn't been in my plans to make out at 6 a.m. But honestly, I wouldn't have wanted it any other way. I had been aching for him since last night.

We had arranged to eat dinner at my house last night. When he came, I was in the shower, and he had to wait outside. Luckily, my porch kept him dry from the rain, but I felt bad I wasn't ready on time. I had mentioned that he needed to have a key to my house, and the next thing I knew, he had me straddling his hips on my couch while he explored my mouth with his own. I was surprised we didn't do more than make out last night, but we fell asleep before we could. The crazy schedules we had been keeping lately had taken their toll. But the tension was still pent up from that this morning, hence why my hard cock was already begging for release.

I moaned when his hardness grew beneath me, unable to keep myself from grinding upon it and rocking it in the cleft of my unclothed cheeks.

*Fuck that's amazing.*

“I want to be inside you.” Bryce groaned into my neck as he kissed the sensitive spot behind my ear. “I want to bury my cock in your slick hole and fill you with my cum.”

Fuck, it was hot when he told me the things he wanted to do to me.

“Then what are you waiting for?” I leaned in and nipped at his neck. “Claim me, alpha. Mate me and make me yours.”

Bryce lifted my chin, so I looked him in the eye. “Are you sure?”

I hadn't meant to say it, but the moment I did, I wanted it: “Yes. Claim me, Bryce. Make me yours forever. And I will make you mine.”

Bryce slid into me, my slick entrance making his way easy. My breath caught when he was fully inside. He stayed there for a moment, still waiting for me to adjust to him being there. Planting kisses along my neck and jaw, I moved my head to the side to grant him easier access. Then he started to move his hips in slow and steady thrusts.

Pulling completely out and inching himself back in, Bryce began a hypnotic dance I was easily caught up in. My hands explored his back and his toned ass cheeks, pushing him closer and deeper. The way I gripped him, my nails were for sure leaving marks on his skin, signs of my claiming him in passion. When my climax approached, I leaned into his neck and licked the spot of skin where I would leave my mark. As both of our cocks exploded in pleasure, I bit down on Bryce's shoulder, claiming him as my mate, and as his teeth broke the surface and we were flooded with images and emotions from one another, it was right to submit to his claim.

## **Bryce**

The moment Connor claimed me, I felt a completeness I had been searching for my entire adult life. I made my mark on his shoulder and a wave of emotion crashed into me, the mingling of my elation and his. I saw clips of his life, as I knew he was seeing mine, and then I caught a glimpse into the possible future. A gift from Fate for following her guidance, she allowed us a small taste of what was to come. What I saw had me tearing up in joy. My beautiful omega, belly round and full of my pup, while I played with two other pups in the forest that Connor and I loved so much. My real dreams for my life would be coming true. A family with my omega might not happen now, but one day. I kissed the skin I had bitten and soothed it. The wound was already stitching closed due to our shifter nature. With a feather-soft touch of his tongue on my mark, he sealed my wound and I shivered; pleasant chills shimmered through my body. If this was how it was to be claimed mates, I wondered how any of them ever left the house because it only made me want to stay in bed with my mate and do it all over again.

As we both came down from our joint release with me fully locked inside him, I rearranged our bodies on the bed so we could lie down more comfortably until my knot deflated. This was one of my favorite parts of sex, the closeness of the knotting. Connor had told me that he was on the birth control shot, so we weren't making a family yet, but a part of me imagined my seed filling him deep and finding its home, creating a pup or two for us to raise. I slid my hand down his flat stomach and promised myself that one day, if he would allow it, we would make that a reality.

“That was amazing.” Connor’s dozy voice broke me from my daydream of having babies with him.

“It was. Every time with you is.” I kissed his cheek. “But when we claimed each other and got that rush of emotion and visions, I swear it made my orgasm last even longer than usual.”

“I concur.” Connor lifted his head off the pillow and peered at the clock on the nightstand. “Do we need to be anywhere today?”

“Nowhere I can think of.” I licked the side of his neck. “As far as I am concerned, we don’t have to be anywhere all weekend. I vote we stay right here in bed the whole time.”

“That sounds like an excellent plan, mate.” Connor snuggled deeper into my body. “Let’s take a nap and then go for round two.”

“I like how you think.”

After a short nap, we went for round two, then three, and four. I think I lost count at ten. Mated life was definitely looking to be an amazing experience.

CONNOR

“Hey, sleepyhead. Do you want breakfast?” Bryce nibbled my neck, and I squirmed, happy little butterflies fluttering in my belly.

“If you keep doing that, it won’t be food I want for breakfast.” I arched my neck to allow him easier access.

“Well, I can definitely offer my body to you first.” Bryce licked my claiming mark. “I can’t seem to get enough of you, either.”

Turning my head, I met Bryce’s lips tenderly with mine—at least at first. As our mouths explored and remained locked in a passionate kiss, I shifted my body so that our chests were flush and our hardened cocks could glide against one another. Already naked, bare skin against bare skin, we were caught up in our desire.

It had been two days since our movie and dinner date, and we had hardly left the bed except to grab water and snacks from downstairs, feed Ren, and take a shower together. It was like my body craved him after being denied his cock for all this time. Our bodies knew one another’s rhythm and fit perfectly, moving together in an intimate dance. I lost track of how many orgasms I could have with my mate, everything blurring into one magical and horny weekend.

*If mating is like this, what will a full-blown heat be like?*



“Fuck, baby,” Bryce groaned into my mouth, as my hands explored the globes of his ass. “That feels good, but I want to be deep inside you.”

“Then do it.”

With a sexy growl that sent a shiver of anticipation through my body, Bryce shifted us so that I was on my back, legs spread, and he was on top. Sliding a finger along my waiting entrance, Bryce took my slick and covered his cock with it before thrusting into my hole. “I love how you’re ready for me, and I need to slide right in.”

“And I love how you fill me.” I rolled my hips, and he struck that special spot inside my omega channel that had me gasping for breath. “So fucking good.”

Soon we were reaching a mutual climax, my body still somehow able to produce cum even though I was half expecting to run out with how many times he had made me come during the weekend. Once the knot went down and he had finished cleaning us up, Bryce lay back in bed, spooning me, and gently kissed my neck. “I love you, Connor.”

Snuggling back into him and closing my eyes, sleep began to pull me under. “I love you too.”

## **Bryce**

It was Sunday night, and I didn’t want to leave Connor’s side, but I had to pack up my things and tell my parents I was okay and moving in with my mate. Detangling from Connor’s sleeping embrace, I kissed his forehead. “Hey, baby. I will go over to my parents for a bit, tell them the good news, and grab my bags. Do you want to come with me?”

“Do you think they will think I’m rude if I stay here and sleep?” Connor buried himself deeper in the little nest of pillows he had on the bed, and it made me want to crawl back

inside the bed and cuddle him for the rest of the night. Luckily, I could do that when I got back.

“I think they will understand.” I kissed his shoulder and stood up. As soon as I vacated the spot, Ren jumped up onto the bed and curled up next to Connor’s stomach. “Maybe we can go over there next weekend for dinner and celebrate our mating?”

“Mm-hmm.” Connor nodded without lifting his head up from its cushioned position. His hand lazily stroked the cat, who was now purring. “I’ll bake something for them. I have a tin of cookies in the pantry. Take them to your parents. The top layer is peanut butter, your papa’s favorite. And the bottom layer is a chocolate chip for your father.”

My heart melted at the idea that my mate remembered my parents’ favorite cookies after all these years, and I closed my eyes, saying a quick and quiet thank you to Fate for their gift of a mate.

“Okay, I’ll grab the tin before I leave. Call me if you need anything.” Walking toward the door, I remembered at the last minute that I might want to put clothes on first.

Connor let out a giggle. “I was wondering how long it would take you to remember clothes are needed for decency’s sake when going to visit your parents.”

“Ha.” I shook my head and grabbed my jeans from the chair in the corner where I had laid them the day before. “One day, you will do something, and I will laugh at you; just wait.”

“I hope you can wait a long time.” Connor rolled over and threw a wink at me. “I never forget to put on clothes before leaving the house.”

“No, but there will be something. And when the time comes, I’ll be waiting.”

“Whatever helps you deal with the embarrassment.”

Dressed, I walked to the door. “Love you. I’ll be back.”

“I know.” Connor’s lips tilted up, and his eyes crinkled at the corners. “Love you too, always.”

Closing the door, I finished the phrase we said when we were younger. “And forever.”

Driving over to my parents’ house, I tried to figure out the best way to tell them the good news. They probably already figured it out when I didn’t come home Friday night, but I would only get to drop this sort of news on them once, and I wanted to make it memorable. Too bad I sucked at figuring out things like that.

For all of my worrying on the ride over, though, my first words when I found my parents sitting at the kitchen table were simple. “Surprise, I’m mated.”

*I guess that will have to do.*

“We figured that when you didn’t show up for dinner yesterday.” My dad stood up and enveloped me in a tight hug. “That would be one of the only things that would make you miss Papa’s lasagna night.”

“Oh man, that’s right.” I gave my papa a hug and joined them at the table. “Do you have leftovers?”

“Of course.” Papa got up and grabbed three containers from the fridge. “One of these is for you right now if you want. And the other two are for you to take home and share with Connor.”

“Thanks, Papa.” I tapped the top of the cookie tin I had brought with me. These are from Connor. He was really tired but wanted me to bring these cookies for you. He made them especially for you two.”

“Oh, he’s the sweetest.” Papa put my plate in the microwave and sat back down, opening the cookie container. “Peanut butter?”

“And chocolate on the bottom layer.” I smiled at my father. “He remembered both of your favorites.”

“I always loved that kid.” My father snagged a cookie from the tin.

“And maybe we can both come over for family dinner next Friday?” I stood and grabbed a glass of water. “Maybe a little celebration of our mating, just the four of us?”

“That’s perfect.” Papa grabbed a second cookie. “Although I will miss you being here, I’m excited for you and need you to understand I expect at least one family dinner a month with all three of us.”

“I think we can do that,” I said. Grabbing my food from the microwave once it beeped, I sat down. “Perhaps even more often, but I need to discuss it with Connor first.”

“Of course you do.” My father patted my back. “Now, have you heard anything more about that strange mist from the market the other night?”

“Oh, I forgot to call you.” I swallowed my first bite of lasagna and sighed. “This is amazing, Papa.”

“Tell us what?” My father prodded.

“I saw it again Friday night while Connor and I were leaving Mama Vee’s. Bruno and Hector are investigating, but we don’t have any leads. It doesn’t seem to follow us, though, and, so far, there haven’t been any attempts to harm me. Just that foreboding.”

“Well, the protection spells you have on you would keep you from harm.” Papa closed the cookie tin and pushed it away. “I don’t like you so uncomfortable in your hometown.”

“I have faith in Bruno and Hector.” I finished my lasagna and water. “They will solve it soon or call in reinforcements if needed.”

“It’s probably a crazy fan looking for information on whether the rumors of your return to the ice are true.” Papa pointed to the newspaper beside my father’s arm on the table. “Every week, they print some new theory on what you are doing and when you will be back in the game. Either that or guessing you will take over your team manager’s job. All the other news must be boring because it’s about you or some other celebrity vacationing in Valleywood lately.”

“That’s good, though.” My father patted my papa’s hand. “It’s better than crime sprees and natural disaster warnings.”

“That’s true.” I stood and put my dishes in the sink. “I better get my stuff packed up and head back to Connor. Thanks for

dinner. I love you guys.”

“We love you too, Bryce.” My father stood and hugged me.

“Do you need any help?” Papa wrapped me in his arms and swayed back and forth like he always had since I was little.

“Nah. I got it.” I kissed Papa on the top of his head and let him go. “I will let Connor know about dinner next week. And that you loved his cookies.”

“Please do.” Papa went back to the sink and started cleaning the dishes.

My father walked upstairs with me to my childhood bedroom. “Let me know if you need any help. I’ll be catching up on my cop shows.”

“I will. Thanks.”

I entered my room as my father continued down the hall into his room. I didn’t have much to bring to Connor’s, so completing it shouldn’t have taken long. When I came to Valleywood, I had already gotten rid of most of my things from before. Traveling with the team, I didn’t collect a lot of belongings throughout the years. All of that was about to change.

I couldn’t wait.

**BRYCE**

“**B**ryce, we got an offer from the team.” My agent, Alex, woke me at 7 a.m. to deliver his news. “They wanted to ask if you would be interested in joining the team as an assistant coach. You wouldn’t be making as much in that position but would still be a part of the hockey world. The package they are offering is one of the best I’ve seen in years. You told me you don’t need the money, but if you want to stay in the field of hockey without playing any longer, this could be a great opportunity.”

“Alex, I told you before. I am staying in Valleywood. I am done chasing hockey stardom. I have new dreams now.”

“Do they have to do with a certain high school sweetheart you’ve rekindled things with?” Alex chuckled. “Of course they do. Maybe you can talk him into moving here with you.”

“But I want to be here.”

“Don’t you miss us?”

“Of course, I miss you and the team.”

*Bang.*

“Hold on.” I put the phone on mute and yelled, “You okay, babe? Do I need to come help you?”

“No.” Connor poked his head into the room, red-faced and shaky. “I accidentally knocked a picture off the wall out here.”

I'll clean it up. No worries. You can get back to whatever you were doing."

"Okay. Shout if you end up needing me after all."

"I will." Connor walked away, and I unmuted my call.

"Hey, Alex. I'm back. Listen, tell the team I'm not coming back. Tell anyone who asks that I'm not interested in any position that would take me out of Valleywood, okay? That's my final decision. My mate, my family, and my home are all here. I'm done being other places."

"Okay, man. I'll let them know. And I'll inform you if anything pops up near Valleywood, okay?"

"Sounds like a plan, thanks. Talk to you soon."

Disconnecting the call, I went to the hallway to help Connor, but he was already gone, and the mess was cleaned up. I needed to make sure he didn't cut himself though.

Making my way down to the kitchen, I found Connor looking at the food in the pantry.

"Thinking about what we should make for lunch?" I came up behind him and wrapped my arms around his waist, resting my chin on his shoulder. "I could take you out somewhere instead. Do you have a taste for something in particular?"

Connor leaned back into me. "Is there any way we can track down Firedancer Food Truck? I could really use some spicy BBQ right now."

"I'll jump online and see if I can track their location down. Their fans usually keep the page updated." I kissed his cheek and pulled away to look up the Facebook page that kept track of such information.

*Connor*

"Did you finish your manuscript? Connor?" Evelyn walked onto my porch, where I was sitting, enjoying my morning coffee. "The publishers called and wanted to know if it's ready for them."

“I thought we still had a few more days.” I put my coffee mug down and pulled my phone out of my pocket, checking my calendar for the date.

“We technically do.” Evelyn sat on the chair beside mine and sipped from her travel mug. “But if you have finished it, I can send it over. With the bullshit they’ve been pulling with the authors lately, I want everything to go smoothly. I figured this would ensure they wouldn’t find an excuse to fuck with you.”

“I am almost finished with my self-edits.” I picked my mug up and took a sip. “Let me finish my morning coffee, and then I’ll spend the rest of the day in my editing cave and send it tonight or early tomorrow at the latest.”

“Sounds like a plan.” Evelyn relaxed back in the chair. “Just give me a few minutes, and I will leave you to it.”

“No rush.” The dark circles under her eyes and the tense position of her shoulders clued me in that something was weighing heavy on her shoulders. “Is everything okay? You seem stressed. I mean, more than your normal level.”

Sighing, Evelyn turned her head and looked at me fully. “Honestly, Connor, I have been so incredibly tired lately. And everything at work seems to be crashing down. I no longer know if I am in the right job.”

“I thought you loved your job.” I always heard Evelyn say how happy she was to see her clients succeed. I assumed that meant she enjoyed it. “Do you think you might need a vacation away from it all? Maybe you should visit your brother in Florida for a month or two. Once I turn in my manuscript, the editors will have it for a while, so I shouldn’t need much help here. And I probably need us to do it over the phone. How about your other clients?”

“That’s the thing, Connor.” Evelyn closed her eyes and leaned her head back. “You are my only client. My manager has taken everyone’s cases and redistributed them. Since your contract states I am the only representative you will work with, they couldn’t take your case from me. So, they refused to give



me any others. They said I need to focus 100 percent on you and getting your obligations met.”

“They act like I have been an issue client that you need to hand-hold.”

“Don’t see it like that. The truth is all the other clients were giving issues, and you are the only one we didn’t need to hand-hold. And they wanted your case to look good to the higher-ups. But since I am the only agent you listed, they couldn’t. So, they limited my access to anyone else. And they have tried to make the office environment inhospitable for me. They wore perfumes they were aware would trigger my migraines, and they kept trying to plant rumors high on the chain of command that I refused more clients, not that they wouldn’t give them to me. It’s a he-said-and-she-said type of thing, and they are currently winning. Maybe you are right, and I need a break.”

“After hearing that, I say you definitely do.” I reached over and patted her hand. “Maybe we should discuss that you and I were going to a different agency or striking out independently. Unless these idiots make it right.”

“I don’t think the company itself is bad—just the new management they put in place. I am going to put in my leave request and see what happens there. Even while I’m out of town visiting my brother Donnie, I’ll be available to you, so they shouldn’t have an issue.”

“Sounds like a plan.”

“Now, tell me about your man and that mating mark I see on your neck.”

My face heated. “Things are good, I guess.”

“You guess? You let him claim you, so I hope it’s good.”

“It is.” I shook my head, trying to clear away the negative thoughts. It didn’t work, so I figured I would tell my best friend my fears. “Everything with Bryce has been amazing. He shows me he loves me with his actions, not only with words. He remembers and celebrates our past but strives to create new

memories together. He says he wants a future with me, here in Valleywood.”

“Then, why do I get the impression you are unsure about something?”

“How can you give up the life he had out in the world, making all that money, winning those championships, and being the focus of all those adoring fans? How can he abandon that life for this one? For plain old me?”

“First off, you are anything but plain or old.” Evelyn held up her fingers as she ticked off her points. “Second, I bet he isn’t giving that up for you. He is doing it because he wants something else more. He’s moving on from what he had for what he thinks is a better future. So, really, he is doing it for himself. And third, you really should talk to him about these fears and let him be the one to ease your mind. Don’t let it build up and become a huge mess. Communication is the key to relationships.”

“I know.” I stretched my neck and got up from the chair, Ren slinking out of his hiding spot and spooking Evelyn as he walked past her. He wasn’t a big Evelyn fan, especially since she kept forgetting the promised kitty treats. “I’m out of coffee. You can come in for more coffee and chat though.”

I didn’t want to rush Evelyn off, but I needed to get back to work, which meant getting back inside and upping my caffeine intake.

“No, I need to let you get that manuscript finished.” Evelyn stood and wrapped me in her arms. “Thank you for listening to me vent. And remember what I said. Don’t waste your time stressing. Talk to Bryce and let him prove you wrong.”

CONNOR

“Do you think your parents will truly like these desserts?” I held the container in my lap as Bryce drove us through his parents’ neighborhood. “Why am I so anxious? I’ve known your parents since we were kids, and we’ve had dinner together countless times before.

“But we’ve never met with them like this, not as adults or a mated pair.” Bryce turned onto the next street. “It is a bit different than all those other times, but you need not worry. They already loved you before, and they’ll love you even more now after seeing for themselves how happy I am with you. Everything will go wonderfully tonight. I swear it.”

“Okay.” I closed my eyes and rolled a round, raw, and rough amethyst crystal in my hand, trying to use its calming energy to ground me in the moment. I had charged this one under the new moon, intending to lessen my anxiety.

“Maybe a kiss from your loving alpha would help?”

I opened my eyes to see that Bryce had already parked the car, unbuckled his seat belt, and had leaned over the middle console into my space. I licked my lips, the anticipation of tasting his overcoming my fears. “Perhaps. Let’s give it a try. I’ve heard that the right alpha’s caress can do wonders for an omega’s nerves.”

The touch of his soft lips on mine refocused my energy on our connection. The flow of his love for me and the confidence he held in our relationship vibrated through our bond—his assurance that everything would be okay.

“Thank you,” I whispered as we broke away from the kiss. Our heads and lips were still close, no more than a breath apart. “I think that worked. I’m much calmer now.”

“Good.” Bryce kissed me quickly once more before leaning back and waving to someone past my head. “Because my parents are in their driveway waiting for us to get out of our car.”

“Bryce.” I smacked his shoulder and rushed to take off my seat belt, trying to avoid looking in the direction of his parents until I absolutely had to. Heat rushed to my face as embarrassment replaced the peace I had moments before. “What are they going to think? Instead of coming in and having dinner with them like respectable adults, we’re making out in our car. Oh Goddess, what if I have escalated things like I normally do? Your parents could have witnessed me trying to give you a hand job in their driveway.”

“I wouldn’t have let it get that far. Don’t fret, Connor. They’ll think we’re happily in love. Do you want to know how many times I’ve caught them making out in their own car? Too many.”

Getting out of the car, I was immediately wrapped up in the arms of Bryce’s parents. Each one took a turn and then passed me off to the other.

“Goddess, we missed you.” Papa squeezed me extra hard and kissed my cheek. They always insisted I call them Papa and Dad, so I made sure to address them as such.

“I missed you too.” I had tried to make myself reach out many times throughout the years but had chickened out each time, thinking they wouldn’t want to hear from me, or that hearing their voices would hurt too much, even though Bryce wasn’t with them.

“Well, now you are here with us.” Dad smiled and patted me on the back. “Exactly where you were always meant to be.”

*Bryce*

Standing in the driveway of my parents’ house with Connor under one arm and a tin full of desserts in the other, the world was mine. I had dreamt of having dinners with my parents and Connor by my side, as my mate, for years, and now it was finally happening.

“Well, let’s get you inside.” Papa rushed to the front door and held it open for us. “I made spinach and cheese manicotti for dinner, with some meatballs and garlic bread. We even threw together a quick chopped salad. I hope that’s okay with everyone.”

“That sounds absolutely amazing, Papa.” Connor looked at me, and I winked. I told my dad the dish was his favorite earlier in the week, when he was asking what we would like Papa to make for dinner.

“How have you been, Connor?” Papa walked through the house and headed directly to the beeping oven while the rest of us followed and sat at the kitchen table. When Connor made to get up and help get dinner served, Papa waved him off. “Don’t worry, dear. I like doing this. The kitchen is my domain, and, honestly, I prefer to do it myself, but if you want to pour everyone some tea, that would be a great help.”

“I can do that.” Connor filled the glasses with ice from my parents’ ice machine beside their fridge. “Everyone okay with iced tea?”

“That’s fine,” I said, and my father nodded.

“So, Connor, I hear you have a new book coming out soon?” Papa took the baked pasta dish from the oven and placed it on the stove. “I’ve read the previous books in the series and can’t wait to see how you resolved that last cliffhanger. Any sneak peeks?”

“You won’t have too long to wait, Papa.” Connor placed the glasses on the table. “But I can tell you, you won’t see the twist coming.”

As my parents and Connor discussed his books and what everyone had been up to in recent years, I sat back and watched.

I had dreamed of having my omega and my parents together again. I had envisioned starting holiday traditions and one day adding a new generation to carry them on. Now, I was seeing those fantasies coming closer to becoming a reality, and I wanted to savor each moment. Warmth filled me at the comfortable way my mate and parents spoke. This really was exactly where my omega belonged.

**BRYCE**

“I don’t know, Papa. He just seems off lately. Something is bothering him, but he won’t admit it.” I sat in my parents’ kitchen and ate my papa’s homemade chili and spaghetti.

“Well, I don’t mind you coming here and talking about it, but why aren’t you home with your mate and trying to work it out with him, then.” Papa raised his brow and tilted his head.

“Because he’s out with Evelyn tonight.” I placed my fork down and grabbed more parmesan cheese to put on top of the dish. “She’s flying out to her brother’s condo in Florida. They both wanted a best-friend-only day together and kicked me out.”

Chuckling, Papa handed me a bowl of chopped onions, aware I loved putting them on the very top of this dinner. “What have been the little clues that tell you not everything is right?”

“When I’m watching, he smiles and is happy. I’d never guess anything was amiss. But some nights, I’ll find him staring out into space in the living room, and his eyes are wet like he’s been crying. He tries to tell me he was watching a sappy commercial or reading some book, but there was no television on or books to be found.” I pushed my bowl away, no longer hungry. “Something is wrong, but he says he’s tired and emotional lately.”

“Emotional, huh?” Papa’s lips twisted in a sort of smile that left me baffled. “How long has this been happening?”

“A few weeks. Ever since I claimed him, really.” I didn’t like the next thought that popped up in my head. “Do you think he regrets bonding with me but is afraid to tell me?”

“No.” Papa shook his head and grabbed my hand. “I think he’ll tell you what is wrong very soon. He needs to work it out in his own mind first. But if he hasn’t in about another week, why don’t you talk to him? And perhaps talk to a doctor about him acting so emotional.”

“A doctor? Why?” Now I was going to worry about him being sick. Just great.

“Oh, I’ll let you figure that out.”

A thought occurred to me, but I quickly brushed it off. “If you are thinking he is pregnant, don’t. He is on the birth control shot, and he hasn’t gone into heat. Besides, we haven’t discussed having children yet.”

“Babies don’t always wait for their parents to plan them first.” Papa pushed my bowl back in front of me. “Eat up. You need the fuel.”

“Fine.” I was hungry again anyway. I couldn’t say no to Papa’s food for long. “But he’s not pregnant.”

“If you say so, dear. Just give him a week or two to speak with you. He’s a good man who loves you. Trust him to tell you.”

“Thank you, Papa.”

“Anytime, Bryce. Now. Eat up before it gets cold.”

*Ding.*

Looking down at my phone, I saw that Hector had texted me.

Hector: Tracked the black mist to a magic weaver out in Vegas. He was hired by some dude who was used to winning big by betting on your team. He was trying to spy on you to figure out if you would be coming back so he could place his



bets for the next championship. So, there was no real danger, simply annoying stalker vibes. I sent a scare-spirit to the man, and he shouldn't be bothering you again.

Me: K. Thanks. Lunch next week?

Hector: Should be good to go. I will call tomorrow.

Before I could put my phone down, another text came through. A warm rush of affection crashed through me when I saw it was from my mate.

Connor: Just saying I love you.

Me: Love you too. I hope you two are having a good night.

Connor: We are going to miss her.

Me: But she'll be back. Plus, weekly video chats, remember.

Connor: Oh yeah. Maybe I'll make them nightly.

Me: Whatever makes you smile. Have fun.

Connor: We will. Say hi to your parents. Have fun in your childhood bed.

Bryce: They said to tell you hi. Tell Evelyn to take care of you. Sweet dreams.

Connor: You too.

"Everything okay?" Papa gestured to the phone and raised a brow.

"Yeah." I nodded, put my phone down, and picked up my fork. "I think everything will be fine."

## **Connor**

"Have you talked to Bryce yet about the nightmares you've been having?" Evelyn sat on my couch and shoveled another spoonful of Peanut Butter Madness ice cream into her mouth. "I keep telling you that will help."

“I know you do.” I put down my spoonful of Banana Bonanza. “But I am scared. What if I’m right and he misses his old life? I heard him talking to Alex the other day, and he told him he was staying here, but he also said that he missed the team and being out on the ice.”

“And I am sure he does. But missing something doesn’t mean you wish you were still doing it. You even heard him say he is staying here in Valleywood. Why are you still freaking out that he will leave?”

“Because I’m stupid?”

“I agree with that only because you haven’t spoken with him yet.”

I threw a pillow at Evelyn, but she dodged it, and it hit the corner table. Ren was not amused and got up from his napping spot by the table and skulked to another room.

“Well, if you had spoken with him, you would have worked this all out already. Instead, you have ignored my advice for weeks and have made yourself so sick over it that instead of going out tonight before I leave for my three-month sabbatical to Florida, we are sitting in your living room bingeing on ice cream and cake.”

“Don’t forget the hot and spicy chips with guacamole we had earlier.”

“Oh, how could I forget that? If I didn’t know better, I would have said you were pregnant and getting cravings.”

“Nope. I made sure I got my shot on time. And besides. I haven’t had a heat with him yet. Just some hot sex every night since we mated.”

“Well, if you’re not better in a week or two, you are going to the doctor. Promise me that, okay?”

“Fine. I promise.” I took a bite of the chocolate cake roll and moaned. “Man, this is so good.”

“Yeah, definitely see a doctor in a week or two.” Evelyn gave me the side-eye, but I didn’t care; I loved my junk-food dinner.

“Let’s get back to this show. I haven’t seen an episode in forever.”

“Me neither.” Evelyn unpaused the television and turned the volume up. “I totally think those two characters need to hook up.”

“For sure.” I looked at the two men in uniform on the screen. Their characters had been flirting all seven seasons and still hadn’t hooked up. “I think this might be the year they give the fans what they want.”

“Maybe someone should give an offering to the god of entertainment or something. Sweeten the deal and get the deed done.”

“Good idea. I think I will recommend that on the fan forum later.”

I grabbed my phone and sent a quick text to Bryce and I got a reply. I missed him more than I thought I would.

“Bryce?” Evelyn leaned over to peek at my phone screen. “He’s a sweetheart. Make sure you talk to him soon.”

“I will.” I sighed and placed my phone down on the cushion next to me. “Put the show back on. I need to try to manifest them kissing.”

“I’ll let you go for now on the whole talk-to-Bryce thing. But if you haven’t spoken to him in two weeks, I will manifest that those two on-screen never become an actual thing.”

“You wouldn’t dare.”

“Wanna test me?”

“Fine. I’ll tell him.” I was pouting now, but Evelyn only did this because she was right. “Now, shut up and watch.”

*She’d better not keep these two away from each other,* I grumbled to myself.

*Then you’d better talk to our mate,* my wolf grumbled back.

Great, even my wolf was on her side.

CONNOR

“That’s it, baby.” Bryce lifted me off the bathroom floor and helped me into the bedroom. “Let’s get you dressed and to the hospital. You have been sick all week and are getting so weak you can hardly stand up without help.”

“Okay.” All the fight had left me by the time he found me collapsed that morning. Several days of vomiting everything I ate and intense stomach pains were enough for me to agree with him that a visit to the doctor was necessary.

“Sit here, and I’ll grab you a new shirt.” Bryce sat me on my bed and went to the closet to gather fresh clothes. I hadn’t been able to change out of my pajamas before I rushed to the bathroom this morning. I loved Bryce so much for taking care of me this last week. “Here you go, baby. Let’s get you changed.”

Bryce helped me change and put on my sneakers. Collecting our wallets and keys from the dresser, Bryce lifted me off the bed again and helped me walk downstairs and into the garage. I wasn’t sure what I would have done if he hadn’t been here.

As Bryce drove me to the hospital, I sat in the passenger seat and curled into a ball as much as the seat belt would allow. I got a little comfort from that position, and the stomach cramping that had been almost constant this morning eased enough for me to take a small nap.

“Come on, sweetheart.” Bryce kissed my forehead and laid a tender hand on my cheek. “We’re here. Let’s get you inside and checked out by a doctor.”

“Okay.” My weak voice would cause my mate even more worry, so I patted his cheek as he bent down before me. “It will be okay. This hospital has some of the best staff possible. Thank you for bringing me.”

“I love you. Let’s go.” Bryce lifted me out of the car and carried me through the main entrance, yelling to the attendant at the door. “I’ll be back to park the car. I need to get my mate in there.”

“We’ll park it.” Bruno appeared at our side and snatched Bryce’s car keys.

“What are you doing here?” Bryce blinked. “You know what? Never mind. Tell me later. I’m just glad to see you, man. Thanks.”

“Don’t mention it.” Hector waved us off as his gaze followed Bruno to the car. “I’ll come in with you if you need any other help. And that way, I can tell Bruno where we are to drop off your keys.”

“Sounds like a plan.” Bryce continued walking through the hospital entrance and up to the check-in desk. “My omega mate is sick. We need to see somebody now.”

“Okay, sir.” A polite young omega smiled up at us from behind the desk. “I can get you checked in. Can I have the patient’s name and date of birth?”

Bryce provided all the necessary information. I was getting weaker and weaker, and my head spun like I was on a ride at Valleyweird Theme Park. “Bryce, I think I’m about to—”

My world turned dark.

The next conscious moment I had was of lying in a hospital bed with Bryce sitting in a chair next to me and Bruno and Hector near the door, almost like they were standing guard.

“What happened?” My voice still sounded weak to my ears, but the moment I spoke, all three shifters took notice.

“Connor, I was so worried.” Bryce stood up and kissed my lips. “The doctors and nurses brought us straight back here after you fainted and started the test and an IV. They said you were dehydrated.”

“We’re gonna go tell the nurses you are awake.” Bruno headed out the door, Hector following. “Then we’ll head home. Call us when they have answers.”

“They stayed?” I guess I scared everyone, not just my mate.

“They were concerned.” Bryce grimaced. “But they also may have volunteered to stay so I would calm down. I sort of went crazy alpha at first. When no one could tell me what was wrong with you, I almost lost control of my shift. Hector was able to do a calming spell on me, and Bruno helped him hold me down when needed, so the nurses said they should stay until you were discharged.”

“I’d better bake those nurses and doctors some treats for dealing with my big scary alpha.” I chuckled. “Tell me you didn’t shift in the middle of the hospital.”

“I didn’t.” Bryce lowered his head and closed his eyes. “Well, not fully. My eyes did the shift, and my wolf growled when they stuck your arm for the IV.”

“Bryce.” I swatted my mate on the arm. “Bad wolfie.”

“Stop it.” My mate’s chuckle was a beautiful sound. “I have never been more scared.”

“Do they know anything yet?”

“No, only that you were dehydrated. They ran a lot of tests, though, and they said the doctor would come in once you were awake.”

*Knock. Knock.*

The doctor entered the examination room, and Bryce and I stopped speaking.

“Well, gentlemen, I think I have discovered what has been making Connor so ill lately, all the dizziness and headaches.” Doctor Prentis looked down at his tablet and nodded. “Congratulations. You are pregnant.”

“Excuse me?” I had to have heard him wrong. “Can you repeat that?”

“I understand that you may be shocked.” The doctor sat in front of me on the stool with wheels. “You did state you were given the shot at your last checkup, and your files show that as correct. You also said you didn’t have a heat. Is that correct?”

“Yes. How am I pregnant?”

“Well, I apologize for this, but I need to ask a few questions to be certain. Were you more sexually stimulated at all during the last month or so? At any time, did it feel like you had to be with each other all night?”

“Well, yes. But I figured that was what happened when you finally were with your fated mate for the first time. But I never went into a frenzy of heat like my omega friends had described to me. I never really have. I just have a mild season of feeling warmer and hornier. But nothing major. I honestly worried I was defective.”

“No, not at all. All omegas are different, and their heats and cycles are not one size fits all. I think you had what your body considers heat, but it was hard to recognize it as such because it was milder than you would expect. And although the pill has a high success rate, nothing is 100 percent.”

“Especially in Valleywood and when it has to do with fated mates.” Bryce smiled and shrugged. “That was what my papa was trying to tell me the other day. But I told him there was no way.”

“Well, there is a way.” Doctor Prentis pulled a machine closer to the table. “I brought the ultrasound into the room with me so we can take a look at the baby. Would you lean back on the table for me, please?”

Lying back and baring my belly, I waited for the doctor to set up the equipment. He smiled after several minutes with the probe on my slightly rounded stomach. “There you go. And, apparently, the surprises aren’t over for you. You will be meeting two new pups this Christmas.”

“Two?” Bryce’s eyes were wide as he stared at the screen, his hand enclosed in mine. “They are so tiny.”

“But exactly the right size I’d estimate based on your mating date.” Doctor Prentis pressed a couple of buttons and took some notes. “I will print out a few pictures for you and want you to follow up with an obstetrician in the next month. I have times available at my clinic if you need one; otherwise, tell the hospital where we need to send your files.”

“Thank you, Doctor.” I sat up, wiped the gel off my belly, and pulled my shirt down. “Is there anything else I should be doing? I’ve been so sick.”

“I am prescribing you some medicine that should help with the nausea. The IV should have helped with the dehydration. Try to keep at least fluids down throughout the day, and if you find that your symptoms are still this extreme, come in earlier than next month. If you are like most omegas I see, the sickness will pass in a month or two.”

“And you said the babies should arrive around Christmas?” Bryce stared at the ultrasound picture as he spoke, moisture gathering in the corner of his eye.

“Yes. Based on the type of wolf shifter you are and the packs you originate from, I estimate the gestational period will take that long, and you will get two adorable Christmas presents this year.”

“Thank you, Doctor.”

“Congratulations again, you two. Take care of yourself and stay stress-free as much as you can.”

“I’ll try. Thank you.”

As the doctor closed the door behind him, Bryce turned to me. “I think it’s time you tell me what’s been on your mind. Our babies need a healthy papa.”

“I will.” I accepted his assistance to get down from the table. “Let’s get home first. I need to cuddle you while I tell you my fears.”

“All right, my omega. Let’s get you home.”



**BRYCE**

“Connor, baby, why are you crying?” I wiped a tear from my mate’s eye and handed him a tissue to blow his nose. “These don’t look like happy tears, but we just discovered some amazing news. Tell me what’s wrong.”

“I didn’t mean for this to happen.” Connor closed his eyes, his voice shaky. “I took the shot, which was supposed to keep this from happening. I didn’t even realize I went into heat. I always had mild symptoms, something my pack all experiences. I thought with that, combined with the birth control shot, I wouldn’t end up with a surprise pregnancy. Yet, here we are.”

“Are you not happy? I’m sorry if I made you feel forced into a decision. You decide your next step. I figured we were mated and both wanted a family when we were younger, so even though this was unplanned so soon after our mating, I was excited. But you still have a choice if—”

“No.” Connor covered my mouth with his hand. “It’s not that. I wanted and loved these babies the moment I heard those quick little thumps on the machine. I hate that I trapped you into staying with me in Valleywood.”

“Connor, I thought we already covered this.” I rubbed my hands up and down his arms. “I came back to town for you but also because this is my home. I was done being away.”

“I guess I was afraid you’d be mad because this wasn’t discussed first.”

“Well, with that logic, you could also be mad at me. After all, it takes two to have a baby, or in this case, two of them. I didn’t raise the question of having kids either, not as adults. So, it was also on me to question if the birth control shot was enough protection against the possibility. But let me ask you, are you happy with the outcome?”

“I am.”

“And so am I.” I kissed Connor and helped him stand up. “Why don’t I run you a warm bubble bath and make dinner? Then we can get nice and comfy for the night?”

“That sounds amazing.”

“Then let’s make it the plan.”

After a nice, warm bubble bath and some spaghetti, chili, and a heaping of cheese, my omega’s comfort food, we made a den of pillows and blankets on the floor of our living room and sheets to create a fort effect. We may have been grown men, but we never outgrew the need for these moments. I wondered, if more adults embraced pillow nests and blanket forts when overwhelmed with life, would they be able to handle them much better in the moment? Knowing that later they could relax in a safe area, they may be able to make it through tough situations easier. Plus, our wolves loved it.

“I was never going to leave you this time.” I held Connor in my arms. The smile on my mate’s face when he saw the fort had made all the effort worth it.

“My heart believed you when you told me that. But my anxiety and fear of abandonment kept poking at me. Telling me you were one step away from the door.” Connor burrowed into my chest. “I’m sorry for not trusting you and our bond enough.”

“It’s okay.” I kissed the top of his head and rubbed circles on his still-flat belly. “But I need you to promise to be open about your fears. I don’t care if I must soothe them a hundred times a day; the worry is not good for you or our babies. Can you

promise to communicate more freely when something worries you?”

“I’ll try.” Connor’s voice was low and quavering.

“Are you okay, babe?” I lifted his chin with my pointer finger to see into his face. “Is something wrong still?”

“No.” Connor leaned in and kissed my nose. “But I am super tired. Can we take a nap down here? It’s safe and warm, and my wolf urges me to rest.”

“We can nap. Close your eyes and dream of our little pups. I can’t wait to meet two little mini-yous.”

“I think they might take after you.” Connor grinned and laid his head on my chest, closing his eyes. “But maybe we will have one like each of us. That would be sweet.”

“I love you, Connor. Always.”

“I love you, Bryce. Forever.”

## **Connor**

The words on the screen blurred as some tears rose in my eyes. I couldn’t believe the words I was reading.

*According to credible sources, hockey star Bryce Maxwell will return to the sport as an assistant coach for his team. While the world will miss seeing his expertise on the ice, we would like to congratulate him on this new opportunity and can’t wait to see him help bring the team home with another championship next year.*

“Honey, I’m home. They didn’t have your favorite flavor of ice cream, Chocolate Chip Ecstasy, but this Choco-Chip Explosion one looked similar. I hope you like it.” Bryce walked into the living room, immediately put down the grocery bags, and came to squat by my side. “Is everything okay? Is it the babies? Should I call the doctor? Please, talk to me. What’s wrong?”

“Here.” I handed him my phone and buried my face into the arm of the couch. Ren jumped up and rubbed his little body against me, sensing my distress and wanting to offer me calming affection. “Did you take a new job?”

“What job?” Bryce scrolled through the article and swore. “I need to call Alex and have him fix this.”

I sniffled and tried to hide farther into the couch. Ren headbutted my elbow, trying to get me to let him into my hiding space.

“Baby?” Bryce pried my face away from the cushion and sat beside me. Ren jumped off the couch, but I caught him staring at Bryce. *Shit. I hope this isn't an Evelyn situation all over again.*

“What?” I was being silly, and now I wanted to hide my face from my mate. “Can we just forget about this? I'm being dumb and hormonal.”

“No, we are going to talk about this so it doesn't fester and so you know there are no reasons for you to worry. Remember how we talked the other night about how I wasn't leaving? I still mean that. I don't know who wrote this article or where they got their intel, but they are mistaken. I told Alex I would not leave Valleywood for any position and that he needed to inform the team and turn down the contracts. Please say you believe me. I thought we were over this.”

“I'm sorry I let it get to me.” I hiccupped and wiped my nose. “I blame the pregnancy hormones. I should have asked you first. Part of me understood it had to be false news and that you wouldn't do that to me. But I couldn't control the tears, so I figured I'd ask you instead of assuming it wasn't true.”

“I wish you didn't even have to ask, but I agree. It might be the pregnancy making it harder for you. One day, you'll trust me enough that you will laugh at the weird headlines paparazzi can come up with. I can be patient until then.” Bryce leaned in and kissed me gently. “Now, let's go clean your face. You have a whole carton of ice cream to devour.”

“You can share with me.” Sharing with me looked more like him getting a spoonful or two before I devoured the whole carton. I swore it was the babies taking over my body. They wanted to eat it all.

“Don’t worry, sweets. I got my own.”

“Weren’t you going to call Alex and straighten this out?”

“Not right now. I sent him a text. I have more important things to do right now.”

“Oh yeah, what’s that?” I grabbed my ice cream and spoon from Bryce and dug in.

“I gotta sit with my mate and eat my ice cream before he eats it all.” He dug into his own carton of the yummy dessert.

“Jerk.” I punched my mate’s arm, but I was sure my laughter betrayed me. My mate had me feeling better already.

*Good alphas make their omegas smile.*

I couldn’t agree with my wolf more. We had the best alpha.

**BRYCE**

“So, today was interesting.” I sat on the oversized beige couch, Connor laid his head on my lap, and Ren curled up next to us. Our plans for the night were to hang out all evening in the living room and watch reruns of reality TV shows. “Guess who I saw at the grocery store tonight when I went to grab our snacks?”

“Who? Was it someone famous?” Connor’s tongue reached out and swiped the lingering bit of chocolate from the corner of his lips. I wouldn’t tell him how adorable I found it since pregnancy hormones had left him noticeably more self-conscious whenever anyone brought up his eating.

“I really wouldn’t bat an eye over someone famous, considering I’m technically famous in sports.”

“I guess.” Connor shrugged. “I forget that sometimes.”

“Anyway. I saw Hector and Bruno. They were buying some frozen pizzas.”

“What? They’re still in town? Then, why haven’t they stopped by to say hi? That’s incredibly rude.” Connor’s lips pursed in a cute pout I was dying to kiss. But I needed to defend my friends before my mate went out to find them and torture them for slighting him.

“I think they’ve been a bit wrapped up in things.” I leaned down and gave in to the temptation, pecking the soft lips of my mate. “They’ve been trying to secure jobs with a security agency in Valleywood. I think they said it was Synder Protective Services. So far, they haven’t had luck, and their savings will run out soon. They took a leave of absence but want to quit their current positions and move here permanently. They need a new reliable source of income.”

“That would be amazing if they could move to Valleywood.”

“I agree. If I thought I needed the security, I’d hire them myself. But it’s been super chill out here. It’s almost like everyone forgot me.”

“They didn’t forget you.” Connor sat up and tucked his legs under himself. From the way, he was bowing his head and fidgeting his fingers, my gut instinct told me he was about to confess something. “I kind of asked my friend Sierra to put a protection spell on us and the house so that no crazy fans would harm us and the paparazzi wouldn’t take unsolicited pictures of our family. She said we might need to keep refreshing it monthly due to the corruption in Valleywood and the chaos it has on magic here, but it should keep us safe enough we won’t need daily security. I had a protection spell on myself anyway, in case a reader turned into a stalker. Sometimes there’s a thin line between biggest fan and biggest hater. If anyone wanted to find me with negative intentions, they couldn’t. Adding you and our pups wasn’t an issue.”

“I do wish you had told me about it sooner, but it seems a harmless enough spell, so that’s fine.” I grabbed and pulled him onto my lap. “That would explain why no one ever asks for my autograph while I’m out.”

“I’m sorry. Do you want it off of you?” Connor reached for his phone on the cushion next to us, but I pushed it farther away.

“Nah. This has been nice.” I kissed his nose and loved the smushed face he made when I did so. “At least now I know they didn’t forget me altogether. I was still hoping to find

some work in Valleywood or nearby. Maybe a coach position or something.”

“I did hear a rumor.”

“You did?”

“Yeah. I heard Valleywood was possibly gaining a hockey team. And someone is thinking of asking a recently retired hometown hockey star about putting it together.”

“Did you really?”

“I did. I wouldn’t be surprised if you hear something from Alex in a couple of months.”

“Are you sure you didn’t have someone work some magic for this?” I eyed my mate suspiciously. This sounded too good to be true.

“I did not.” Connor leaned in and kissed my nose. “I am really good at gathering the city’s gossip.”

“There are a few other things you are really good at.” I captured his lips with mine and forgot what we had been talking about, what we were watching, or really anything else that wasn’t my mate and what his mouth tasted like.

## **Connor**

“I guess it was the hormones messing with me after the mating and getting pregnant so quickly. But ever since I got further along in the pregnancy, I haven’t been as insecure or anxious about our relationship.” I propped my cell phone on my mug of tea next to my laptop while Evelyn and I had our weekly video chat. I had to finish these edits tonight, so I had my laptop open to my manuscript to make a few fixes as we talked.

“That’s great.” Evelyn took a sip of margarita and leaned back in her lounge. “Bryce has done nothing but prove his love and dedication to you and those babies, so, if you were



still unsure, I would give you the number for my counselor. She has been a huge help to me lately. Even though you seemed more confident and secure lately, I can text it to you if you still want it.”

“I probably will want it. Send it to me after we hang up, and I’ll see if my insurance covers it.”

“You got it.” Evelyn scribbled something on a piece of paper in front of her. “Just made me a note about it. Now, am I missing out on anything else there in Valleywood?”

“Not really.” I searched my mind for anything of importance that may have occurred in the week since our last chat. “I think we’re all caught up with me and Valleywood. So, tell me about you and how things are going there. Do you think you will be back anytime soon?”

“Things are boring here, but that may be what I needed.” Evelyn rolled her eyes. “I think I’ll be staying here a little while longer though. My brother seems to like having me here, and I don’t miss my job there. I actually quit over the phone this week when they warned me I needed to return to town or lose my job. Of course, now they call me twice a day and beg me to rethink my choices. It makes me sure I did the right thing. I have a little nest egg I can use, but my brother has a small bar out here he would like me to help run for a bit while he works out a few issues in his personal life. The career change won’t be permanent, but it may be a nice change of pace.”

“Yeah. I can see that being a good thing for a while. Is everything okay with your brother? Do you guys need help?”

“Oh no. We are okay. He’s having alpha issues. I hope this time will give him a new perspective, and the alpha will disappear.”

“Okay, well, call us if you need help or your brother does. We’re here for you.”

“I appreciate that. Thanks.”

Evelyn and I stayed on for a few more minutes and discussed what a tool her brother’s alpha boyfriend was. I

agreed that it would be best if the guy left. But that was something only her brother could decide for himself. When our video chat was over, I went to find my own alpha. Hearing about what a loser they were dealing with made me realize what a catch I had. I thought it was time to show him my appreciation again, naked. But when I found him, he was napping in the middle of our large bed, with Ren snoring on his chest and Bryce's hand buried in his fur. I guess it's time for a nap instead.

**BRYCE**

“Hey, baby.” I found Connor in the small bedroom next to ours, which we were turning into the nursery. He had properly washed some of the tiny onesies we had purchased last week, so he was folding them. “How are you feeling?”

“Pretty good today.” Connor looked up from his task and smiled. “I wanted to make sure everything was put away.”

“We still have quite a bit of time for that.”

“I know. But it seems to be moving so fast, and if I don’t get to it now while it is fresh on my mind, I will forget about it, and then we won’t be ready when the time actually comes.”

“I can understand that.” I came farther into the room and knelt by his side. He was sitting on the overstuffed rocking chair we had bought for nighttime feedings. It had become one of his favorite spots to sit and think lately. Along with Ren, who was often found curled up near the crib. “Do you want any help?”

“I’m almost done. But thanks.” Connor leaned over and kissed me.

“I thought we could head up to our spot today and shift. The doctor said you shouldn’t in your third trimester, so this might be one of your last chances to let your wolf out. What do you

say?" I rubbed a hand over his growing belly, filled with the familiar euphoria of sensing our babies were in there.

"That actually sounds amazing. My wolf has been whining all day to get one last run, so the time is perfect. Let me finish up this one last pile, and we can leave. Maybe you can pack a small bag of snacks and water for us. I think shifting will make me hungry, and I'm not up to hunting for lunch. I'd rather eat in my human form today."

"Okay." I stood and walked toward the door. "I'll pack a picnic spread for us. See you in a few minutes."

It only took around fifteen minutes to finish our tasks and get to the car. I made sure to include a picnic blanket with our lunch basket and grabbed a few drinks from the fridge. Once we were ready, we were on our way.

Connor's whole body radiated excitement, his smile the brightest I'd seen in a while. "I can't wait for the breeze to blow through my fur as we run. I'll not be able to shift for a bit after this time, so I plan to savor every moment of it."

"I'm glad I thought of it." I held his hand while we drove out to the woods.

There was no one else in the area, which was how I preferred it. Having the view to ourselves always made it extra special.

"Let's shift first and then have lunch. The run will make me hungry, so I'd rather eat after than before." Connor stretched out his legs once he exited the car. "I'm shocked there aren't more people out here today. It's a beautiful afternoon."

"It is. They may be at the park instead." I closed the car door and wrapped my arms around my mate from behind. "Let's walk to the tree line and strip. My wolf is itching to get out."

"Mine too." Connor turned his head and kissed me. "Let's go."

We were soon bare and ready to free our wolves. Letting the shift take over, my body and features changed into animal

form. Connor was doing the same. Soon, our two wolves were sniffing and playfully nipping at one another.

Connor dashed off into the forest with a loud yip, instigating a chase by my wolf. Using my sharpened senses, I searched for my mate through the trees. His scent blowing in the wind, I followed it deeper into the wooded area, making note of the times it shifted into a new direction and doubling back toward places we had already been. Eventually, he would get tired enough and allow me to catch him. I was content in letting him enjoy outwitting me for a bit.

After a while, I took the opportunity to catch up and tag him. I would usually have pounced on him, but I feared hurting our pups. Turning, he nuzzled me and licked my snout. My mate joined me on the forest floor, and we took a few moments to cuddle in our animal form.

## **Connor**

I never meant to fall asleep and shift on the forest floor, but we did. Luckily, a friendly little cub came investigating the two sleeping wolves in his territory. Unsure where his parents were, we cautiously got up and headed toward our clothing. We dressed and walked to our car to grab our food and blanket.

“Let’s spread it out over there.” Bryce gestured toward the clearing to the left of the parking lot.

“That’s perfect.”

Bryce had prepared a generous spread of luncheon treats: all the fixings for hearty sandwiches or delicious salads, a few types of cookies I had made the last couple of days, some fruits and cheeses, and, of course, water—a lot of water.

“Just because I was dehydrated that one time doesn’t mean you need to bring a whole case with us wherever we go.”

“That is exactly what that means.” Bryce handed me a bottle of ice-cold water and grinned. “I must ensure you and our babies are well cared for.”

“We are.” I placed a hand gently on his scruffy cheek. “Are you taking care of yourself? You haven’t shaved in a few days, and your sleep schedule has been slightly off. I found you assembling a crib at three in the morning the other day. That seems like an odd time to be working with a screwdriver.”

“It is.” Bryce took my hand from his face and kissed the palm, keeping hold of it afterward. “I kept dreaming of the babies coming and not having anything ready for them.”

“We do have a couple of months left, you know.”

“We do. But if I didn’t do it right then, I would most likely keep forgetting and then bring the children home to a barren nursery.”

“And the new facial hair?” I lifted my chin toward his face. “Not that it’s not incredibly sexy, but you’ve always been pretty diligent about being clean-shaven each morning.”

“That is more like trying new things than letting myself go. I decided to switch it up. You like it?”

“I do.” I leaned in and kissed my mate, intending it only to be a quick peck, but somehow ending up in his lap and our food forgotten.

After getting lost in exploring his mouth, I was startled by a family of black bears that came tumbling out of the forest. Two adults and three cubs walked to a car located a few spots down from our own before shifting into their human shapes. I waved when I recognized them as my old neighbors who’d moved into a bigger house a few years back. When the tiniest cub giggled, I realized I was still straddling my alpha’s lap. I quickly climbed off and shrugged to the parents, who joined in on the laughter.

“Don’t worry,” the alpha bear shouted. “They always walk in on me and their papa cuddling.”

“You two enjoy your picnic alone.” The omega bear waved. “It looks like you will be meeting your own wee ones soon.”

Congratulations.”

“Thanks.” Bryce beamed, his pride radiating off him.

“We can’t wait.” I watched the three kids play in the dirt while their parents took out their clothes and prepared their car seats.

Once they were settled, they took off, and Bryce and I had the area to ourselves once more. Bryce looked at our unfinished plates. “Should we finish eating here or pack it up and head home?”

After a long yawn, I put some of the food back into containers. “Although I would love to stay and enjoy the fresh air. I’m afraid I might fall asleep again.”

“Or get busted making out again?”

“That too.”

We’d packed up our picnic and put everything into our car within minutes. Bryce forced me to wait there while he did one extra lap around the area to ensure we didn’t leave any traces of our presence. What we brought to an area should be taken with us instead of being left behind for others to find and deal with.

“All ready?” Bryce jumped in the car and fastened his seat belt. “We got everything.”

“Yeah. I’m ready to head home and cuddle with my alpha.”

“That’s definitely something we can do.” Bryce leaned over and kissed me before starting the car. “Why don’t you nap while I drive?”

Closing my eyes, I followed my alpha’s suggestion.





## EPILOGUE

### CONNOR

“Babe, did we get enough water and canned food for the blizzard coming? The news is calling it a bad one, and I don’t want to be left without the things we need.” Bryce poked his head into the pantry, and I heard him counting the cases of water we bought last week in preparation for the upcoming storm. I would have helped him, but I had a bit more urgent situation on my hands. I was currently counting the time between my contractions.

*Shit. They are getting closer now.*

“Sweetie, I think you will have to put prepping to the side for now.” I clutched my stomach as another contraction ripped through my back and belly. “I think it’s time we head to Valleywood General.”

A loud clatter followed my announcement before the wide-eyed face of my mate backed out of the pantry door.

“Did you say we must head to the hospital?” Bryce dropped to his knees and examined my stomach. “When did the contractions start? Why didn’t you tell me?”

“Because you would act the way you are acting right now.” I breathed out through another wave of cramping. “Can we move on from these questions and get me into the car? I don’t want to have these babies in the middle of my kitchen.”

“Yes. Sorry.” Bryce rose from the floor and helped me to stand. “We already have your bag in the car, so we should be ready to leave. Am I missing anything?”

“Nope. We’re all good to get there.” I bent over as another rolling pain came through. “Can we hurry? They seem to be getting closer and stronger.”

Bryce helped me move through the kitchen and into the garage. After opening the car door so I could slip in, he went back to the door to lock up the house.

“Do you think they will have a VIP suite available even though we aren’t due yet?” Talking was getting harder to maintain as the contractions got harsher.

“I am sure that they will.” Bryce drove down the street but kept a hand on my belly. “And even if they don’t, their normal suites are perfectly acceptable. I only booked for us a VIP suite because they looked awesome. This is our first pregnancy, and frankly, because I could.”

Now that the cramping was too close together for any relief between contractions, I stayed quiet for the rest of the ride. Bryce was right. Any room at the hospital would be nice, but I really loved how the VIP suites looked when we took our tour a few months back.

*I really would love one with a view of Lake Eerie.*

The rest of the drive, our arrival to the hospital, checking in, and getting sent to a room all blurred for me. My world was focused on one thing, managing this pain on my own until I could get one of the nice doctors to give me the good stuff. As I rushed through the process in a tunnel-visioned daze, I was confident Bryce had my back and wouldn’t let me walk into a wall or get sent to the wrong section of the hospital. And when the good doctors set me up in a beautiful VIP suite overlooking the lake, I had proof my mate had listened to me all those nights I babbled on about which suite I liked best and had a hand in which room we got into. Now, I needed a spinal epidural so I could get some rest before these pups arrived.

“Hello, Connor. My name is Doctor Ava Norn, and I will be assisting in your delivery tonight.” A woman with black hair and bright-blue eyes approached my bed. “I understand you would like some pain meds. I need to check first to see how far you have progressed. And I am familiar with your ancestral pack of wolf shifters. From what I understand, you have been blessed with an omega line on your lower abdomen, so that is how the children can come into the world. That will be very similar to a human having a C-section, I would assume, only with quicker healing, and it begins to open itself as the babies get ready to be birthed.”

“That’s how my parents explained it to me when I reached puberty.” I breathed in deeply and tried to ground myself. Different types of shifters, even families within the same breed, would have unique heats, pregnancies, and childbirth, much like how we vary in how we can tell who our fated mates are. Bryce and I were from the same ancestral pack, so we scented each other after reaching adulthood, and I had an omega line.

*Hopefully, I will only have to wait a few more minutes to experience sweet relief.*

“Well, let’s have a look.” Doctor Norn lifted my shirt and examined the opening that allowed me to give birth as an omega. “Okay, baby A is a bit excited to meet his papa outside. We won’t have time to prepare the spinal for you. This baby wants out now. I can already see his head starting to break through.”

“You should have driven faster,” I growled at Bryce, who stood at my side wide-eyed and holding my hand. “Next time, you’d better floor it, mister.”

“Hey, that’s good. You’re already talking about a next time.” Doctor Norn chuckled. “Usually, the birthing parent is screaming about never being touched again, and their partner had better be happy with an only child.”

“Nope.” I breathed deeply again and tried to focus on the spot right above the doctor’s head. “I would like to build our own little hockey team.”

“Nothing wrong with that.” Doctor Norn smiled. “But let’s get these two safely into the world first, and then you guys can try for that team in another six to eight weeks, okay?”

The next twenty minutes flew by in a blur of nurses and doctors, grunts and screams, and the sweet first cries of our beautiful sons. It was only after we were all cleaned up, the nurses and doctors out of the room, and Bryce sitting on the edge of the bed holding one twin while I had the other that I could pause and fully appreciate the moment.

“So...” Bryce kissed Twin B on the forehead. “Which names should we go with?” We had a long list but hadn’t selected which names to call the twins yet. I had told Bryce I would know once I held the babies in my arms, and I was right. The moment the babies were laid in my arms and the room was silent, they came to me like whispers on the wind. “Owain and Aeron.”

“Perfect.” Bryce leaned over and kissed Aeron’s head like he had baby Owain a minute earlier. “Welcome to the world, Owain and Aeron. Daddy and Papa love you.”

## **Bryce**

“I didn’t realize how much you could love someone until I mated Connor, and we had Owain and Aeron. Papa, I understand you and Dad so much more now.” I grabbed a cup of coffee while my parents sat in the sitting area of the VIP birthing suite. Connor was taking a nap after the exhausting birth process, but luckily, the suite had a separate room where guests could congregate without disturbing the birthing parent’s resting time. This one even had a small kitchenette where I could make a quick snack and brew coffee or tea. I sat across from my father and sipped the delicious caffeine.

“I remember that rush of unconditional and immeasurable love.” Papa stared at Aeron’s face as my newborn son looked around, observing this new room for the first time. “It was

pretty overwhelming, I admit. Beautiful but all-encompassing.”

“And it deepens and expands the moment you hold your grandchildren for the first time.” My father smiled down at Owain. “These babies are very curious and observant for newborns. I don’t recall you being so aware on the day you were born.”

“I’ve heard from fellow shifter friends who have had children that it seems the newest generation is born with more magic ability and innate knowledge. They mentioned their babies were born able to do things newborns usually weren’t capable of, like holding their heads up, recognizing faces immediately after the first meeting, and rolling over. Some were born with so much magic, their parents had to bind them for a few years so they didn’t accidentally cause humans to freak out or unintentionally set a fire with their minds when having a temper tantrum.” I shivered at the idea of a newborn or even a toddler holding that much power over energy.

“I can tell these two have quite a bit of magic-weaving ability in them.” Papa made a scrunched-up funny face at my son. “We’ll need to keep an eye on how much, but I don’t see them setting things aflame. They might just be intuitive.”

“If we are lucky. I remember when cousin Katie started fires all over her house during her naps. Aunt Marie and Uncle Cliff had to put a binding spell on her until she reached maturity and could handle the full extent of her powers.” I chuckled and finished my coffee, standing so I could make another cup. “Would either of you like some coffee or water? We have a couple of things here in the fridge. Hector and Bruno dropped off some groceries for Connor and me.”

“We’re fine.” My father leaned back on the couch and held my son to his chest. “Your papa and I can watch these two for an hour or so. Why don’t you go in there and rest with Connor? I’m sure he wouldn’t mind you sneaking into that hospital bed and cuddling with him after what he went through. We aren’t going anywhere, and, if you want the kids closer to you, let us know, and we will bring them in.”

“But you two need rest.” Papa smiled at me. “The next couple of days, weeks, and months will be full of learning a new routine, getting little sleep, and forgetting your own needs unless someone comes over and forces you to remember. Take the hour or so we can give you now to rest and share some time alone with your mate.”

“Thanks.” I set my mug down by the sink and kissed my parents on their cheeks, brushing a few curly strands of hair off each of my sons’ foreheads. “I’ll be back soon.”

Walking into the area where my mate slept, I tried to be as quiet as possible.

“Are the boys okay?” Connor’s whisper made me realize I wasn’t stealthy enough.

“Yeah. My parents are watching them for a bit.” I squeezed myself onto the edge of his bed and pulled him closer into my body. “They thought it would be a good time, while the babies slept, for me to come cuddle with my omega.”

“Your parents are wise men.” Connor snuggled into my embrace, and I kissed the back of his head.

“Thank you for making all my dreams come true, Connor. I love you.”

“All of your dreams? I didn’t make you into a hockey star.”

“No, but you gave me your trust, love, and our little family. Those are the dreams that truly count.”

“I love you, Bryce. Always.”

“I love you, Connor. Forever.”

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## MEET KATY MANZ

**K**aty Manz has always dreamed of being a romance writer. She wants to bring the stories created in her mind to a world of readers who would fall in love with her characters as much as she has. Keep looking for more books in this series and future series to come.

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