



A Baby for the Bear (Wylde Brothers 1)

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Category: Romance, Horror

Description: February “Ary” Felina, an ocelot shifter, decided getting drunk on her Dirty Thirty birthday was a bad idea. But at the end of the night, she was in Charlie Wylde’s bed, the intimidating alpha bear shifter in the town of Sweet Water. But then the unthinkable happened. The contraception broke during their wild, passionate night, and Ary found herself knocked up by the possessive, growly shifter.

When Charlie saw Ary for the first time, he instantly wanted her. The bear in him needed to mark and claim her until everyone knew she belonged to him. And so he made that happen—took her to his home and claimed every part of her in the raw, animalistic way of his kind. She might’ve thought this was a one-off night of pleasure... but she was wrong. He wasn’t letting her go, especially not now that she carried his baby.

Reader note: This story was previously published as Bared for Her Bear. It has been re-edited and revised.

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“I think you should do it, Ary.”

February “Ary” Felina looked over at Melissa and rolled her eyes. “Of course you do. It isn’t like it’ll be you that’s putting yourself out there for rejection.” Ary took a long swallow of her Sex on the Beach and glared at Melissa and Candace.

“Why do you think you’ll get rejected?” Candace asked right before she sucked her piña colada through the bright-pink straw.

“Because that asshole Frank told her she wasn’t any good, which, I’ll add, I would have been happy to kick him in the balls for that one.” Melissa didn’t mince her words, and Ary loved that about her. “Besides, what do you expect from a jackal shifter? Jackals are always assholes if you ask me. You remember Chuck the Big Old Fuck?”

How could any of them forget? Usually, Melissa only dated wolf shifters, but she’d given Chuck, the douchebag, a chance, which only ended up in him sleeping with her cousin behind her back at her sister’s wedding.

It was true though. Ary stayed in the verbally abusive relationship with Frank—the jackass jackal, according to Melissa—for a year too long. Everything started out great, but of course nothing in her life could go the way she wanted it.

First, there had been the subtle hints she should watch her portions at dinner, and then it escalated to Frank “jokingly” calling her plain and homely in front of his friends.

So what if she was Plain Jane all the way? She loved her body and looks, and the person she spent her life with would love them as well. That she had no doubt about.

Maybe she should have just stayed with her own kind, or even with a human. They were weaker than even her, a female shifter, and tended to find being with shifters some kind of kinky oddity.

But to be honest, male ocelot shifters were too clingy and submissive for her liking. February had always wanted a guy who could take control, but apparently she looked in the wrong place where jackals were concerned.

This was her thirtieth birthday, after all, and Ary had grown comfortable with the way she looked. She loved every aspect of herself, and it was a damn shame the jackal fucking shifter hadn't seen the beauty in that.

So, she called it quits with Frank, especially when he continued to make comments about her looks in front of his buddies, who laughed like they were high on nitrous oxide. She'd broken up with him a week ago, and now she was ready to put his sorry ass behind her and move on.

She might have the self-confidence now, but that didn't mean she still wasn't a woman who worried about rejection from a guy for putting herself out there.

"It isn't even about Frank, guys." And it wasn't, really, but the looks her two wolf shifter best friends gave her told February they didn't fully believe her. "It's true. Anyway, you can't tell me you don't have a moment of hesitation when confronting a man. In fact, I know you two like to be sniffed at and approached like you're some kind of prize." Both looked at each other, and Ary had her answer without them having to say a word. "Yeah, that's what I thought."

They both shrugged, and Melissa leaned forward. "Okay, change of subject then.

What else are you going to do to celebrate the big three-oh, Ary?”

Oh, Lord.

“Can’t we just sit here and enjoy our tropical drinks without you going all sex-crazed?”

Melissa grinned in a purely wolfish way and shook her head. Ary loved these girls like they were her sisters, but sometimes she wanted to wring their necks, especially Melissa. Ary had known them since high school, and when the three of them stood in the cafeteria that first day of freshman year, each of them looking scared shitless, they found a friendship like no other that very moment.

It was hard enough living in a world where some humans could shift into animals, but tack on the fact that she couldn’t find a decent man, and well, that just made it even more frustrating. She was getting older too, and February would be lying if she said she didn’t look into the future and see herself with a wonderful husband and a handful of children.

“Hell no, we can’t just sit here and drink these frilly-ass drinks. You’re thirty years old now, and let’s all be honest and admit you’re not getting any younger.” Ary glared at Melissa and noticed Candace sitting smartly quieter to her right.

“I’d like to remind you that you’re the same age, bitch.”

Melissa grinned and leaned back in her chair. She gestured for the waiter to bring them another round, which February objected to.

“Melissa, I do have to drive home tonight.”

“Not if I can help it. My goal is to get you in the car with a hot—and safe—male.”

She looked around the bar and tapped her perfectly red painted nail on her chin.
“Although we are in Sweet Water, so that might be harder than it sounds.”

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“If you actually think we will find someone here, you’re insane,” Candace said right as their waiter brought them another round of drinks. Ary didn’t miss how the coyote shifter winked at Candace, or the blush that spread across her much quieter friend’s face.

“Why don’t you harass Candace? It looks like she’s more likely to get laid by that coyote shifter than I am of even finding a guy tonight.”

“February, why don’t you just hook up with a human?” Candace asked.

Melissa made an exaggerated noise, and they both looked at her. She looked between the two of them with feigned wide eyes. “What?”

“Why did you make that noise?”

Melissa shrugged and scanned the bar. “Who the hell wants a human to fuck?”

Ary wasn’t shocked by her friend’s words. That was just how Melissa was.

“All I’m saying is if you want to kick thirty in the ass and celebrate like the awesome fucking cat you are, you need to find one hell of a shifter.”

“There isn’t anything wrong with being with a human,” Candace said but quickly drank her colada when they stared at her.

Melissa scoffed. “Yeah, right. The few humans I’ve fucked have been pussies. They didn’t even compare to the alpha-ness I require in my men.” She looked at Ary then

Candace. “It’s true. If you want a male to really bruise your uterus, you need to go for a bear shifter.” She started fanning herself and leaned back in her chair.

“God, Melissa. Do you have to be so damn vulgar?” Ary asked but couldn’t help smiling.

Melissa shrugged and lifted her gaze to something behind Ary. “Now that right fucking there is what I’m talking about.”

Ary turned around and felt her mouth part at the men who walked through the door. Big, muscular, and all-around badass described them to perfection. Males moved out of their way, and the females all but dropped their panties and grabbed their ankles.

“I would so let those Wylde boys fuck me into next Sunday.”

“God, Melissa,” Candace said, but February was too transfixed on the bear shifters.

February, along with every other breathing female in the town of Sweet Water, knew who the Wylde brothers were. The oversized, dominating alpha bear shifters who didn’t take shit from anyone, got into far too many fights, and slept with the majority of the women in town were a force to be reckoned with.

The three bears made their way to the bar, and here was February still staring like one of the other horny females who surrounded them. In fact, a horde of them seemed to charge forward like a damn herd of cows. When she finally forced herself to look away, it was to see Melissa’s smirk and the wary expression Candace wore. She looked between the two of them.

“What?” February grabbed her drink, sucked it back, and gestured to the waiter for another while coughing from the alcohol going down the wrong pipe.

“I think you should go over there and take one of those hunky bears home.”

“Are you insane?” Their waiter dropped off another drink in front of her, but before she could say her thanks, he was facing Candace and flirting heavily with her.

Melissa tossed her curly black hair over her shoulder and glanced at the shifters in question. “I can assure you I am totally sane.” She ran her tongue along her bottom lip, and February groaned aloud. She knew that look, and it was one everyone should be afraid of.

“Don’t even think about it.”

Melissa scowled over at her, but that expression soon morphed into one of wicked intent.

“I said no.”

Melissa may have not said anything, but February knew her well enough to know she was concocting something.

“Listen. You’re here, it’s your birthday, and we were just talking about finding a kick-ass male.” She pointed over to where Ary knew the bears to be. “What better way to celebrate and send a big ol’ ‘fuck you’ to the jackass than to hook up with one of those big boys?”

February was shaking her head before Melissa even finished talking. “No.” She looked over at Candace for a little moral support, but it seemed their timid and quiet little strawberry-blonde-haired friend was getting cozy with the coyote.

“Give me one good reason why not, Ary.” Melissa threw back her shot and wheezed. Good. Serves her right.

“I can rattle off three.”

Melissa leaned back, crossed her arms over her chest, and stared at her, clearly waiting for her to name them.

“First of all, they look like they’d tear a female up in bed.”

“So? That just means they can fuck good and hard, and believe me, I’ve heard the filthy and ridiculously arousing desires of the female population where they are concerned.” Melissa wagged her eyebrows. Yeah, they all had heard the rumors, but that wasn’t the point.

“Secondly, I am so not even in the same league as them.”

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A dark mask covered Melissa's face. "You cut that shit out right now and stop being a bitch. You know damn well you're hot as fuck."

"It isn't even about that, Melissa. I have fine self-confidence." And she did, but February knew when men were out of her league. Besides, she knew damn well she couldn't handle even one of them. They were just too big, too muscular, and looked like they would do some serious damage to her vagina, but in a seriously good way. "I don't really need a one-night stand, and you and I know that is what it would be." Not that she had never had one before, but that had been so long ago and was not really something she wanted to try again. She was a grown-ass woman now.

In reality, she wanted something stable and meaningful now that she was older. Looking over her shoulder and training her eyes on Charlie, the oldest Wylde brother, she felt her panties become impossibly wet. How desperate and pathetic was she that just looking at all that tanned, hard, bulging, and lickable flesh encased in a plain white tee and faded denims could have her so needy?

"Girl, you can't lie and say you don't want that, especially when I can smell how hot they make you."

Ary felt her face flame with heat at Melissa's words. She turned back around quickly and chugged the rest of her drink. Already, she was feeling the effects of the alcohol zipping through her bloodstream. It was a welcome feeling and one she didn't want to have end just yet despite her earlier disapproval of more drinks.

"Can I get another?" She held her glass up to their waiter, who was still flirting with Candace. "Yo." The coyote turned and offered her an apologetic smile. "Can I get

something stronger, please?”

“Sure thing.” He grabbed her empty glass, asked Candace and Melissa if they wanted anything else, and went back to the bar.

“Looks like someone is getting laid tonight.” Melissa slapped Candace on the back in a congratulatory manner. If Ary wasn’t already sexually frustrated, annoyed with herself and Melissa, she would have joined in on the friendly banter. As it was, she was uncomfortably aroused and looking to get drunk, although mixing booze when she was turned-on might not have been the best idea. The coyote waiter, named Chad, came back with three shots of Crown.

“When I said something stronger, I don’t know if I meant straight-up whiskey.” Ary picked up a glass. She didn’t need to bring it to her nose to smell how potent it was.

“These are courtesy of the gentlemen at the bar.” A scowl was on Chad’s face as he set Candace’s shot in front of her. The three of them turned around to see all three Wylde brothers looking at them.

The men watched them with the same stoic expressions. Their appearances were similar, but they each had their own subtle differences. Ary, as well as pretty much every resident in Sweet Water, knew about the bears. Bram, the youngest of the Wylde brothers at thirty-three, had a faux-hawk going on with his black hair. His skin was tanned, just like the other two, from working out in the sun, and his light-blue eyes added to the striking combination.

Ford, the middle Wylde brother, was thirty-five. He had the same striking blue eyes as Bram and dark-brown hair that was shaved close to his head. The oldest brother, and the one who was staring directly at February, was Charlie. At forty, he wore his age damn well. He had the lightest coloring of hair, and the dirty-blond strands were a haphazard mess around his head. They were all built the same: at least six foot three

inches of powerful muscle.

She knew bear shifters were one of the biggest around, in all aspects, but having them this close to her made her feel wholly feminine. All she could think about was why Charlie seemed interested in her, when there was a swarm of half-naked females practically in his lap and vying for his attention.

“Holy fucking shit.”

Ary snapped her attention back to Melissa. Her friend stared at the men with wide eyes before schooling her features and popping her breasts out.

“Ary, you need to get with Charlie, like yesterday. That boy is eye-fucking you like crazy. And I’ll tell you what.” She fluffed her hair out and stood. “I call dibs on Bram.”

“Melissa, don’t push her,” Candace said, but only half-assed, because her attention was surprisingly not on the Wylde brothers, but instead on Chad. Melissa scoffed and ignored Candace. She started making her way past the table, and Ary looked at Candace.

She knew she shared the same stunned expression as her friend. When Melissa walked by her, she reached out and grabbed her arm, stopping Melissa. The wolf looked down at her with one eyebrow cocked in question. “What?”

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“You can’t be serious.”

Melissa cocked her other perfectly plucked eyebrow, so now both were dark arches.

“What do you plan on doing?”

“Uh, go over there and thank them for the drinks, which, I might add, is the polite thing to do.” Instantly, February felt like a huge bitch. “Then I’m going to invite Bram back to my place.” She wagged her brows, and February rolled her eyes.

“Just sit back down, Melissa.” Candace spoke up. “Those bears are far more animal than man, and too much for even you to handle.” For a moment, no one said anything, and the steady beat of music surrounded them, but then Melissa started laughing.

“You guys are such wimps. I’m getting me some tonight, and it’s going to be with a Wylde bear.” She pulled out of Ary’s grasp and sauntered over to Bram. February felt her face heat at the blatant sexuality that poured from Melissa. She was used to this behavior from her friend, but now she was sucking her into her craziness. There was no denying she was attracted to Charlie Wylde, but this certainly wasn’t the way she wanted to go about it.

Turning back around and grabbing her shot, she downed it and let the burn travel straight down her throat and to her stomach.

She was halfway to the point of being drunk already, but it wasn’t nearly enough, not when she knew Melissa had some of the biggest balls around and something up her

sleeve concerning the bears.

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Melissa stayed by the bar for a good ten minutes, and as much as Ary didn't want to check to see what she was doing, she found herself doing exactly that. In that short amount of time, she managed to throw back another two shots, accompanied by the worried looks cast her way from Candace.

"It's my birthday," was all she said and tossed back one more. She would need to be good and trashed tonight, especially when Melissa brought over the bears, which Ary knew was bound to happen soon.

"I didn't say anything." Candace looked over her shoulder again at Melissa, but Ary didn't miss the way her eyes strayed to the coyote waiter. The silent flirting between the two was cute, but maybe that was just because her previous buzz had turned into full-blown intoxicated giddiness.

"Just go over there." Ary smiled widely, feeling the pleasure of her alcohol-induced happiness. Candace cast an unsure expression, and Ary waved her off. "I'll be fine. Besides, Melissa will no doubt be back soon, and you don't need to be subjected to her antics." No doubt, their friend would be in she-wolf stalking mode. Candace mouthed, Thank you, and scurried off. Someone should at least be excited about picking up a guy, not counting Melissa, since she was always excited about meeting a guy.

Hell, Melissa had enough of that for the whole damn bar. As Ary sat there and let the alcohol do its magic, she felt her worries, unease, and overall uncomfortable feeling that surrounded her wash away. Her eyes strayed to the dance floor, and she watched the crush of bodies move sexually and hypnotically against each other.

Shifty's was a shifter-owned bar, but it didn't discriminate against humans. All beings were welcome to enjoy the wild, animal-like fun that could be had. Most of the time, humans didn't really come to Shifty's—well, not if they actually knew what type of bar it was. There was always the occasional human who passed through their small town and stopped for a drink, but the locals tended to stay away.

Rightly so too. Shifters tended to let their animals out more when alcohol and raw sexuality were involved, and that combination was always going down at an animal bar. The hair on the back of Ary's neck stood up, and she knew she was being watched. She pushed the long fall of her blonde hair over her shoulder but refused to look at Charlie. She still couldn't grasp why a man like that wanted an ocelot shifter like her.

Maybe Frank did do a number on her and she buried it so deep she thought she was fine. How many times had she looked in the mirror and wondered what any man saw in her? How many times had she criticized her flat blonde hair, dull blue eyes, and overall curviness? Had Frank's hurtful words really made her believe that she was less than what she actually was? Sitting up straighter, she realized the truth. Why should she let herself feel like she wasn't worth another man's time?

Glancing at Candace, she was glad her friend was putting herself out there. She was the quietest one of their trio, and if she could go after what she wanted, why couldn't Ary? Looking over her shoulder, she saw Charlie still watching her. He brought his beer bottle to his lips and took a long drink while never breaking eye contact. His position was relaxed as he leaned against the bar with one arm resting on the counter.

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Melissa was laying it on thick with Bram, and Ford was making out with some barfly between them. Could she actually go after one of the Wylde brothers?

And why not? Do it, girl. Show Frank and yourself that you are something special and desirable.

Determination settled inside her, and she stood. Was she really going to have a one-night stand after she said she never would again? She stared at Charlie, and he cocked one dark brow. God, he was so freaking gorgeous that her inner question was already answered as she made her way toward him. He looked unaffected by her approach, but then again, maybe he knew this would be the outcome.

He certainly had the arrogance and assurance to think that way. The music was loud and angry-sounding, and it seemed she got more than one nasty glare from the female population the closer she got to Charlie. He hadn't moved from his spot and just continued to drink his beer and watch her. When she was just a few feet from him, she inhaled deeply. The act caused her to get a concentrated scent of his cologne and natural scent.

It was a mixture of something rugged and wild, spicy and woodsy. To be honest, it had to be the most arousing aroma she had ever come in contact with, or maybe that was just her hormones talking. Melissa's seductive giggling told Ary that her friend was on the fast track to getting exactly what she wanted, but she doubted she had to try very hard. Melissa was gorgeous and svelte, and by the look Bram had given her, there was no doubt the bear wanted to roll around in the sheets with a wolf.

February should say something, she knew this, but being so close to a man like

Charlie Wylde had her tongue in knots. Her heart was a frantic, pounding mess, and her whole body felt like it was on fire. Could he see her nipples through her too-thin top? They felt hard enough to cut glass with. Could he smell her arousal? She was certainly wet enough that the moisture pooled in her panties, and the tingling in her clit made her think of his big, hard—

No, she wouldn't go there, not when she felt as though she'd combust as it was.

With slow, methodical movements, he set the bottle down and took a step forward. He towered over a foot above her, and she craned her neck back. She thought she was aroused before, but holy damn did his presence make every cell in her body light up. As if he didn't turn her on enough, watching him close his eyes and inhale deeply sent her over the edge.

A gush of moisture rushed out of her pussy, and she clenched her thighs together. When he opened his eyes, the blueness of them speared right into her and had her knees nearly buckling. His pupils dilated, and there was no doubt in her mind that he could smell her pussy and knew what his presence did to her.

As he leaned toward her, Ary forced herself to keep her place and not moan from his nearness. She didn't care about the sneers the other women were giving her, and didn't care that people were probably watching the spectacle. All she cared about was the heat from his body pulsating around her and his scent of masculinity and power consuming her.

His lips brushed along her ear, and a shiver raced up her spine. "Your name." His voice was low, deep, and so damn sexy. It wasn't a question but a command that made her realize this male was all alpha.

He inhaled deeply again, and a rough growl left him. That sound went straight to her clit, and that blasted bundle of nerves swelled even further. Her pussy clenched, most

likely needing something substantial that only this bear could give her.

She could blame her reaction to him on the fact that she was drunk, but in reality, it was only his presence that made her a quivering mass of nerves.

“Ary Felina.” She breathed out her answer just as he leaned back and held her gaze. He hadn’t risen to his full height, and his face was so close to hers that they breathed the same air. He smelled like the rich, dark beer he just drank, and she swore she got a little more intoxicated off of it.

“Ary.” Her name rolled off his tongue like pure, unadulterated sex. The dirty images that she conjured of the two of them had heat rising to her cheeks. His smirk informed her he didn’t need to be a mind reader to know what she was thinking. That was the problem with shifters and the fact that they could smell emotions.

“It’s short for February.” Her eyes lowered to his mouth, and all she could think about were those lips on her skin, her breasts, and even between her legs. It looked like he hadn’t shaved for several days, and a dark dusting of facial hair covered his cheeks. It made him look even more masculine, if that were possible.

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“Like the month?” The tone of his voice told her he was teasing, but she was too far gone to get annoyed. It wasn’t as if she never heard the jokes about her name. Right now, all she cared about was pushing her preconceived notions about herself to the side and taking the bear by the balls, so to speak. She was standing tall and going after what she wanted, and what she wanted was Charlie Fucking Wylde.

“Charlie Wylde.” His name came from him smooth and crisp. He didn’t say anything else, just took her hand and led her to the dance floor. Everyone parted for him. The males looked uneasy, and, well, the females looked like they always did when a Wylde bear walked into the room. The song was slow and seductive, and as soon as they stepped into the center of the glossy floor, he pulled her close.

Their chests were pressed together, and she felt the hardness of every defined muscle move against her softness. The air left her when he slipped his hand down to her lower back and pulled her so close she could feel the stiff outline of his erection rub against her belly. It was like they were fused, and everything else faded away as he started moving his body against hers. Had she ever felt so feminine before? No. Never.

The steady bass moved through her, and the deep, rhythmic pumping settled in her erogenous zones. Charlie dipped his head low so his lips brushed along the shell of her ear again. He thrust his hips forward, and tingles started to encompass every single space in her body as his very prominent erection jerked between them. Ary was so attuned to him in every possible way that she could actually feel the damn thing grow stiffer.

Pheromones poured off him like a tsunami, and she absorbed it all. He was potent and

untamed, and never had she been so needy to feel a male between her thighs.

“I can smell how wet your pussy is, Ary.” Out of that erotically phrased sentence, the one word that had her nearly moaning was the way he said her name. She admitted it sounded fucking good coming from his mouth. She hadn’t even had sex with him, yet she understood what the hype was with the Wylde brothers. And if she got her way, she would find out every intimate detail of his body by the time the night was over with.

She didn’t respond to his statement, just pressed her breasts more firmly against him and let her eyes slide shut when her hard nipples rubbed along his ripped muscles. This was so not her and would have been out of her comfort zone if not for her liquid courage and the lust that seemed to take on a mind of its own.

He spun her around so her ass was snug against him and started grinding his erection into her lower back.

Bear shifters were big in general, so why the hell was she even surprised that his cock was as well? They moved to the music, and Ary got lost in the rhythm and her desire. She rubbed her ass on him, snaked her arms behind her, and wove them around his neck, acting totally out of character. And it felt damn good. She saw Melissa and Bram through the throng of people, doing some very Dirty Dancing moves. Movement out of the corner of her eye had her looking to the side and seeing even Candace on the dance floor with the coyote.

He didn’t wear that little black apron around his waist, so Ary assumed he was off the clock, and by the looks of their own gyrating hips, he’d be getting off on something else later tonight. Melissa’s actions didn’t surprise her, but she was shocked at her own actions and even Candace’s. Maybe it was a full moon or something, because by the looks of it, all three of them were not going home alone tonight.

Charlie turned her around again, and she stared into his blue eyes. He moved close to her face, so their lips were only inches apart.

“I love a female who has all the right curves for me to hold on to,” he growled, and she swore their lips brushed together. “I especially like a nice handful when I’m buried balls-deep in pussy.” He emphasized his point by grinding his dick into her, and she swore she felt the damn python behind his fly jerk. Even with the pounding music, she heard every little word he said and wanted out of the fucking bar right now.

He held her stare for another moment, and she knew he was waiting for her to say the words, to give permission for things to escalate. Ary pushed her fear of the unknown aside and opened her mouth to say what it was she really wanted.

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“Let’s go back to your place.”

His grin was purely predatory, and a shiver of anticipation and excitement coursed through her. After telling Candace and Melissa that she was leaving, and ignoring Melissa’s catcalls and Candace’s excited expression, she followed her date for the night out. Charlie took her hand and led her through the bar and outside. A Harley sat right in front of the bar, and she knew without a doubt it belonged to him.

Ary’s heart pounded fierce and hard as he straddled the metal beast. He handed her the helmet, and for a moment, all she could do was stare at him. He didn’t say anything, didn’t rush or pressure her, and she knew she was letting her mind take control when she needed to let her body do the talking.

As she grabbed hold of the helmet, their fingers brushed, and fire raced up her arm from the point of contact. She climbed on the back, and he reached behind, grabbed hold of her arm, and brought it around his lean hips.

“Atta girl.” The smile in his voice had her relaxing even further. With her legs spread wide and both arms now tight around him, Ary let herself look forward to doing something that was totally out of her comfort zone. It actually felt pretty good. He fired up the Harley, and the vibrations had her gritting her teeth as a stab of pleasure coursed through her pussy.

Charlie maneuvered the big piece of machinery out of the parking lot, and when he hit the asphalt, Ary held on as he sped away.

The ride to Charlie's place only took about twenty minutes, but it felt like forever for Ary. The constant vibrations beneath her had her so incredibly worked up, even more so than she thought possible.

By the time they pulled up to the two-story cabin, her panties were soaked, her nipples felt like they ripped through her shirt, and she was ready to attack him. He climbed off the bike and helped her dismount.

Thick evergreens and pines surrounded the cabin, and she knew they were secluded. Maybe she should've been worried about having so much privacy and being completely alone with him, but that was the furthest thing from her mind. She might not know Charlie personally, but he was well known in their town for the construction company he owned with his brothers.

This was a reckless thing to do, something that was totally unlike her, but it felt so good to throw caution to the wind and just get wild.

He took her hand and led her toward the wide porch that wrapped around the cabin. He unlocked the front door and ushered her in first. A small light flickered on, and she glanced around. A massive kitchen was to her left with gleaming stainless steel appliances and black granite counters. To her right was a living room with dark leather furniture, a huge flat screen television, and a fireplace.

In front of her stood an intricately carved staircase that led to a loft. That was all the exploring she could accomplish, because the door slammed shut a moment later, and then she was spun around and pressed against the cold, hard wood. Charlie pressed his body to hers, and his cock dug into her belly.

His mouth was on her, one hand cupped her ass, and the other held a chunk of her hair in his fist. He kissed her raw and hard, sweeping his tongue inside her mouth and claiming her fully. The hand in her hair tightened, sending a sting of pleasurable pain

through her scalp, to her breasts, and straight to the center of her pussy.

She tightened her legs around his waist and ground her pussy on his dick. He grunted out and used the leverage he had in her hair to tilt her head back. With her throat arched, he broke their kiss and dragged his tongue up her neck. He trailed his hand up her hip, and she was disappointed that he no longer gripped her ass.

When he slipped his hand under the hem of her shirt, she felt every callus along the pads of his fingers. It felt good to be touched by him, to feel the roughness that was a testament to the manual labor he did.

He ran his teeth up and down her neck, nipped at her flesh, and thrust his erection into her. She didn't want to wait any longer to feel him inside her. She was feverish and excited, and all she could think about was how it would feel for him to thrust all those thick inches into her. Charlie murmured something, but it was distorted against the base of her throat. She didn't care about words though.

All she wanted was him. Moving her hands between their bodies, she fumbled for the button and zipper of his pants.

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Apparently, he wasn't having any of that, because in the next instant, she was being turned in the air sharply then set back on her feet. The cold, smooth leather of the back of the couch pressed to her belly, but he didn't give her time to let their actions settle in. Jerking her upright, he pulled her shirt from her in one swift move and tore her bra off.

A small sound escaped her at the fact that he was so worked up that he had torn the material right off her body. He had her shorts off next, and then the feel of his warm, humid breath against the cheeks of her ass told her he knelt behind her.

Could he see how wet her panties were? He groaned and palmed her ass right before he ran his nose up and down the crease of her bottom. No male had ever been near that part of her body before, but the taboo nature of it had her thrusting her ass back at him. The heavy weight of his palm landed on her right cheek, and the motion sent her forward slightly.

He brought his hand down on the left cheek then back to the right. Over and over, he swatted her bottom, not hard enough to hurt, but with enough force that the promise of it was there. Heat rose to the mounds as blood rushed to the surface.

"Your ass was made for fucking." He curled his fingers into said body part, and she bit her lip and closed her eyes. He gripped the little strip of material that was nestled between her cheeks and pulled it to the side. The air left her in a whoosh when he used his other hand to spread her ass open and proceeded to run his tongue up and down the slit of her pussy. He sucked and licked, nipped and hummed along her swollen, heated flesh.

The couch was big and wide, and she was forced to stand on her toes as he tormented her with his tongue. She was going to come, but of course he sensed that, because he moved away from her pussy and ran that long, thick muscle up and up until he skimmed the tight, unused hole of her ass. She could smell the sweet but musky scent of her arousal, knew her wetness had slipped between her ass cheeks during the ride to his cabin, and loved that Charlie sucked every last drop from her.

She'd never let a man touch her so intimately, so erotically, or in a way that was so forbidden. Over and over, he massaged the globes of her bottom, teasing and tormenting her to the point of climaxing then backing off and starting all over again. It was an ongoing harassment of pleasure, and Ary didn't know how much more she could take.

"Ask me for it, Ary." He slapped his hand on her ass, and she squeaked out. "Ask me for my cock in your cunt."

Oh. God. His words were so vulgar and should offend her, but Goddammit they turned her on.

"Ask for it, kitten." He slapped her ass again and went back to running his tongue along the puckered hole of her bottom.

"Charlie." He growled against her body when she said his name, and her arousal kicked into overdrive. "I am so desperate for your cock inside me." In the next second, he tore her panties from her and threw them to the side. The material had dug into her flesh with his frantic motions and left a burning sensation along her hips, but it was a welcome feeling that swirled with her pleasure. His rough respirations wafted across her back, and then she felt him step away.

Sucking in a great lungful of air, she looked over her shoulder and watched him shed his clothes. Hard, tanned flesh was revealed. A light sprinkling of dark-blond hair

spread across his chest, past his belly button, and created a trimmed nest of the same colored hair that framed his cock.

All she could do was stare at what was big and thick and pointed right at her. It was, without a doubt, the biggest dick she had seen, and that was saying a lot, since her ex hadn't been in the small department. She had never been with a bear shifter before and heard other women gossip about their breed being the biggest around, but good fucking Lord, he was monstrous.

And she was going to take all of him.

4

Taking hold of the root of his cock, Charlie stroked it a few times. His gaze jumped from her ass to her eyes then back to her bottom again. "Spread your ass for me, kitten." Reaching behind her, she grabbed each cheek and pulled them apart. Her pussy lips spread wide, and the cool air teased her cleft.

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“Fuck, you’re so pink and wet.” He stepped closer, and his body heat was ten times more powerful without his clothes on. He ran his finger down her slit and pushed it into her pussy. Immediately, she clamped her inner muscles down on the digit.

He grunted in approval. Her inner thighs and pussy were so sensitive from the scruff along his cheek when he had eaten her out. A brilliant image of him thrusting his cock in and out of her coursed through her mind in vivid detail.

Ary wanted to be sore and aching from how hard and fast he fucked her. That thought shocked her, but not enough to let her fear take hold. She wanted this, and by God she would have it. He reached down, grabbed a condom from his wallet in the back of his jeans, and sheathed himself. His length pressed between her pussy lips, and a groan spilled from both of them. He dug his hands into her hips, and she knew there would be bruises, but that only made her wetter.

He used his foot to kick her feet farther apart and nestled his lean hips between her thighs. That first touch of his cock head to her pussy sent a thrill up her spine. He rubbed himself against her, up and down and faster and harder until she was moving her ass back against him, pleading without words that she wanted him buried inside her.

“You’re a greedy little thing.” There was nothing but strained heat in his words, and she prayed he didn’t get off on torturing her. As nice as that sounded, she wanted to be fucked good and hard, and right now.

Looking over her shoulder, she narrowed her eyes. The feline in her unsheathed her claws. She didn’t know how bears fucked, but her cat wanted it now. She was done

with this teasing bullshit. His lips twitched, and she knew he thought this was just too funny. She was still good and intoxicated but coherent enough that she wasn't going to back down. Lifting her ass, which caused the tip of his dick to slide partially into her pussy, had his jaw clenching and a soft moan spilling from her.

“Just shove that big dick in my pussy. That's why I'm here, right?” Where in the hell had that come from? She blamed the alcohol and her hormones for the fierce fire that came from her.

A flicker of emotion passed over his face, but it was gone as soon as it arrived. She didn't know what he was trying to hide, but she knew her words sparked something inside him. A glance down at where he held onto her hips showed his own claws had come out. It wasn't unheard of for some shifters to partially turn into their inner animals during extreme emotions.

The very thought of Charlie's bear coming out, even if it was just his claws, had her so aroused that wetness slipped down her inner thighs. She tried again to push herself back on his shaft, but he tightened his hold on her.

“I don't know what kind of males you fucked back in the day, but bears are the ones in control.” He reared his hand back and slapped her ass hard enough that her flesh stung something fierce. “I fuck you, not the other way around. Do you understand, kitten?” He spanked her again, and she closed her eyes in bliss. The alpha in him called out to her, and she wanted to do whatever he said. Her past lovers had never been like this, and that sent a wave of delicious ecstasy through her. Charlie liked to be in control, and she wanted him to use that dominance on her.

She licked her lips. “Yeah, I understand.” They stared at each other for several seconds, and the only warning she got before he took her completely was his nails digging into her flesh. He shoved all of those hard, thick inches into her, and she cried out in pleasure/pain. Never had she felt so stretched, so full, so totally taken

with only one thrust. Her inner muscles clenched along his length, and he grunted.

“You keep doing shit like that and I won’t last ten fucking minutes inside you.” She breathed out and rested her head on the back of the couch. Her legs were spread as wide as they could go, and she knew he had a prime shot of her asshole and pussy. He let go of her waist and spread her cheeks so wide she knew he was watching his cock move in and out of her body. “Fucking hell, Ary.” He picked up speed and slammed harder into her. “Your cunt is so fucking tight.” He thrust into her again and again until she couldn’t see straight and couldn’t suck enough air into her lungs.

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Sweat formed on her body, and she felt her orgasm starting to churn inside her, threatening her that what was happening would end far too soon. He worked his dick inside her in deep, long strokes, and she curled her hands into the butter-soft leather.

“I’m going to come,” she gasped out, and even though she wanted to feel it claim her, she didn’t want it to end yet.

“You’ll come when I fucking say it’s time, Ary.” Droplets of Charlie’s sweat landed on her back, and she arched up, wanting it covering her. As strange as that sounded, she wanted to feel his pheromones seeping into her, wanted his musk surrounding her, and wanted his big body curving around hers. As if her unspoken desire was said aloud, Charlie leaned forward so his sweat-slicked chest rubbed along her back. He continued to thrust into her, and she forced herself to hold off on coming. He pumped into her three more times and pulled out. Before disappointment could fill her, he had her turned around and lifted into his arms.

She wrapped her legs around his waist and her arms around his neck. He thrust into her with expertise and bounced her up and down on his cock. Charlie ran his teeth along the base of her neck before gently sinking them in just enough that pain sparked inside her. He started walking out of the living room with his dick still shoved deep inside her, and she thought for sure he was leading her to his room, but clearly he couldn’t make it that far. He pushed her against the wall in the hallway and pounded into her. She let her head fall back and closed her eyes in ecstasy.

“It’s so fucking good,” he grunted out against her neck and continued thrusting into her.

“I can’t hold off any longer.” Curling her nails into his biceps, she bit her bottom lip. He instantly stopped moving inside her, and she groaned in frustration. They both panted out, and she swore she could feel his erection pulse inside her, getting bigger and thicker. They stared at each other for a heartbeat, and the lust that bounced between them could have started fires. In a few quick strides, he was up the stairs and had them in a bedroom with the door slammed shut behind him.

The room was too dark to really see anything, but she didn’t need a visual. All she cared about was getting off with this Wylde bear’s huge dick inside her. He all but threw her onto the center of his mattress, and before she could complain, he was on top of her with a hand gripping each of her thighs. With an iron-like grip on each of her legs, Charlie pushed them open. Her labia parted, but she was too wet and aroused to give a damn what she must look like down there.

The monstrous shaft that rose from between his thighs looked like it could do some damage, and by the tenderness of her pussy, she knew it did. She flicked her eyes to his face and saw him looking at her splayed pussy.

“Fucking hell, kitten.” His massive chest rose and fell from the force of his breathing. The sting of pain from his fingers digging into the sensitive flesh had her pleasure increasing. Who knew she had masochistic tendencies? “I am going to tear you up.” His filthy fucking words had her hips lifting on their own. He certainly showed her exactly what he was made of, but she wanted so much more. His eyes bored into hers. “You want that, don’t you? You want me fucking you so damn hard you won’t be able to sit for a week.” Good Lord, the bear was insanely arousing with his dirty bedroom talk. “Ask me to fuck you raw. Tell me you want my cock so far inside your cunt you can’t see straight.”

The air left her, and she knew there had to be a word in there somewhere, but if there was, it was unintelligible. Did he actually expect her to answer? He was going to be disappointed, because she couldn’t form a coherent sentence with what he was doing

to her.

“Christ, baby. If you thought I fucked you hard back in the living room, you haven’t seen anything yet.” A tingling sensation traveled throughout her whole body at his sandpaper voice. His animalistic masculinity was something to be rivaled, and his fierce, strong, and intimidating presence made her feel like his prey.

The corded muscle and tendons that were laced and bulging right underneath his flesh had her urging to claw at him, lick and nip his flesh, and consume him just as he was doing to her. The thick crest of his shaft pressed against the entrance of her pussy, and he held her eyes for a suspended moment before slowly pushing into her.

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Inch after thick inch tunneled into her sensitive pussy, and he was so deliciously forceful with his ministrations that her body slid up the bed until her head met the headboard. A shocked cry left her when he bottomed out inside her, his dick head slamming into her cervix. She knew her eyes were wide, and tears of pleasure/pain slipped out and trailed down her temples.

“Look at me.” Charlie’s voice was distorted as he issued the command, and when she did as he said, everything around her faded until there was only this one moment in time. He hovered above her, his upper body blocking out the moonlight that spilled through the window. “I want you to watch while I slam my cock into your tight little pussy.”

There had never been a time when she had been with a male and just their words had her blood racing and her skin tightening. Ary lifted up and braced herself on her elbows.

He slowly pulled out of her, and she watched as his length became visible inch after glorious inch. His thickness was wet from her pussy cream, and right when she thought he would torment her with just the tip lodged in her entrance, he thrust back into her.

He did this over and over again, forcing her to watch as he took her to new heights. Arms shaking and breath leaving her in uneven gasps, Ary knew she couldn’t hold out much longer.

She needed to come, wanted to so desperately she could taste it on the tip of her tongue.

Charlie watched his dick slide in and out of Ary's tight cunt. Her flesh was pink and wet, swollen, and gripped him like an iron fist. Never had he wanted to fuck a female as badly as he did her. When he had seen her in the bar, his bear stood to its full height and clawed to take her. He had sensed the females' arousal as it thickened the air when he and his brothers entered the bar, but she stood out like a flower in the desert.

Her scent, like soap and spearmint, was a strange combination, but it called out to him, had him aching to claim her and mark her. His nails curled farther into her flesh, and he smelled her blood. It was a tangy aroma that tickled his nose and had his hips propelling into her with a force that astounded even him.

It was like his bear wanted out and needed to take her in the most primal of ways. Even now, he was forcing himself to stay in human form, but it was a damn hard feat, one he had never encountered before.

The slickness of her pussy and the suctioning warmth that surrounded him had his orgasm rushing precariously close to the surface. He didn't want it to end, not when he had never felt anything as good as this little ocelot. His dick was harder than he ever remembered, and his balls felt like they would explode with every thrust inside her.

"Yeah, kitten." He pushed into her and pulled back out. The nickname had just been spilling from him, but he liked the way it sounded rolling off his tongue. He had never been with an ocelot shifter, but then again, that hadn't been what called to him. Her luscious curves had him imagining himself with his face buried between them, and her long blonde hair had him picturing it fisted in his hand.

Dipping his head to her hip, he removed his hand and ran his tongue around the

crescent-shaped wounds. The instinct to heal and care for her was as strong inside him as breathing, and he wasn't entirely sure he liked the emotion. He liked where his life was, and that involved sleeping with a random, willing female, doing a job that he actually enjoyed completing, and only worrying about himself and his brothers.

Yet here was this slip of a female, making him feel these unaccustomed emotions and having his bear going fucking crazy. This female was unlike any before.

They may have only known each other for a few hours, and this may have started out as a one-night fuck, but Charlie knew there was no damn way he could just let her walk away, not if his human side and inner animal both wanted her in the worst kind of way.

Her moans were soft and breathy, and he worked his hips against her. It was taking all his strength to hold off the inevitable. He let his eyes travel up her rounded belly, the kind he absolutely loved, and to her large breasts. He had always been more of an ass-man, and boy did she have one killer ass, but her tits were like the fruit of the gods. They were full and had a slope to them, with strawberry-colored nipples.

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Thrusting as hard and fast as he was caused the large globes to bounce up and down obscenely, but fuck did he like the look of them doing just that. His mouth watered for a taste, but at the moment, he couldn't move, as he became immobilized when she lifted her hips to meet him thrust for thrust.

He pulled out, because he needed to take a deep fucking breath or he'd lose it right then. This was so not like him, to want to come like a randy fucking teenager after only a few strokes, but hell, she drove him crazy.

Fuck, this was good, she was good, and he wanted every damn part of her.

6

Charlie arched his neck, and the tendons strained from the force of it. He placed his hand back on her hip, but the tingling sensation of his tongue lavishing her wounds, and his huge cock thrusting in and out of her, was still so fresh. She had been shocked at first when he did the act, because although they were having sex, his tending to the small cuts he created was overly intimate.

His nails dug deeper into her, and the wetness of her blood slid down her side. If she were a human, she might have been horrified by the animalistic quality of this intimate act, but at heart, they were both wild creatures, Charlie more so than most males, and the pain he inflicted only made her soar higher.

Unable to hold herself up any longer, Ary dropped back on the bed. Her back bowed when the head of his shaft scraped along her G-spot.

“Pull your pussy lips apart. Let me see all that pink, wet perfection.” Holy hell, the man had a freaking way about him that drove her absolutely insane. Ary reached down and spread her pussy lips apart.

Charlie growled deep in his throat, and she felt her eyes widen as a flicker of his inner beast showed itself. It disappeared as fast as it had appeared, but she had seen it nonetheless, and the fact that his bear flashed right before her proved he was just as lost in this sexual frenzy as she was. His cock stretched her wide, and her inner muscles clenched around his girth.

Apparently, he had enough, because only moments after she spread herself wide for him, he was barking at her to place her hands above her head.

Being stretched out before him like some kind of offering sent a heady rush through her. His thrusts were faster, more determined. The light sprinkling of hair on his chest was wet from his sweat. He seemed so big above her, pumping into her body like he owned the damn thing. In the next second, he had both of her knees pressed to her chest and slammed in and out with so much power her orgasm exploded through her.

Arms and legs numb, she heard his grunt as her cunt tightened around his dick.

“That’s it. Milk my fucking cock, kitten.” Over and over, he slid in and out of her, prolonging the intensity of her climax until she was thrashing her head back and forth on the bed, not knowing if she would ever come down from the high. Her clit swelled with each down stroke he made, and when his thrusting increased even more, she knew he was going to come. “One more time, baby. Just one more fucking time.” She didn’t know what he meant until he placed his thumb right over her clit and rubbed it back and forth.

Crying out as another orgasm washed through her, she found her hand clasping his biceps and her nails digging in.

“Shit. Your pussy is so damn tight and hot. I could fuck you all night long and never get enough.” His sweat dripped onto her bouncing breasts, mixing with her own and sliding along her skin.

Once, twice, and on the third thrust, he buried his erection so far in her that his big balls slapped against her ass. Ary could do nothing but ride out her own pleasure, but she forced her eyes to stay open and watch Charlie come long and hard. The dark-blond strands of his hair were stuck to his forehead, and his low rumble of completion that seemed to vibrate the whole room ensnared her. He came and came, his big body straining and his cock twitching in her pussy.

“God, Ary.” He wasn’t looking at her, and his words were low, almost like he was talking to himself. “It’s so...” His whole body shook, and although his orgasm was quite possibly the longest one in history, he never stopped slowly thrusting inside her. With one final groan, he stilled, and his entire huge frame shook as he finished coming. It was the hottest thing she’d ever seen. There was the sensation of his dick swelling even further, and then a wave of warmth filled her. Beads of sweat dripped down his chest, and the sight was erotically tantalizing. “It’s so fucking good.”

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She would never get tired of hearing him say those words or hearing him curse. He could swear all night long, and still she'd want more.

The rumors that the Wylde Brothers were... well, wild... were so far from the truth. Charlie was so much more than that. He was controlling, dominant, and had claimed her in the short time she had been in his presence.

Ary now knew the true depth of how untamed a bear in bed could really be. He collapsed on top of her, and the monumental weight of him pushed her into the mattress. She gasped for air before he mumbled his apology through a chuckle. They lay side by side, their breathing erratic and identical, and neither moved or spoke for several long moments.

When Charlie stood and made his way to the bathroom, she took a second to stare at the perfectly sculpted shoulders, the defined back, and his hotter-than-Hades ass. Wetness slid from her pussy, and she squeezed her thighs together. She was so sore down there that all she could do was smile. Charlie Wylde had ruined her for all other guys. Well, dammit.

Closing her eyes and breathing out as euphoria washed through, all of that was tossed away when she heard his angry curse. "Motherfucker." The hoarse, furious-sounding voice that came from the bathroom had her pushing herself up and staring at the partially shut door. The sound of water running followed his words, and then he opened the door and stood there for a moment.

He was nude with the bathroom light shadowing the front half of him. Of course she could still see the monster between his legs. Even flaccid, it was impressive. He

swore again, tightened his hand on the rag he held, and stalked to the edge of the bed.

“What?” Oh, God. Did he regret it or something? “What’s wrong?” She almost regretted saying the words. He was staring at the mattress for several long moments, so she was starting to become uncomfortable. “Okay, well, maybe I should go?” Why in the world did she phrase it like a question? Oh yeah, because she honestly hoped he asked her to stay the night, or told her he wanted to see her again, or anything that wouldn’t make her feel like an idiot. Before she could move from the bed, he sat down and sighed heavily.

“Fuck.”

She jumped at that lone word. He barked it out, and her skin tightened. What in the hell could be so wrong that would make him this angry?

“It broke.” He turned and looked at her, and the seriousness in his expression had her heart pounding and sweat breaking out across her brow. It only took her a moment to realize what he was talking about. She rushed to the bathroom.

Ary grabbed a towel, got it wet, and started cleaning herself off. Sure enough, that wetness she had felt just moments ago was not from her arousal, but from the damn condom breaking.

Shit and double shit.

This was so not good.

7

Ary knew the odds of this turning into anything were pretty slim, but she also knew her fertile time was only days away. Sitting on the edge of the bathtub, she let her

head fall into her hands and breathed out. She sensed Charlie before he said anything.

“This is bad.” She was talking to herself but knew he heard, nonetheless.

“Yeah, tell me about it.”

Lifting her head and looking at him, Ary still grew warm in all the right places as he leaned naked against the doorframe. His dick lay against his tree-trunk-sized thigh, and with his arms crossed over his chest and his forearms and biceps bunched and unrestrained, he looked like the dangerous male who had stalked into the bar earlier tonight. She needed to go, like twenty minutes ago.

She stood and walked past him and back into the bedroom. Fuck, her clothes were scattered out in the living room.

“Listen, I’m going to head out.” Maybe she was overreacting, but it didn’t matter either way, because she was suddenly feeling frazzled. She should have gone with her gut and not had a one-night stand. All she could think about was getting pregnant, because she had been wild and reckless and done something so out of the norm, and then being left alone because a male like Charlie surely didn’t stick around.

He was so alpha, so rough and raw around the edges. Would he want her for more than one night? Would he want to be saddled with a female he had a one-night stand with, all because the latex had broken?

Ary shook her head, because it was all a moot point. So what if he had come inside her? And so what if she was far too close to her fertile time for comfort? Nothing would happen, and she was just freaking herself out.

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Leaving was sounding better and better, because once she was away from the powerful magnetism that surrounded Charlie, the brighter this night would look. Once she was downstairs and had her clothes picked up and haphazardly put on, Ary turned toward Charlie when she heard him enter the room. The stillness was a heavy presence that surrounded her; not to mention the sudden weirdness that bounced between them. Of course she could have taken the Morning After Pill... if they worked on shifters. But seeing as they didn't, she was here with the unknown looming down on her.

“Thank you for... tonight.” God, Ary. Smooth. Real freaking smooth. They stood there, neither saying a word. The whole situation had felt so very right at one time, and now it was so very wrong. She turned to leave, but then remembered he had driven.

He sighed heavily and said, “Come on, kitten.” Charlie grabbed his keys off the counter, and she followed him outside. Once she was on the bike with the helmet on, Charlie climbed on. He reached behind him and grabbed her hand, bringing it around his waist then doing the same to the other one. His abs clenched under her hands, and she swallowed. Her arousal started to creep through her body, and she pushed it away.

Everything had gotten so weird between them, and instead of her being curled around his hard body and in his warm bed, she was feeling awkward sitting behind him as he raced down the road. The roar of the engine didn't soothe her as it did earlier in the evening. They reached Shifty's quickly, and a part of her was relieved while another part was disappointed. It had been several hours, and she could see her car sitting alone under the streetlamp.

Candace and Melissa had driven together, and Melissa's car was vacant. Climbing off the bike, she handed Charlie the helmet, but before she could turn and escape, he took hold of her hand and stopped her retreat.

"Listen, I didn't mean to freak like that. It's just...." He ran his hand over the back of his head. The engine still hummed, but it seemed to fade in the distance as she stared at him.

Sighing, Ary knew she was acting ridiculous, but she had never encountered anything like this. "No, you didn't do anything wrong." It wasn't like he knew she was fertile in just a few days. Shifters had a great sense of smell, but they couldn't scent something like that days away. She was at least thankful for that, because she'd really hate to see Charlie's expression or how he'd act with that. No, nothing bad would happen, and she needed to chill the hell out. "I freaked too." Looking at the gravel, she kicked a few stones. "As hard as this may seem to believe, I don't go home with random men." Lifting just her eyes to look at him, she was surprised by the gentle expression he wore. It changed his whole demeanor.

"I know, Ary. I never thought you were easy." The brush of his thumb back and forth over the back of her hand soothed her. "I wanted you, and I knew you wanted me. It was as simple as that."

A one-night stand.

She had gone in knowing this, of course, but hearing him all but say it still made her feel slutty. "I just wanted you to know." Pulling her hand away, she offered him a smile. God, this is so damn strange. Is this how all one-nighters are when everything is said and done?

"Okay, well, thanks." Ary cringed at her words and internally berated herself. She walked away, not expecting him to call her back, but feeling even shittier that he

didn't. No more going home with random men. If she had to go through this again, she might be liable to shoot someone later. Once in her car, she forced herself to keep her eyes anywhere but where Charlie still sat.

She could hear the purr of his Harley, and like a string being pulled and forcing her gaze to his, she looked at him. He sat there in all his hotness, one hand on his thigh and one leg braced on the ground. His blue eyes regarded her curiously, and maybe if she weren't surrounded by metal and glass, she could have scented the air to gauge his emotions. Lifting her hand in a pathetic wave, she started her car and left, yet he still sat there, and she watched him disappear through her rearview mirror.

She reached for her cell in her purse and slid her finger over the screen to unlock it. She needed to talk to Melissa about everything. Although she knew Candace would have been the comforting friend she needed right now, Melissa's quick wit and matter-of-fact attitude would slap some sense into her. She also didn't want to freak Candace out with the gritty details of her night, but knew she had to talk about them.

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No, Melissa was the right one to speak to at the moment, and when she felt calmer and less frazzled, she'd talk to Candace and get her thoughtful advice. The phone rang four times, and just when Ary would have hung up, Melissa answered. At the sound of her friend's heavy breathing and intimate giggles, she instantly regretted making the call. How could she talk about having sex with Charlie Wylde when Melissa was no doubt sleeping with his brother right now?

"Hello? I know you're there, Ary. I can hear your obscene breathing." Her obscene breathing? Did Melissa not hear the way she panted? "Come on, girl, I'm right in the middle of doing some crazy contortionist positions over here."

Oh. God. Yeah, this was a really bad idea.

Charlie watched Ary drive away. He curled his hands into tight fists. He had meant to have her stay with him, wanted to ask her to, even after the whole broken condom fiasco, but he had seen the freaked-out look in her eyes and had kept his mouth shut. She was already on edge, and he knew he was to blame for that.

When he went into the bathroom and realized the latex had broken, he had instantly worried. It never happened before, but then again, he had never fucked a female like he had Ary. He had no doubt been rough, but then again, she hadn't complained but asked for more.

Even now, his damn cock was sore from pounding her so hard. That had his mouth forming a smile, because fuck he wanted to do it again.

Charlie wanted to do nothing for an entire day but be buried deep inside her tight, wet

heat. He wanted them so exhausted that the following day they couldn't walk and could only stay entwined with each other. It had only taken a few hours of feeling her clenching around his shaft for Charlie to be an addicted fiend when it came to her.

He would let her run, but she wouldn't get very far, because for the first time in Charlie's life, he wanted a female for more than one night.

8

"I still can't believe you let loose and fucked Charlie Wylde." Leave it to Melissa and her foul way of stating things. Oh no, Ary's friend couldn't put it more eloquently, but then again, that was one of the reasons she loved her so much.

"Ugh, Melissa, can you keep your voice down if you're going to talk like that?" Candace asked in a hushed voice and glanced around the small café they were currently in.

A few days passed since Ary had been with Charlie. She hadn't spoken to or seen him, although that wasn't much of a surprise, since she didn't have his number and hadn't gone back to the bar.

"Candace, stop being a damn prude."

Candace narrowed her eyes and leaned back in the chair.

"Ary, you have to tell me all the raunchy details." Melissa took a large drink of her iced tea and seemed to be waiting expectantly.

When she called Melissa right after she drove away from Charlie, she had quickly hung up. No way was she planning on explaining everything while Melissa was naked and in bed with some male. It turned out she hadn't gone home with one of the

Wylde brothers, but instead with a lion shifter. It had taken a few days before the three of them could get together, but now Ary was debating whether this had been a good idea.

But it was too late for any of those doubts, because Melissa could already tell she fucked Charlie, even if Ary hadn't confirmed anything, and no way in hell would her friend let it go. Candace, on the other hand, was more interested in her phone all of a sudden, and the smile on her face led Ary to believe it might have something to do with her coyote shifter.

"Why don't we talk about Candace and that coyote she was flirting with at the bar?" Melissa turned and looked at Candace. Ary mouthed I'm sorry to Candace when her friend pinched her lips together and tossed her phone back in her bag.

"You bitch." Candace's words held no heat. She sighed and glanced at Melissa. "First of all, Ary, you called us here to talk about your drama. No way in hell are you turning this around on me." She crossed her arms over her chest.

"Candace is right." They both glanced at Melissa. "But we will be getting back to you, Candace. I've been dying to ask you about the waiter with the tight ass anyway." Candace groaned, but didn't otherwise respond. Both of her friends turned and glared at February. "Well, spill it, girl."

Ary rubbed her eyes, finding this so much harder than it actually was. It shouldn't have been a big deal, not when the three of them talked about sex many times before, but now, telling them about Charlie was a hell of a lot more difficult for some reason.

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“Okay.” Ary inhaled deeply and looked between them. “So, yeah, I slept with Charlie Wylde.”

Melissa grinned in a way that made her think her friend was silently saying “I told you so.” Ary immediately glanced around. Fortunately, no one paid them any attention.

“I knew it, you whore.” Melissa’s grinned from ear-to-ear. “You go first.”

“I go first what?”

Melissa gave her a bored look. “Puh-lease! You tell me the dirty details, and then I’ll spill it on Nick and the wild freaking sex we had.” She took another drink and said, “I’ll even tell you the freaky shit he wanted to do.”

Ary didn’t bother responding on the whole Nick the lion shifter thing or question her friend on why she hadn’t gone home with Bram, because she had only been on the phone with Melissa for one minute, and it had been sixty seconds too long. It seemed like Nick enjoyed talking dirty—or at least that was what she picked up on when she heard him in the background while talking to Melissa.

“So, yeah, I was with Charlie, and it was incredible, but then...” Ary paused, and Melissa and Candace’s eyes grew wide as they both leaned in closer. “It broke.”

Candace’s brows dipped low, and she glanced at Melissa.

It didn’t take Melissa any time at all to understand what she was talking about. “Oh.

My. God. Ary, what happened? Was he angry? Did he turn in to the biggest jackass? You know how those bear shifters can be, all growly and territorial, like it's the female's fault everything in the world goes wrong." Melissa waved down the waiter and ordered an oversized margarita. "I'm going to need some alcohol to get through this conversation."

"Well, yeah, he freaked out, just like I did, although I think I took it to a whole other level," Ary replied as the waiter came back with a big-ass margarita and set it in front of Melissa.

"So, was he an ass?" Melissa sucked down her drink and watched her. "I bet he was. Lord knows Nick was a hot piece of ass, but way too alpha and pushy for me, and that was just in bed. I hate to see how he acts with a female he's in a relationship with." That had Ary lifting her brows in surprise. "Yeah, I mean I like my men all controlling and whatnot, but some of the stuff he wanted to try at the end just wasn't for me." Melissa waved her hand in front of her. "More on that later though. Anyway, finish up, girl."

Ary spilled the rest of it. The more she talked, the better she felt. She told them in detail how she freaked out so much, because her fertile time was nearing. That little tidbit had their eyes widening even more, because any shifter female knew the full severity of the situation.

Over the past few days Ary thought long and hard about what would happen if she did end up pregnant. The chances were slim, of course, but it was still possible. When a shifter female went into heat, there was a one-hundred percent probability that conception would occur. Most single males stayed away for obvious reasons.

"Holy crap, Ary. That is serious." Leave it to Candace to state the obvious. "What did he say when you told him? You have to know that unprotected sex even days before a shifter's fertile cycle is dangerous." Candace's eyes were as wide as saucers. "Oh my

God.” Candace looked between them. “You could be pregnant with his cub.”

“God, Candace, of course she knows that. You’re cute, but sometimes I don’t know about you.” Melissa turned her full attention back on Ary. “What did he say, and when are you going to see him again?”

Ary wasn’t going to admit she’d been thinking about him nonstop. She had one night with him, that was all, and chances were nothing unexpected would result from that mind-blowing night of sex, but a tiny voice in the back of her head kept whispering, “What if?”.

“Every male shifter knows that if they don’t want a kid, then they better keep it in their pants when a female is ovulating. Of course, I suppose if you weren’t ovulating at that time, he wouldn’t have known.” Melissa’s brow dipped low, and she looked thoughtful.

Shifter senses were precise and keen, and a female in heat could be scented a mile away. It was kind of like a big neon sign that hung over their head, stating they were ready to procreate. “I was a couple days away from it. I mean, it wasn’t like it was flashing across my face.”

“I suppose, but still.” Melissa shrugged and sucked down more of her margarita. “What are you going to do?” That was the million-dollar question.

February shrugged and picked at the bagel she hardly touched. “I guess just wait and see. I mean, it isn’t like we weren’t staying safe. The damn thing broke.”

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“Was he just that big, or was he going so hard he tore right through it?” Melissa wagged her eyebrows in a lewd fashion. Ary didn’t need to respond, because when she felt her face heat and saw Melissa’s grin widen, she knew that had been answer enough. “I’m just going to assume he was both.”

“You should just tell him, Ary,” Candace said.

“Why get him worried and worked up before I know for sure? If my period doesn’t come when it’s supposed to, I’ll take a pregnancy test. If it happens to come out positive, I’ll tell him.” God, just thinking about possibly being pregnant sent everything inside her tightening. The thought terrified her. She wasn’t young, and she always wanted children, but certainly not as the result of a one-night stand.

“Sweetie, don’t worry about it until you know for sure. You’ll just end up worrying yourself to death, and that’s not healthy. Now, how about I cheer you up with some of the dirty details of Nick Jamison?”

Ary couldn’t help but laugh at the almost dreamy look on her friend’s face. “First, what happened to going home with Bram Wylde?”

Melissa shrugged at Ary’s question. “I don’t know. I guess I just wasn’t feeling it. I mean he was hot and all, but when I saw Nick, I just had to have a lion that night.” Melissa leaned forward, and Ary immediately worried about what would come out of her mouth. “First off, if I had known lions had such huge dicks, I would have hopped on that bandwagon a long time ago.” Melissa fanned herself. “It wasn’t even the fact that he wanted to shove that big thing in my ass—”

Candace started choking on her drink, and February and Melissa started laughing. The noise drew a few annoyed looks from the other patrons.

“He was all into this domination shit, like tying me up in some weird-ass contraption and beating my ass with this homemade paddle.” She leaned back and shook her head. “This wolf is not into all that shit, so when I said hell no, we went back for another round of wolfie and lion sex.”

For the next twenty minutes, Melissa continued to go into great detail on the things Nick did to her, made her do to him, and how she could barely walk the next morning. Despite the entertaining and somewhat shocking details her friend provided, there was that small voice in the back of Ary’s head that wouldn’t give it a rest.

Her period couldn’t come soon enough, because who in their right mind heard of an ocelot getting knocked up by a bear?

9

Charlie wiped the sweat from his brow with the back of his arm and looked at the construction site all around him. Wylde Construction was a family owned business that had been around when his great-grandfather had been alive. It was the leading construction company in Sweet Water, and he was damn proud of it.

It was not only their livelihood, but their dream and passion. He and his two younger brothers had grown up watching their father sweat and bleed to provide for them and their mother.

When their parents passed away several years back, they knew they couldn’t let it fall under, so the three of them had teamed up and made it what it was today. He looked over to where Bram and Ford were busy going over a set of blueprints.

They were currently in the middle of building a new city hall named The Hampton. The last one burned down a year ago. The frame was up, and his men were busting their balls to make their quota every day.

“Charlie, come over here and look at this,” Ford called out. There were three other shifters looking at the blueprints with his brother. Everyone was tired as the end of the day approached, and each one of them was just as soaked in sweat as he was.

“What’s up?” Ford started talking about the pipes and foundation, but Charlie’s thoughts were elsewhere. Ever since watching Ary drive away several days ago, he hadn’t been able to get her out of his mind. He wasn’t the type of male who chased after a female and wasn’t about to start, but hell, he wanted to go to her so damn bad.

Over and over, he asked himself what it was about her that drew him in, but he wanted everything about her, and therein lay the problem. At forty years old, he should have been married to a nice bear shifter female and have a handful of cubs, but as it was, he immersed himself in his work.

His parents had been so in love with each other, and even though Charlie wanted that, he didn’t want or need the heartache that came when the one who was loved above all else was gone.

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It might have been a baseless emotion, because in reality he knew he couldn't live his life like that, but the way things were going had been good for him this far, and he might as well continue on the same path.

“Yo, Charlie,” Bram called out, and he glanced at his youngest brother. He couldn't help but feel slightly responsible that Ford and Bram were just as single as he was. Their lives were about the business. There was Ford, isolated because of some past relationship he refused to talk about, while Bram immersed himself in bar fights, because he needed an outlet for his anger.

They were good men, but had he inadvertently steered them away from wanting something more than what they had? How many times had he been drunk and asked Ford about Mina, even though he knew there was bad blood between those two?

He knew it was a sore subject, but he also knew that maybe if he made his brother remember what he had with the female, even if it had gone bad in the end, he might take the initiative and not let Charlie's ridiculous fears consume him.

It was cruel to bring up Mina, and after the last time, when he saw the clear pain and rage on his brother's face, Charlie never brought it up again. His brothers were old enough to make their own decisions, no matter how much he thought it was his fault or that they were going the wrong way.

“Yeah, I hear ya.” He told them what needed to be changed in order for everything to be stable enough and flow smoothly, and although some of the measurements seemed off, his mind was so fried from working and thinking about his kitten that he didn't want to deal with it right now.

He wanted to leave, get cleaned up, and throw back a few beers. It had been a rough couple days, and only harder because he wanted to feel Ary again, and not necessarily in a sexual way.

Maybe he should just look her up. He still didn't know how he hadn't noticed her before taking her to his cabin. She had this magnetism that drew him in like nothing else that made him want to control her, take her, and claim every part of her body until she screamed there was nothing of her that he didn't own. His bear tried to take him over, wanted to shift and hunt her down, mate with her, and mark her flesh.

He wanted to run his tongue along the mark he gave her and show it to everyone until they knew she was his. Shaking his head at his ludicrous and dangerous thoughts, Charlie knew he was treading on a very slippery slope, because despite the fact that he desperately wanted Ary with a fierceness that actually stunned him, it was all around bad news.

Thinking about her this way, and wanting her like he wanted to... mate with her... was not a place Charlie was going to go.

His life had worked out fine with only himself, so any thought about taking on a mate was off limits. No, there would be no looking her up. He would go on with his life, put her behind him, and move on.

She had been an incredible sexual partner, the best female he had ever been with, but that was where he needed to leave it.

“Come on, boys. Let's call it a night and get drunk.”

10

Three weeks later

Ary stood in the center of her bathroom, that damn little stick of doom hanging loosely in her hand. She had known this was a possibility, but to actually miss her period, something that never happened, and to see those two pink lines show up on the pregnancy test was like dropping into the seventh realm of hell.

“Are you sure that two pink lines means pregnant?” Candace questioned, and Ary looked at her as if she lost her mind.

“Candace, I know none of us have been in this situation before, but damn, girl, don’t you watch TV and the commercials for shit like this?” Melissa asked her incredulously.

“Good God, Melissa. Of course I know two lines means pregnant, but I’m just trying to make Ary not feel so bad about it.”

Ary sat on the closed toilet seat lid and hung her head.

“It’ll be okay, Ary. I promise.” Melissa stood by her side and ran her hand up and down her back. They had shown up twenty minutes ago with a bag full of pregnancy tests. When she hadn’t had her period, she thought maybe, just maybe, she had stressed herself out to the point of her period stopping because of it.

She had certainly been worrying enough since all this happened and didn’t have any nails left because of it. Then she made the call to Melissa and Candace, asked them to grab the tests, because she was too much of a wreck to go get them herself, and here she was, freaking the freak out right now.

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Casting a glance at Candace, who was looking just as worried and nervous as she felt, Ary had no idea where to go from this point on. She was a single thirty-year-old woman, an ocelot shifter, and was currently knocked-up, because she enjoyed one night of meaningless sex. To make matters worse, the baby she carried was the child of none other than Charlie flippin' Wylde.

“So, do you think the baby will be an ocelot or bear shifter?” Leave it to Melissa to bring up something she hadn't even thought about. There were no hybrid shifters. They were either one or the other, which meant her child would have her shifting genes or their father's.

“You know we are here for you, right?” Candace moved next to her and got down on her haunches. Her strawberry-blonde hair was twisted in a cute braid and hung over one of her shoulders.

Her light-blue eyes were filled with so much compassion they had Ary bursting into tears. There was a hushed murmur from both of her friends, which only caused her to cry harder.

Yes, she was so scared about what all this meant, but she was also crying because she knew she was lucky to have these friends standing beside her. Their arms wrapped around her, and they held her tight.

Ary knew she had to tell Charlie, but she also knew she needed some time to herself to come to grips with all of it. This was huge, and until she was comfortable with it, how in the world did she expect to tell the father?

Melissa and Candace pulled back, and each of them grabbed her hands and helped her to stand. “Come on, this calls for a monster bowl of ice cream over at Freezy Breezy.”

Yes, that sounded like the perfect temporary solution to her permanent, horrifying situation.

11

“Charlie, what the hell is going on with you?” Bram cracked open another beer and planted his ass beside him on his couch. The football game was on, a leopard shifting team from New York playing against panther shifters from Chicago.

The teams were brutal as they tackled each other so hard against the ground that pieces of sod sprayed all around them. There was nothing better than shifter football. Humans playing the sport were entertaining, but they couldn’t take a hit like a shifter could. “Hello? You with us?”

“He’s been acting all kinds of fucked-up since he slept with that cat. What did she do, drag her teeth across your dick?” Ford asked, but his attention was on the game.

Charlie didn’t bother responding, just flipped his brother off and sank farther into the leather couch. He hadn’t talked about February with his brothers, the two people he cared about the most, because he thought if he didn’t talk about her and tried to block her out, he might be able to put her behind him.

Yeah, that hadn’t worked out as well as he would’ve liked, and when Bram and Ford brought her up, it only made things worse.

“It’s nothing. She just got under my skin, but nothing I can’t handle.” That was true... but also a lie. He wasn’t handling it well, because frankly he had never

encountered feelings this strong before.

“Under your skin?” Bram was the one to ask, and Ford shouted out a string of curse words when a foul was called in the game.

“What’s going on?” Ford asked and brought his beer to his lips. He turned and looked at them, and one of his brows cocked up in question. Charlie scrubbed a hand over his face and exhaled. Did he really want to get into this with his brothers, tell them about this girl he only spent a few hours with one night in his bed?

They would surely think he was an insane asshole, because how many times had he told them he would never claim a female?

“Dude, why are you clamming up right now?” Bram sounded confused, and Charlie couldn’t blame him. He looked at his youngest brother and noticed the day-old cut above his right eye and the fading bruise that covered his cheek. Looked like Bram was at his bare-knuckle fighting again.

Taking a deep breath and deciding to just say it already, Charlie looked at his brothers. This was the first time he’d kept things from them.

“That ocelot female has been all I’ve been thinking about for weeks.” He looked between Bram and Ford. It seemed Ford now had his full attention on Charlie.

“What do you mean you’ve been thinking about her?” Ford turned the television off, and silence descended on the living room. Bram was already looking at him with interest on his face.

Charlie supposed he should just spit it out. Damn, why in the hell was this so hard? He was a grown-ass male, and this was his family.

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“You got it bad for this girl?” Bram asked.

“It’s like my bear wants to take over and claim her.” He leaned forward and placed his forearms on his thighs. “I have never wanted to take a mate. You both know that better than anyone, but shit.” He exhaled and ran his hand through his hair. He gripped the short hair at the back of his neck and tugged on the strands. “I knew there was something different about her as soon as I saw her in the bar. The scent of her, the way she fucking looked. She drove me crazy, and I hadn’t even said one word to her. Then I had her under me, and my bear clawed to take control.” He looked between his brothers and saw their intense but shocked expressions. Yeah, he supposed this whole conversation was shocking, given the way he acted before.

“Then the fucking condom broke. I freaked, which in turn caused her to freak. So, I took her back to her car and haven’t seen her since, but dammit I’ve thought about her every fucking day, and it scares the shit out of me.”

For several long seconds, his brothers didn’t say anything. The silence was deafening, and for the first time in his life, he felt vulnerable for revealing how he felt. Charlie had always been the one to hide how he felt inside. He didn’t share all that shit and kept his hard, armor-like exterior firmly in place.

He liked his solitude, living alone, and didn’t want to have to worry about a female. But then there was February Felina, and all his preconceived notions on how he planned on living his life vanished.

“Well shit, man.” Ford chuckled, but there was no humor behind it. “The condom broke?” Charlie nodded. “She wasn’t fertile, right?” There was a bit of a strain in

Ford's voice.

“Nah, but I'll be honest; I don't know if I would have been able to stay away, even if she was.” That was the first time he had spoken those words out loud. It was hard not to when he knew he had come inside her, and if she had been fertile, she could be carrying his child. Yeah, that was a slap of reality right in his face.

“The human side of you wants to mate with this chick, and so does your bear. Charlie, dude, you've found ‘the one.’” Although this was how he felt and the conclusion he had come to, whether he wanted to embrace it or not, it was crazy hearing Ford say it.

“Damn, Charlie. It must be pretty serious for you to open up like this and for your bear to want to mark her.”

He looked over at Bram and could only nod. He didn't feel like the oldest brother right now, not when Bram and Ford could so easily admit what the hell was going on when he had held it in for so long.

“You need to call her.” Ford sounded so sure and confident that it had him and Bram looking over at him.

“Just like that, huh?” Yeah, it sounded easy enough, but he got the impression that she was done with him, especially when he acted like an asshole during the whole condom breakage. He had given her his full name, and she hadn't reached out to him.

He might have said she could run and he would go after her, but with each passing day, he felt himself going more inside himself and pushing her back. He could admit it: he was scared.

“What are you really afraid of? You've just admitted to us that it isn't just you that

wants her, but your bear too,” Ford said matter-of-factly. “How many years have we heard you talk about what you don’t want in your life, and how you don’t need the messy feelings that come with a relationship?”

“If this one female causes this type of reaction in you, why not just go for it?” Bram prompted.

“Bram, it isn’t that easy.”

“But it is, brother. And with that, I need a fresh beer.” And just like that, Ford was out of the room. His words were strong and honest, and despite Ford almost leaving nonchalantly after what he just said, it told Charlie that it really was that easy.

Bram stared at him but didn’t speak. Ford returned with three more beers and handed each of them a fresh one. For the rest of the night, no one said any more about it, but that was the way the three of them were. They said what needed to be said, and that was it.

Now it was up to Charlie if he was going to take his brothers’ advice and let his bear out to take what it really wanted, or keep his distance and continue living his solitary life.

February stared at her cell for the hundredth time since she decided it was time to call Charlie. His number was written on a scrap when she scribbled it down after finding it on one of the many Wylde Construction signs posted throughout the town.

She let herself have some time to get used to the idea that she was pregnant, had even made an appointment with one of the town's shifter clinics. Her pregnancy was in the very early stages, but a shifter's pregnancy only lasted two-thirds of a human's gestation. In less than six months, she would have Charlie's baby.

She set her phone on the table and placed the slip of paper with his number beside it. Reaching into her purse, she took out one of the ultrasound pictures the clinic had given her. The baby looked like a piece of rice, but warmth settled inside her every time she looked at it.

It was real, but looking at the picture of her baby seemed to cement everything inside her. Setting the picture on the other side of her phone, she looked among the three items. Why was this so hard for her?

Because what if he is the hard asshole everyone in town makes him out to be? What if he wants nothing to do with you or this baby? And what if he denies it is even his?

In all honesty, she couldn't blame him if his reaction was the latter. She had gone home with him, a virtual stranger, even if she knew of him by reputation. No doubt, that made her look like some kind of slut, regardless of the fact that she had never done something like that in her life.

There had just been something about him that called to her. She always went with her instincts, and they had been screaming for her to let the gorgeous bear take her home. But then again, look at how well that worked out.

“Quit being so weird about it. You’re a grown woman. He’s a grown man. This kind of thing happens all the time.” Yeah, talking to herself wasn’t helping matters. She picked up her phone, but before she could swipe her finger across the screen and dial his number, she got an incoming call. The number that flashed in front of her had her heart racing.

It was the same number she saw on the construction billboards in town, and the same one she had been staring at on that scrap piece of paper for the past several days.

Oh God. Oh God. Oh God. Just answer it already before it goes to voicemail. Ary ran her finger across the screen and brought it up to her ear. “Hello?” Why did she sound so out of breath and shaky? Because she was nervous as hell.

“February?” God, there was something about his voice and the way he said her full name that made everything inside her tingle with awareness. She heard it replay over and over again in her head, but actually hearing the smooth baritone of it over the phone was so much more satisfying.

He said her name all smooth-like, and all she could think about was being beneath him as he pounded all that hard flesh into her.

“Yeah, this is Ary.” Oh Lord, she sounded ridiculous. Closing her eyes and slapping her hand over them, she breathed out and prayed he didn’t hear the nervousness through her voice. His chuckle told her she failed miserably at trying to hide it.

“I’m glad to know I’m not the only one nervous about this phone call.”

What? Really?

“Listen, let’s just forget about how strange all this is and relax, yeah?” He made it sound so easy, but really, wasn’t it?

No, you stupid girl. Remember, you planned on calling him to tell him you’re pregnant with his child?

“Ary, you there?” How long had she left him hanging on the line? Taking a deep, steadying breath, she placed her hand on her rounded belly, which had nothing to do with the baby growing inside her, and forced her voice to stay steady.

“Yeah, I’d like that.” She heard him exhale and wondered if he had been holding it in. It was strange that she could sense how nervous he was through the phone. It went against everything she had ever heard about him and what she experienced when she spent those few blissful hours being consumed by him.

“Good, that’s real good. Maybe you’d want to meet up and get something to eat? I’d like to talk with you, if that’s all right?” Well, if this wasn’t turning out easier than she thought. She hadn’t been the one to call him and ask him to meet, but that led to the realization that when she agreed, because there was no option against that, she would have to come clean. She looked at the ultrasound picture again.

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It was too early for the tech to be able to tell from the bone structure and internal organs whether the baby would be an ocelot or bear shifter, but she hoped he took what she said in stride. It was going to be hard telling him, but it had to be done.

“Yeah, that sounds good. When and where would you like to meet?”

He rattled off a small café that specialized in soups and sandwiches, and after he told her what time to meet him, in just a few short hours, they hung up. Well, this was really going to happen, so she might as well put on her big girl panties, grow a pair of balls, and get it over with.

Two hours later and Ary was pulling into an empty parking spot at J&A's. The little café was relatively quiet, something she was thankful for. Turning off the car and just sitting there for a moment to get her bearings, she listened to the sound of the engine cooling. The click, click, click filled the interior with the rhythmic noise.

There was no sign of Charlie's Harley, and aside from a large truck and a few cars, the place was pretty barren. Climbing out of the car, she made her way inside.

The hostess who stood behind her little podium glanced up and gave her a thorough onceover. The scent of the hostess being a leopard shifter permeated the air the closer she got, as well as the fact that she was displeased by Ary's presence. Oh, there was no doubt the leopard knew Ary could sense her emotions, but clearly she didn't care.

“May I help you?” One perfectly shaped brown eyebrow lifted in question.

“Yes, well, I'm actually waiting to meet someone. I don't think he's here yet—”

“Ary.” The sound of her name coming from Charlie right behind her had a shiver working up her spine.

The hostess wrinkled her nose, but when she looked over Ary’s shoulder at Charlie, a mega-watt smile covered her face. “Mr. Wylde. It is so pleasant to see you again. The same table?” Her presence completely forgotten by the hostess, something she was accustomed to, February took a step to the side and turned to look at Charlie. Good freaking Lord did he look good.

His distressed jeans hung low on his hips, and the T-shirt he wore was form-fitting. She could make out every dip and hollow of his muscular chest, and the fact that she knew what the bear looked like naked had all sorts of dirty images rushing through her mind.

He took her hand before she could make a move, and the air turned icy as a blast of the frigid coldness rushed at her from the hostess. She glanced over at her, and saw the narrowed-eyed look she was shooting at Ary. That obviously made her uncomfortable, but she wouldn’t be intimidated.

Charlie gave her hand a squeeze and addressed the hostess. “No, Lauren, I’ve already taken a table outside. I want a little privacy for my date and me.” Heat rose to her face at the fact that he considered this a date. A tingle of pleasure shot through Ary that he clearly wasn’t affected by the hostess.

He didn’t wait for a response, just kept hold of her hand and took her outside. The patio was surrounded by a stone wall that offered privacy in an almost intimate manner.

There was one other couple seated outside, but they were far enough away from the table Charlie led them to that she wasn’t worried about being overheard. After they took their seat, a young waiter stopped by, and they gave him their drink orders. She

opened up the menu but wasn't hungry. Her stomach felt like it was in knots for what she was going to have to tell him.

"Have you ever been here before?" he asked her.

She glanced up at him. He was scanning the menu and after only a minute of looking at it closed it and set it aside. "Not since they had the reopening," she replied.

He nodded but didn't respond, since the waiter chose that moment to set their drinks in front of them.

"Have you decided on what you'd like to order?" The waiter looked between them. He was a cute human male, but she could sense his interest leaning more toward Charlie. That had her smiling, which in turn made him look at her quizzically.

She closed her menu and handed it to the waiter. "I'll just take a chicken Caesar salad, please." She wasn't hungry, but she also didn't want to be rude or seem like she was one of those girls who couldn't eat in front of a guy. If Ary was anything, it was not shy to eat around people.

Charlie invited her to lunch, and maybe if she forced herself to eat something, the tightening dread in her stomach would ease.

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He ordered the biggest burger they had, a double order of fries, and a side salad. Ary supposed a man of his height and weight, especially concerning his profession, would need a lot of calories. The waiter left, and a moment of silence filled the space between them.

“Only a salad?” he prompted and brought his glass of water to his mouth.

She shrugged. “I’m not all that hungry.” The sound of the couple on the other side of the patio seemed a lot louder than it had been only moments before. “So, um....” She started to pick at her napkin, and even if he hadn’t been a shifter and able to smell her unease, her twitchy movements would have been loud and clear.

“Hey.” He reached across the table and took her hand in his. The heavy weight of his palm settling over hers had the effect of grounding her. “I know this must be awkward and all after we slept together.” The corner of his mouth curved up, and heat spread up her neck and to her cheeks.

All it took was him mentioning what they had done in the most non-descriptive way and a small smile, if it could even be called that, and she was ready to push everything off the table and beg him to take her right there. She opened her mouth, but he started talking again.

“You’re probably wondering why I called you after waiting so long.”

Actually, that had not been what she thought at all. That hadn’t even crossed her mind.

“I’ll be straight and just tell it like it is, since we are both adults, and beating around the bush is not my style.” She swallowed and didn’t know why that ball of dread in her stomach started to grow at an astounding rate. “I freaked about... well, you know, but then after I watched you leave that night, I haven’t been able to get you out of my mind.”

He let go of her hand and leaned back in the chair. He didn’t speak, but she could hear him breathing and see the rise and fall of his massive chest.

“I have always just stayed to myself, knowing I would never need anyone to live my life with.”

The sound of her heart seemed so incredibly loud, and the feel of it pounding in the base of her throat made it hard to swallow. He leaned forward again and took hold of both her hands.

“In all of my forty years of existence, I have never wanted a female the way I want you.” His blue eyes bore into hers, and she swallowed past the lump. “I know this is probably pretty heavy, but I have done a lot of thinking and know that if you’ll give me a chance, I’d like to show you that we can be good together.”

Ary licked her lips and removed her hands from his. She swore a flash of hurt crossed his face, but a millisecond later, it was gone, and that stoic, hard mask was back in place. His jaw clenched tight, and he leaned back in his chair.

Well, it was now or never. She bent down and grabbed the small black-and-white picture tucked into the side pocket of her purse.

Straightening back up, she stared into his face for a suspended moment before reaching across the table and handing the picture to him. He took it while keeping eye contact, and Ary was shocked by how her hands shook so forcefully. Placing them in

her lap she waited to see him lower his gaze to the sonogram picture of their baby.

When he did, the world stopped, time stilled, and there was nothing aside from that one, tense moment. Would he toss the picture back in her face, call her a liar, and say the child she carried wasn't his, or would he accept it and actually want to go through this journey with her? He looked up at her then back at the picture.

"February...." She watched as his throat worked when he swallowed. He kept looking between her and the picture. Although their child looked like a tiny dot right now, in just a few months, they would be able to tell the sex and whether their child would be a bear or ocelot shifter.

Before either could say anything else, their food was brought out. Once they were alone again, she lifted her gaze back to Charlie's and saw him staring at the photo again.

"I found out about a week ago that I was pregnant, but I should have told you that night you dropped me off at my car that it was only days before I was fertile." Taking a deep, steadying breath, she pressed on. "I want you to know that I don't make it a habit of going home with men I don't know and sleeping with them." Ary looked down, suddenly unable to keep eye contact. "I was trying to work up the courage to tell you, but as if we were on the same wavelength, you called me." When she forced herself to look at him, a gasp left her at the fact that he was right in front of her on his knees.

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He still held the picture of their baby, and his expression couldn't be called anything but awe-filled and expectant. Could it really be so easy for him to accept all this?

"I know there are probably doubts in your head on whether the baby is yours, and I'll understand and won't take offense if you want a test once the baby is born, but—"

Before she could finish her sentence, he had his mouth on hers and was kissing her breath away. He broke the kiss far too soon and leaned back. His hand was on her cheek, and she was so stunned by the play of events that she was speechless.

"I thought it would go a lot differently."

He shook his head and smiled.

"So, you're not upset or think I'm lying?" There were a lot of males out there who would not be having this kind of reaction to a bomb like this being dropped.

"February." Just hearing him say her full name was an auditory orgasm. She shouldn't be thinking about sex right now, but here she was, inhaling his scent and being surrounded by all his masculinity that it made it impossible not to. "Kitten, I asked you to come out here, because I wanted to talk to you about starting a relationship. I want you, and the fact that you carry my child only solidifies the fact that you are mine."

She curled her toes at the declaration. The heavy feel of his hand on her belly shocked her to the point she had to grip the armrest of her chair to steady herself. He moved back to his seat a moment later, and she was left feeling utterly confused but

happy. He certainly wasn't the type of male many talked about.

He might have this hard, devil-may-care attitude, be overly large and intimidating, and have this aura about him that made everyone move out of his way, but she had just seen the soft side of Charlie Wylde.

"Can I keep this?" He held the picture loosely between his fingers, and her heart palpated at that small request. She had another of the same image at home. She nodded. The smile he gave her was filled with so much pleasure, so much happiness, that one would think she had just given him the world.

"I'm just..." She looked back at the patrons in the corner. They were an older human couple with graying hair and bright smiles. Could it actually be possible that Charlie wanted a life-long commitment with her?

"Thinking too hard." Smiling over at his words, she nodded. "Listen, nothing in life that is worth anything should be wasted on the what-ifs, and Ary, you are one of those important things in life. Hell, I can't explain why out of every female in the world my bear and my human want you like our next breath, but I know it feels damn good, and I am not going to let that go." Could he sense what his words were doing to her? "Since the moment we came into each other's life, it has been a whirlwind of emotion and action. I know you feel the same way, felt it when I touched you, saw it when you trembled, and smelled it as the delicious aroma of everything that is you."

He was going to make her cry with his gently poetic words. Here was this monster of a male, able to crush anyone who stood in his path like a toothpick, and yet he spoke to her as if she were a delicate flower needing to be watered and placed in the sun.

Everything he said was right and had that ball of dread in her belly dissipating until there was only pleasurable warmth that filled every empty spot in her.

It had only taken a few hours under him, a few weeks of worry and angst, and now an hour spent in his presence and listening to his sweet words for her to want to give every part of herself to this shifter.

“I have no doubt the child you carry is mine. I can smell my scent permeating from you, as if your body knows it is in the presence of its mate.” He spoke fiercely, like he had known this would be the outcome.

Male shifters were known to be territorial, possessive, and all-around alpha in everything they did, but Charlie was in a whole other class. He put every man she had been with to shame.

“Even if you decide you’re not ready for something between us, I want you to know I will always be there for you and our baby. Do you understand me, February?” His blue eyes never left hers until she felt herself nodding in response.

She might not have known much about him, but deep in her heart, she knew he spoke the truth. If there was one rumor she heard about Charlie that she would believe over all else, it would have to be the one that he took care of his family above all others, and that his word was his livelihood.

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“I believe you, but, Charlie?” Licking her lips and smoothing her hands over the napkin, she knew she wanted to give them a chance. It wasn’t just about the baby, and she had a feeling Charlie wasn’t the kind of man to do something just because. “I do want to see where this goes between us.” His grin was wide, and he didn’t have to say anything to show that her words had meant the world to him.

This was good, and for the first time in her life, she actually felt like she was going down the right path.

That revelation scared the shit out of her.

13

After Charlie left Ary, but not before promising to see her later, he sat in his truck and let his thoughts consume him. All he could think about was the child who grew inside Ary, his child. There was no doubt in his mind she was telling the truth.

The scent of her was a mixture of everything whole and pure that made up his little ocelot shifter, but there was an underlying scent, his scent, that surrounded her.

He hadn’t really noticed it before, not when there had been a plethora of other aromas that invaded his senses since stepping into the café, but once out on the patio where the fresh air swirled around them and he could really concentrate, the smell was undeniable.

He didn’t need an ultrasound to know that their child would be a bear shifter, not when he could sense so much of himself around and inside her. Or maybe it was just

his overactive imagination wanting to find something, anything that could further tie Ary to him.

His bear awakened at the thought of her, and he raked his claws, trying to escape and go to its mate. The possessiveness he felt for her was unlike anything he had ever encountered, and it only intensified since he now knew she carried his cub.

He needed to get his emotions under control and calm the fuck down. This was the biggest news that had come into his life, and he needed to share it with his brothers, the two people who had always been by his side, even when he was acting like a pompous asshole.

Giving them a quick call and finding out they were at Ford's home, he made his way toward the cabin that was nestled deep in the Sweet Water Mountains. Out of the three of them, Ford preferred his privacy and solitude above all else. Charlie always attributed it to Mina, but he had never questioned Ford on the reason for his distance.

He took the winding road that ascended the mountain and turned off onto a narrower dirt path. He should have taken his Harley instead of his truck, because he was barely clearing the evergreens that lined each side of him. When he came into the clearing that housed Ford's two-story cabin, he pulled the truck beside Bram's pickup and cut the engine.

Climbing out of the vehicle and making his way into the cabin, Charlie couldn't help but feel nervous. This was a new emotion for him, and one he didn't know if he liked. Despite the unsure feelings swirling inside him, he couldn't deny he was excited to tell his brothers they would be uncles.

Would they be more surprised that he was going to be a father, and that he was going to mate with an ocelot shifter, or that he was going against everything he ever said about how he wanted his life to go?

When he entered the cabin, he saw Bram and Ford sitting around the dining room table with a bottle of whiskey between them. Their laughter lowered when they noticed him. “Isn’t it a bit early for Crown, boys?”

Bram lifted his shot glass up in salute and downed it. “Hell no, not when we got some incredible news to celebrate.”

“Yeah?” He made his way to the table and sat beside Ford. “It can’t be as incredible as mine.” His brothers looked doubtful, but before he could tell them, Bram started talking.

“We just got word that the CEO of Piefer Industries wants to contract Wylde Construction for a large condominium job in Denver,” Bram said with a grin on his face.

“Yeah, they want us to leave next week to meet with the CEO, Allister Piefer, and go over the contract and blueprints for what they have in mind.” Ford threw back his shot and poured him and Bram another, as well as filling an empty glass for Charlie. “Charlie, man, we are talking about a multimillion-dollar deal, and they want us, a small construction company from Sweet Water, to do it for them.”

Charlie ran a hand over the back of his head. This was incredible news, but as he looked between his brothers, he knew his news still surpassed theirs. “That is great news.”

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“Man, why aren’t you throwing the shots back and celebrating with us? This is a huge step.” Bram pushed the glass closer to him. “A huge step for the business. Mom and Dad would be drinking right along with us if they were here.” Silence descended around them, and they each looked down at the table.

It had been a long time since they actually brought up the memory of their parents, but Bram was right that their parents would be excited and proud the family business was flourishing.

“Didn’t you have some news of your own?” Ford prompted.

“Yeah, I do, and it’s even bigger than yours.” This had his brothers looking at each other then back at him expectantly.

“Well, spit it out,” Ford urged him to continue when he just looked at them.

“It must be huge if you think it’s bigger than Piefer,” Bram said right before he poured himself another shot. His smile was wide, and the excitement poured out of him.

“Yeah.” Charlie picked up his shot and tossed it back. The burn of the alcohol traveled down his throat and settled like a lead ball in the pit of his stomach. “You know the ocelot shifter I was telling you about, the one I wanted to mate?”

“Ary, right?” Bram asked slowly and looked over at Ford.

Charlie nodded. “Well.” He cleared his throat, feeling his own joy and happiness

grow to a monumental point inside him. He was excited to see how his brothers would react. Ever since their parents passed away in the car accident years ago, he always looked after Ford and Bram, even though they were adults.

The three of them stuck together, and always would, but he had Ary in his life now, and she carried his child. Things would change most definitely, and although he knew his brothers would be happy about this, he couldn't help but wonder what the future held.

He wanted to start a life with February, and not just because she was pregnant, but that little fact had every possessive instinct inside him rushing to the surface and threatening to spill out. He needed to control himself and keep his bear in check or he would surely frighten her away. "Looks like I'm going to be a father." The heat in the room became stifling, and he cleared his throat.

"Father? What do you mean?" Ford asked slowly, but Charlie knew he understood him just fine.

"You're having a baby with the ocelot female?" Bram leaned back in his seat and started tapping his fingers along the table. It was a habit he had when nervous.

"Yeah, I am. I asked her to have lunch with me, because I wanted to talk to her about taking the next step in a relationship. Turns out, she had her own reason for agreeing to come, and that was telling me the broken condom ended up with her being pregnant."

"Shit, man." Bram sounded stunned. "I mean, I don't know the girl or anything, but I have to play the devil's advocate here. She did go home with you willingly after you two just met. You don't think maybe there is a possibility she got knocked up by a different guy she let take her home?"

Charlie knew Bram meant well and was just looking out for him, but just hearing those words had his inner animal on the verge of breaking free. He felt his muscles start to swell with the imminent release of his bear. The fact that he was having a hard time restraining his animal scared the shit out of him.

“Damn, Charlie, I meant no disrespect. I was just making an observation.” Bram and Ford stood at the same time and took a step back. Charlie’s whole body shook as he tried to control his bear. All it had taken was for him to hear something negative about Ary, even if it had been from one of his brothers, and his bear wanted to taste blood and feel flesh ripping beneath his claws.

“What the fuck is happening to me?” His voice was distorted, sounding like an animalistic growl. He curled his fingers into the table, heard the sound of cracking wood, and knew he needed to rein himself in or he’d end up hurting his brothers. Closing his eyes and taking a few deep breaths, he did the only thing he could think of that might make his bear refrain from coming out: he thought of February.

He pictured her lush body beneath his, the spearmint scent of her flesh as he ran his tongue along every dip and swell. He pictured her crying out his name as he buried himself deep inside her and marked her with his seed. He wanted her smelling like him completely and wanted his claw marks on her succulent body so every male, shifter and human alike, would know she was his.

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Slowly, the bear inside him calmed and backed down enough that he could take control. He let go of the table, felt pieces of wood fall from his hands, and lifted his eyes to Ford and Bram. They stood several feet away, both having the same stunned look on their faces.

“Holy fuck, Charlie. That was the most intense fucking thing I have ever seen.” Ford picked up the Crown off the table and drank right from the bottle. He started chuckling and handed the bottle to Bram, who drank it in the same fashion. “I thought for sure you’d lose it and tear out our throats.”

“I’ve only ever seen something that intense at Slater’s, and only when other shifters wanted blood on their hands as sport. I mean, damn, Charlie, she really is your mate, huh?” Bram took another drink and handed the bottle to Ford again. They did this back and forth until there was nothing left.

Charlie ran a hand over his face, felt the sweat that had accumulated along his brow from his near shift, and breathed out. “I am so fucking sorry. Shit, I have no damn clue what in the hell is happening. I feel like I’m losing myself to my bear. It wants out so damn bad, and every passing day, it is getting harder to control him. We should be one entity. I feel like my human is trying to control an animal intent on taking over.” Was this how Bram felt? His youngest brother was more bear than human, had been for as long as he could remember.

Did Bram always feel this wild and untamed? If so, Charlie could see why he did bare-knuckle fighting so often. A glass of water was placed in front of him, and he thanked Bram.

“And to make matters worse, ever since Ary told me about the pregnancy, I’ve been feeling so damn territorial and possessive.”

“Charlie, why are you even trying to fight it?” Ford asked. His brother sat in the spot across from him and set a brand-new bottle of whiskey on the table. “What do you think will happen if you shift? You think you’ll hurt your girl? Not likely. Damn, dude, your bear wants to claim her. I say go for it, let him mark her, and then you can go on being one person again instead of feeling pulled in two different directions.”

“Well, damn, Ford. When the hell did you get all philosophical and shit?” Bram chuckled and cracked open the alcohol. “I think we are all in need of some more liquor.” Charlie didn’t bother agreeing with Bram on both accounts. Ford was right, which left the burning question of why was he trying to hold himself back?

If his bear wanted to mark her as theirs, then so be it.

14

One week later

The sound of Charlie’s Harley pulling into her driveway was a loud rumble she seemed to feel all the way to her bones. It had been seven long days since she had seen him, although they talked on the phone several times a day.

He ended up having to leave with his brothers to Denver concerning some big contract. Everything was still so surreal, right down to the fact that Charlie wanted so much more with her.

Even their conversations over the phone had her feeling so much closer to him. The connection was frighteningly strong, so much so that her ocelot wanted to rub up on him and purr in approval.

He couldn't see her watching him through her living room blinds, and she took that moment to appreciate the view. It had only been seven days since she had seen him, but it felt like far longer than that.

He knocked on the door, and she grabbed her purse and gripped the handle to pull it open. She only had a moment to take in his appearance: distressed jeans and white button-up shirt. But that was short-lived as he was charging in the house, using his upper body to press her against the wall.

A gasp left her at the feral intensity of the action, but he clamped his mouth down and swallowed the noise.

Their tongues tangled together, and the flavor of everything that was Charlie bathed her taste buds in spicy maleness. Their plans had been to ride up to the mountains to take a relaxing hike along a path that followed a small creek.

She had been there before, loved being out in the wilderness, as did all shifters, and wanted to show Charlie a hidden alcove that overlooked Sweet Water Lake.

Apparently, this bear had different plans for them. The hiking shorts she wore were modest, and that was clearly something Charlie didn't appreciate, since he muttered against her mouth something about too many clothes before undoing the button and pulling the zipper down.

In one frantic motion, he had her shorts and her panties down her thighs and thrown to the side.

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The low, rumble growls that came from him vibrated through his chest and went straight to her clit. There was something definitely different about him, like he couldn't control himself and needed this more than he needed to breathe.

She inhaled deeply, smelled the scent of his alpha bear surrounding him, and knew right now he wasn't Charlie the human, but a wild animal.

"Charlie, what's gotten into you?" Her words stuttered out of her from the rhythmic way he thrust his hips back and forth against her. His dick was hard and thick and brought back the erotically delicious memories of their night spent together.

Not that she was complaining, and if she thought he was alpha personified before, she was starting to realize there was more of it hiding inside him. He trailed his mouth down her neck and licked and sucked at every exposed inch until she begged him for more.

"I want you so fucking bad, Ary." He slammed his hands on the wall on either side of her head. She swore the picture frames right above her head shook from the force of his actions. Through the corner of her eye, she could see his nails had turned into claws and were currently digging into the drywall. "I've tried so hard to control myself around you, but it's just too fucking hard. I want to claim you, baby. I want the damn world to know you're mine." His voice was gravelly and no longer human-sounding. "I'm not going to curb the animalistic need to mate with you. Not now. Not ever."

The air was charged with electricity, and the hairs on her arms stood up. It didn't take her shifter senses to tell his bear was close to breaking free, not when she could see

the swell of his muscles beneath his shirt or feel the aggressive arousal pouring off him. His huge body blocked out the light from the partially open doorway, and the heat that poured off him was like a sauna.

At the first touch of his fingers on her swollen, soaked pussy lips, Ary let her head fall back against the wall and moaned out.

How could one week make her feel so needy and desperate for him? As he used his knee to force her thighs wider apart, she gripped onto his lean yet rock-hard waist for support. Taking his index and middle finger and placing them on her inner labia, he spread them apart.

“Fucking hell, Ary. I can smell you, feel how wet you are for me, and know I won’t last five seconds once I have my cock shoved deep inside you.” Before she could respond, or at least make a noise that she was just as desperate as he was, Charlie had retracted his claws and pushed two thick fingers inside her.

Nails digging into his skin and mouth parting as the stretch from the penetration consumed her, all she could do was hold on as he started to fuck her with those digits.

In and out, he pumped them into her pussy, all the while keeping his eyes locked with hers. They were no longer blue but a dark color that seemed to swallow his pupils whole. It was a testament to how close he was to shifting. The fear over that fact should have left her immobile and not aroused, but it had a far different effect on her.

Her nipples swelled beneath the now too rough shirt, and as if he sensed that discomfort, he reached between them, placed one of his claws at the base of her throat, and started dragging it down until it reached the collar of her shirt. The material parted beneath his touch like a warmed knife going through butter.

Every so often, she could feel the very tip of his claw press against her flesh, not hard

enough to hurt, but with enough pressure to let her know it was there regardless. It was a reminder there was no more Charlie Wylde in front of her. The male who touched her let off a scent of ownership, one that had her wanting to submit to him in every way possible.

“You’re mine.”

Oh God. His voice, gravel under the tire of a car, was loud, slightly distorted, and like nothing she had ever heard. The sound had her toes curling, her breathing increasing, and her heart pounding so fast and hard it felt like it was lodged in her throat and moving into her ears.

She had wanted him like a fiend before, but seeing the possessive gleam in his eyes, feeling that crackling energy that at this moment he was more bear than man, and having his fingers still moving in and out of her had Ary realizing she wanted his mark, and she wanted him to claim her hard.

Everything became deathly still and quiet. Seconds later, he removed his fingers from her, brought them up so she could see how wet they were, and proceeded to suck her juices off his index and middle finger. The sight was highly erotic and like nothing she had ever witnessed before. It had her blood boiling and her knees weak.

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He leaned forward and ran his tongue up her throat, over the corner of her mouth, and along her bottom lip.

Parting her lips and sucking his tongue into her mouth had them both groaning. Their flavors mixed together until it was all she could think of. Suddenly, his hands were framing her face, and his fingers were tunneling in her hair. He used his leverage to tilt her head to the side and take control.

For long, drugging minutes, they did nothing but kiss. He dominated her without bonds, controlled her without words, and promised her with just the touch of his fingers on her flesh. He slid his hand down her hips, over the curve of her ass, and gripped the mounds in an almost bruising manner.

Ary loved it and moaned for more. He gave her a light squeeze before moving lower until he curled his fingers around the backs of her thighs.

In one swift move, he had her lifted up, and she was forced to wrap her legs around his waist. The hard cock that pressed right between her thighs was huge and brought back wave after wave of remembrance of their night together. It had been far too long since they had been together, but that was going to be put to an end right now.

He turned around with his hands now back on her ass, spun her around so she wasn't pressed against the wall anymore, and started striding down the hall.

"Where is it, baby?" he murmured against her lips but then went back to kissing her. He didn't need to elaborate on what he was referring to. It was strange that this was the first time he had been to her home, and only the second time they would be

intimate.

She broke the kiss long enough to answer. “Up the stairs, first door on the right.” He turned around and started heading back the way they had come, and she couldn’t help but chuckle at the humor in it all. Right before he headed up the stairs, she said, “Wait, the front door.” In their lust-filled haze, they had left it open for any and all her neighbors to see.

In just two long-legged strides, he was in front of the door, kicked it closed with his foot, and made his way back to the stairs to ascend them. Before she knew what was happening, they were in her room and she was on her back in the middle of her modest full-sized bed.

The sound of ripping material filled her hazy brain, and she realized it was from Charlie tearing her shirt off. He took a step back, and his chest heaved up and down with the force of his breathing. Not bothering with the buttons of his shirt, which she found highly carnal, he ripped the shirt from his body, tossed it to the ground, and went to work on his belt. Ary was so aroused her wetness slipped in the crease of her ass.

“Spread your thighs for me, baby.” Once the belt was free and the button undone from his pants, he stepped out of them. The fact that he wore no underwear was like a hot poker to her clit. Doing exactly as he said, she loved that she was the one who brought out the harsh grunt from him. His dick was just as impressively frightening as before, and when he took a step closer and knelt before her, her heart stopped.

Seconds ticked by with only the sound of his breathing and the feel of his breath along her labia. A hand on her inner thighs had her jerking with awareness. As he lowered his head until she knew there couldn’t be an inch that separated his mouth from the very center of her, Ary waited for his next action with anticipation.

“Ary, you are mine.” He lifted his head, and his emotions were reflected clearly on his face. He looked savage and powerful, making her feel dwarfed and miniscule compared to him. He was everything she wanted and a male who could ruin her with a few softly spoken words. To her disappointment, he rose above her without so much as a lick to her pussy.

Her clit throbbed in time with her heart, and the sound of her blood rushing through her veins filled her head. “I will destroy anything that stands in my way of ensuring you are completely mine. Do you understand, Ary?” His statement and question were a double-edged sword, because she knew as soon as she told him she was his that it would be set in stone.

When a male like Charlie wanted something and declared it so, there was no going back. As they stared into each other’s eyes, she knew the truth. She wanted to be his, no matter what.

“I’m yours, Charlie, irrevocably.”

He took her mouth in a powerful, intoxicating kiss, and before the world righted itself, he was pushing his erection into her.

“Yes, Ary, you’re mine. Mine.” He roared out the last word as he buried the rest of his shaft into her. The power with which he did the act had tears of pleasure and pain springing to the corners of her eyes. “Mine. Fucking hell, you’re mine.” Being completely filled by him was like an otherworldly experience. Shaking from head to toe and on the verge of coming just from the feel of him totally bottomed out inside her, she knew as soon as he moved that she would climax.

And as if he read her mind, he did just that. Pulling out of her and pushing back in, he took control of her body like he knew it expertly, like he had her memorized. Her first orgasm claimed her hard and fast, and she panted through it, knowing it was only the first of many.

Just as the first orgasm waned, another took its place when Charlie placed his thumb on her clit and worked it back and forth.

He pistoned in and out, in and out. His claws were out, scraping erotically against her skin, and his muscles flexed and seemed to grow right before her eyes.

“I’m sorry, baby.” He closed his eyes and panted. Sweat covered his chest, and the droplets slid down the hard valley. “I’ve tried to control myself around you at every turn, but my bear wants to mark you, mate with you, and claim you.”

The last part was a roar. She knew her eyes had to be wide, because even though this was an intense moment, she was so turned on she couldn't even think straight. Her ocelot purred in approval and all but jumped out of her and rubbed itself on Charlie.

"You smell so good, Ary." He looked down at her, his eyes half-lidded and his hair clinging to his sweaty forehead. Even through all of this, he never stopped pumping into her or rubbing her clit. "I just can't control myself or stop it." He closed his eyes again and gritted his teeth. "Tell me you accept me. I need to hear it one more time." It was clear he was hanging on by a thread, and she wanted to say it to ease both of them.

"I want you, all of you, Charlie." It seemed that was all he needed to hear, because he pumped into her again and again, rubbed her clit faster and harder, and then they were both climaxing at the same time. She felt his cum fill her, felt his body shake atop hers, saw the wildness in his features, and knew what was coming next.

He stayed buried inside her for several long seconds, his cock jerking as he emptied himself completely. He pulled out, and a gush of their combined fluids slipped from her, but instead of turning her off, it inflamed her.

Naked and growing even larger right before her eyes, Charlie's bear took control, and he started to shift. Bones broke and realigned, dark brown fur grew along his flesh, and no more was a man standing before her, but a frightening-looking grizzly.

The beast roared out, his teeth and fangs rivaling anything she had ever seen. Being a shifter herself, nothing surprised her, but seeing this from the man she was falling for harder and harder each day had her heart stopping.

He stalked forward on all fours, his muscles moving beneath the dark fur. He was the predator, and she was the prey. He stopped beside her, and she didn't move, didn't breathe, and didn't dare blink as she kept his stare. He lowered his massive head and

ran his tongue along her throat and down to her shoulder.

The post-euphoric bliss still coursed through her veins, and the feel of his slightly roughened tongue made her acutely more aware of everything. The scraping of his teeth along where her shoulder and neck met didn't have her tensing, but instead had her relaxing into the mattress.

In a swift move, his teeth pierced her flesh, and the stinging pain from his bite gave way to the knowledge that she was his.

When it was all said and done and he was lapping at the wound he made, all she could do was smile. The sound of bones breaking and realigning once more filled the room, and then Charlie in human form was pressed against her.

He turned her to the side, brought her back to his front, and placed a big palm right over her belly where their child grew.

Before she let her eyes close and euphoria claim her, she heard his softly spoken words and let them carry her off into a blissful sleep.

“There is nothing that can keep me away from you and our baby. Nothing will ever hurt you, and I won't let anyone take you from me. You're mine, February.”

15

Four weeks later

After Ary revealed her pregnancy to Charlie, which was already a month ago, a crazy thought every time it passed through her mind, everything had been going fantastic. He was attentive—overly so, in fact, but it was always welcome.

She couldn't help but notice how territorial he was with her. Never had she been with a male who was like that, who seemed more animal than man, and she would be lying if she didn't say it made her feel cherished and protected.

February had never realized how lonely she had been, even when she was with Frank or her other partners. They had been there with her, but not for her, and that was the major distinction between them and Charlie. It wasn't just about the baby though. He talked to her and actually listened to what she had to say.

Even now, she remembered when Frank and she would have a conversation. He never paid attention to her and was certainly not interested in anything but himself.

Charlie conversed with her, responded to what she had to say, and focused solely on her. It was refreshing and made her realize exactly what she had been missing out on and the losers she let fill her life. He didn't care that she had a few extra pounds, or that her belly wasn't flat and her thighs were thick. In fact, he told her continuously that he loved her body and that she was healthy enough to carry his child.

He hadn't been formally introduced to Melissa or Candace yet, and she hadn't met

his brothers. With her friends' schedules taking them out of town for several weeks, and his brothers traveling from Sweet Water to Denver the last couple weeks for a new building project, there hadn't been a right time for introductions.

That would change tonight though, because they had plans to go to Bram's house later this evening, and she was taking Melissa and Candace with her.

Charlie picked her up, and they went to her first official doctor's appointment—well, the one she considered official, since the time before had just been a confirmation that she was indeed pregnant. This one would allow them to find out the sex of the baby and if it would take after her or Charlie in regards to shifting.

Charlie seemed to be positive it would be a male bear shifter, but she couldn't deny she was kind of hoping for a little girl. It didn't matter the sex or who it took after, though, because in the end she just wanted a healthy baby.

"You getting excited?" Charlie reached across the seat and grabbed her hand. She nodded and couldn't help but smile. "Me too, baby." His own excitement was tangible, and his smile lit up his whole face. There was no denying he was one proud father, and that had her heartstrings tugging almost painfully.

Her belly was in knots, but in the good kind of way, and the further along she got in her pregnancy, the more she was anticipating the arrival of the baby.

She had four more months to go, and although she hadn't felt any kicking or movement, she knew it would be coming and couldn't wait.

He pulled the truck into an empty spot in front of the doctor's office, and they climbed out. He grabbed her hand again, and she loved that he always had to be touching her. Since he went wild on her all those weeks ago, literally, she noticed he tamed down quite a bit.

Maybe it was because he was no longer fighting his bear for supremacy, and now the two were merged into one. Either way, she liked everything he gave her.

When they entered the small office, there were a few women seated in the chairs. Some had obvious round pregnant bellies. After she checked in and they sat down, Ary couldn't help but notice the way the women stared at Charlie. Yes, he was certainly not a male to be missed, but wasn't it obvious enough that they were together when he still had a hold of her hand and brought it up to his mouth to kiss her fingers?

The women were called back one at a time, and the longer she had to wait, the antsier she became.

"Calm down, kitten." Charlie chuckled beside her. He was flipping through some Pregnancy 101 magazine, and that sight brought a smile to her face.

"February Felina?"

Her heart pounded a fast tattoo, and they both stood and followed the medical assistant into the back of the office. After being weighed, having her vitals taken, and asked to change into the standard paper gown, they were left to wait in the room for the doctor to arrive. Charlie started pacing, and it was her turn to speak and ease his nervousness.

"Calm down, Charlie." He glared at her but plopped his big body into the tiny chair in the corner. The doctor arrived moments later with a sonogram machine and an assistant.

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“Hello. I’m Dr. Harrison.” She held her hand out, and Ary took it. The physician was a cougar shifter, the same as the assistant. The feline in her could smell the cat in them right away. “So how about we check on your little one?”

Nodding and smiling, February did as the doctor instructed and lay back on the table. The lights dimmed, and the sonogram machine lit up in an array of blue and white. “If you were a human, we would have to go vaginally in order to see anything, because you’re so early in the pregnancy, but seeing as you’re a shifter, we will be able to do this on your abdomen.” The assistant brought the machine closer. “We can see the sex of the baby and which species it will take after, if that is what you’d like revealed.” She smiled at Ary and then did the same to Charlie.

Dr. Harrison squeezed warm gel on her exposed belly and started moving it around. Charlie stood by her side and took her hand in his. At first, she couldn’t see anything but a black screen, but then the tiny body came into view. Ary could make out the arms and legs, the head, and even the tiny fingers and toes.

The doctor started pointing out all the parts and even showed them the baby’s beating heart and let them hear it. Tears filled her eyes, and she blinked them away. It was the most surreal and joyous moment in her life thus far.

“Do you guys want to know the sex and who the baby is taking after?”

Ary looked at Charlie but already knew he wanted to know as well. She looked back at the doctor and smiled. “We want to know.” The doctor ran the wand over her belly a few more times, tapped out dimensions on the keyboard, and printed off some pictures.

She pointed at the screen, but Ary had no idea what she was looking at. “You see that right there?” Charlie leaned in and squinted, and she and the doctor laughed. “I know it’s hard to make out if you don’t know what it is, but that right there tells me your baby is a boy.” Charlie snapped his head back, and she swore his chest puffed out a good six inches.

The doctor then started rattling off bone lengths, head circumference, and a whole lot of other dimensions that made no sense to Ary.

“The bone structure and the placement of internal organs tell me your baby will be a bear shifter.”

Charlie squeezed her hand and looked down at her. His smile was bigger than any other time before, and she couldn’t help but return the expression.

“You hear that, kitten? We are having a boy, and it looks like he’s taking after his dad.” He leaned down and kissed her on the lips.

“I can also see he is going to be a pretty big boy too, given the length of his arms and legs this early on.” Doctor Harrison looked over at them. “But seeing as the father is quite large in size, that really isn’t a surprise.” They wrapped everything up, and they were handed a series of pictures of the baby. When they were left alone and Ary was dressed, Charlie grabbed her and pulled her into a tight hug.

“Have I told you how happy you make me?” He pulled back and cupped her face with his hands.

She had to crane her head back to look into his face. “Yes, but you can always tell me again.”

He chuckled and kissed her once more. “You make me so damn happy. I love you,

Ary.” Her eyes widened, and her pulse quickened. Charlie didn’t flinch as he stared at her. “I know everything is happening so fast, but my feelings are what they are. I don’t expect you to feel the same way—”

“I love you too, Charlie.”

His eyes widened a fraction as well, and then that trademark half-mouth smile came into play. He pulled her into a hug again, and she heard him inhale. He was right; things were going so fast, but she had never been around someone who made her feel so complete.

After several long minutes of him just holding her, he pulled back and dropped to his knees in front of her. She was a bit confused as to what he was doing, but then he lifted up her shirt and placed a kiss on her stomach.

“You hear that, son? Your momma loves me, and I love her.” He kissed her once more and stood. She was speechless, so much so that all she could do was blink at what he had just done. Here was this big, strong male, so very powerful and frightening at times, but so gentle and surprising at the things he did. He continuously shocked her. “We better get going or they’ll think we’re doing dirty things in the exam room.” He took her hand and led her out of the office. She was still in shock when he helped her in then climbed in the driver seat.

“I freaked you out, didn’t I?”

Blinking a few times, she turned to him and shook her head. “You made me feel like I am actually wanted.” Tears pricked her eyes, and he pulled her close to him.

“Hey, no crying, unless it’s because you’re happy.”

She nodded against his chest. “I am happy. You make me happy, Charlie.” Pulling back and looking into his face, she was struck anew by the force of how much she loved him. It seemed crazy that she could feel like this for one person after such a short amount of time, but her feelings had been there all along, and until Charlie had told her he loved her, she hadn’t known it was so intense and consumed her fully.

He wiped her tears away with the pads of his thumbs.

“I hate to tell you this, but I told you so.”

For a moment, she was confused by his statement, but then it clicked into place. He was stating the fact that he had known they were having a boy and that he would be a bear. Smacking him playfully on the arm, she scooted back to her seat and chuckled. “Yeah, I guess you did.”

He started the engine, but before he pulled out of the parking lot, he leaned over and kissed her on the head. “You want to wait to tell everyone the good news until tonight?”

She nodded, because that was just what she was about to tell him. He took her hand

in his and then maneuvered the truck out of the parking space and away from the doctor's office.

"I need to stop by the butchers and pick up a meat order Bram placed for dinner tonight."

"That's fine. I'll go into the supermarket and grab a few things."

He pulled into a spot right in front of the little grocery store and cut the engine. "I won't be too long. I'll meet you inside." He leaned over and kissed her on the lips. They climbed out of the truck, and he jogged across the street to Brady's. She walked into Sweet Water's small grocery store and grabbed a cart. If anyone wanted more than the necessities, they'd have to travel twenty minutes outside of town to the larger chain supermarket to get it.

After paper plates, plastic cups, and any other "party" items she could think of, she debated whether or not to grab a bottle of wine for Melissa and Candace. Deciding against it, because if she knew anything about Melissa, it was that she would probably bring a case of wine with her, she headed over to the bakery. After ordering a baker's dozen of pastries, she stood patiently as they were being packaged.

"February?" Stiffening at the deep sound of her name right behind her, she slowly turned around and stared at Frank. Her jackal ex-boyfriend looked exactly the same: longish dark hair and cold, flat dark eyes. They had broken up—or more, she had left him. Memories of their relationship washed through her, sour and vile ones that made her feel like less of a woman and more of an object.

He had made her feel like no one else would want her, had told her as much on several occasions, yet she stayed with him. That was, until she grew a backbone, talked to her two best friends, and dumped his ass. No way would she let him intimidate her anymore.

She was now with Charlie and couldn't help but feel like she was worthy of someone's love and that they were worthy of her love in return.

"Well, shit, it is you." He eyed her up and down, and she could practically hear his condescending words even though he didn't say anything. "Damn, Ary, in just a few months, you've really packed on the pounds. And that's saying something, since you were thick to begin with." And there was the Frank she left. She didn't say anything, couldn't, because she was humiliated, but also because she was furious.

Opening her mouth would only end in her saying something vile in front of a lot of unsuspecting people, children included. No, she would bite her tongue, hope her pastries were almost ready, and walk away from him.

"Ma'am?" She turned and saw the baker handing her the box filled with her baked goods. Her face heated even further at the knowledge that Frank would no doubt have a comment about that. And just like on cue, he spewed his hurtful thoughts.

"I see you're still eating like the world's gonna end." He started cackling that distinctive laugh jackals had. Her face felt like it was on fire, and she snatched the box, said thank you, and started to walk away. A hand on her arm stopped her, and her heart raced.

"Damn, Ary, the least you can do is say hi to the man whose heart you broke."

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Yeah, if she had broken his heart by leaving, then the world really had ended. Just days after she broke up with him, she'd seen him all over a human female. Shaking because of his icy touch, she straightened her shoulders and told herself she would not let him get to her.

“I have nothing else to say to you.”

The saccharine smile he wore vanished, and he narrowed his eyes. She went to turn again, but his hand gripped her wrist in a tight hold, and he refused to let go.

“You bitch. I put up with your shit for a whole fucking year, and now you act like you're too damn good to even talk to me? You fucking bitch—” Before he could continue on his rant, he was thrown across the aisle, slid along the polished floor, and landed at the base of a soup can display. Chicken noodle soup cans fell all around him, and he moved away before he got buried in them.

Charlie stood a foot in front of her, and looking at his profile showed his rage and the fact that he was seconds away from shifting. Knowing she had to defuse the situation before it got worse, she took a step forward and placed her hand on Charlie's forearm. The heat that came from him told her his muscles were contracting, preparing to shift and fight.

“Looks like Ary found herself a protector. Not that she's gonna need a big bear to watch over her.” The fact that he was making yet another reference about her looks wasn't lost on her, but then again, she didn't care at the moment. There was no doubt Charlie could easily kill him, but then that would just open up a lot of problems she didn't want Charlie to deal with.

“Come on, Charlie. It isn’t worth it. He isn’t worth it.”

Frank had since stood, and she could tell he was doing everything in his power not to attack or make another nasty remark. He had never been known for his restraint, but clearly he knew what he was up against and was actually thinking about the repercussions for once in his miserable life.

There was no contest that a bear could take a jackal, but Frank had never been the brightest male, and his temper and arrogant attitude had gotten him into a lot of trouble when they were dating.

Exhaling the breath she hadn’t known she was holding in, Ary was able to steer Charlie out of the grocery store, although she knew he was allowing it or it wouldn’t have happened. Once they were back in his truck, her groceries tossed in the back, all she wanted to do was drive out of there and never look back, but he didn’t start the truck or pull away from the store.

He had a tight grip on the steering wheel, and his knuckles were white as bone.

“Charlie, please, let’s go.” She kept her voice purposefully soft and placed her hand gently on his thigh. His muscles twitched beneath her palm, but he covered her hand with his and looked at her.

“That was the ex I take it?” He said it through clenched teeth. She nodded once, and a muscle under his jaw jumped. He returned the nod and went back to staring out the front windshield. “I could have torn him in half for what he said to you, and when he put his hands on you, kitten....” His voice was scary low, and she didn’t know any way to make things better aside from just leaving.

“I’m glad you controlled yourself, because he isn’t worth the air he breathes. Come on, Charlie, I’m excited to meet your brothers and tell everyone the good news.” She

placed a hand on her belly and offered him a smile she hoped didn't look unsteady.

He turned his upper body so he was facing her. His smile was forced but still there. "I didn't mean to frighten you, baby."

"I know, but when I said he isn't worth it, that is exactly what I meant. I don't want you getting in trouble because of some asshole like him. I love you, Charlie."

He exhaled, and his smile wasn't forced this time. "I love you too, baby." He kissed her on top of the head, and she closed her eyes and felt herself relax for the first time since the whole altercation started. They finally left and headed toward Bram's cabin not far from where Charlie lived. She just wanted to put everything that had to do with Frank behind her and thought she had until she had seen him tonight.

Maybe she wasn't as stable with her self-worth as she originally thought.

16

Melissa and Candace kept passing around the ultrasound picture, oohing and aahing at how cute the baby looked. Charlie and his brothers were at the dining room table drinking beer, while the girls stayed in the living room.

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“Is it awkward for you, Melissa?” Ary took a drink of her lemonade.

“What?” Melissa handed the pictures to Candace and looked up at her. “Awkward about what?”

Ary tilted her head toward where the guys were at. Melissa waved her question off.

“Just because we almost slept together but I ended up going home with someone else isn’t a big deal, Ary. We parted ways on good terms. In fact, I saw him leaving with some redhead, so it’s all good.” She smiled. “Besides, I had a nice time with Nick.” She wagged her eyebrows, and they all started laughing.

This had all three of them laughing so loud the guys stopped their conversation and looked over at them curiously. They smiled innocently, which had all three guys narrowing their eyes suspiciously but going back to their conversations nonetheless.

“So, things are good with you two?” Candace asked her.

A flurry of butterflies started in February’s belly, and she felt her cheeks heat when Melissa and Candace’s matching grins met hers. “More than okay.” She leaned forward and lowered her voice. “He told me he loved me, and I said it in return.”

For once, Melissa was speechless.

“Oh my God, Ary.” Candace clasped her hands together and covered her mouth.

“Dammit, why can’t I find a hot bear shifter and have everything fall into place?”

Melissa whined teasingly, but Ary could tell there was no heat behind her words.

“So you’re seeing that lion shifter again? Not really your style, Melissa.” Candace grinned, and both Ary and Melissa glanced over at their normally quiet friend. Candace had a little bit of bite in her tonight, and Ary decided it suited her quite well.

“You bitch.” Melissa poked Candace in the ribs and smirked. “Yeah, it isn’t my style. I’m kind of the love ‘em and leave ‘em kind of girl, but hey, it isn’t like I have anything better to do. Besides, he said he wanted to take me to dinner and go dancing this weekend. And also, he’s a manly man, you know, the kind who can crush an opponent with his hands.” She squeezed her hand as if to emphasize her point.

That brought back the memory of Frank and Charlie getting into it at the store. If February never had to witness something like that again, she would die a happy woman. She certainly didn’t want to have Frank’s vileness seeping into her current life, and she didn’t want Charlie involved in any of that. Frank was part of her past, and that was where she wanted him to stay.

Charlie could hear the females laughing in the next room, and the sound of Ary’s happiness made him smile.

“Man, you got it bad for your girl.” Bram’s words were filled with brotherly love. Charlie looked up at him, saw the fresh split lip and slightly swollen right eye, and sighed out loud.

“Bram, when are you going to chill on the fighting?”

His youngest brother cracked his knuckles and smirked. “Listen, it helps me with all this extra energy that builds and builds inside me until I feel like I’m going to explode. Besides, I like breaking a few noses. It’s fun.”

Charlie rolled his eyes, and Ford grunted in amusement. Out of the three of them, Bram had always been far more bear than human, and Charlie knew he took after their father in that regard.

“Anyway, enough about this and his need to kick some ass, and more about you and your girl.” Ford made a low, annoyed sound when Bram play-punched him in the arm.

“Dick.”

Charlie chuckled at his brothers’ banter.

“I never thought I’d see the day when you’d get pussy whipped,” Ford said absently. His attention was on his cell that was on the table in front of him. His brow was puckered, and a look of concentration was written across his face. When Charlie looked over at Bram, he saw a worried expression on his brother’s face.

He didn’t need to ask Bram what was wrong, because when his brother mouthed the word Mina, Charlie knew Ford was slowly going down a slippery slope of anger and pain. Ford had never discussed what really happened with him and Mina. One day, they were together, and the next, she was moving out of Sweet Water.

Ford would most likely be out tonight, drinking to numb everything he was feeling, and Charlie would be there picking him up and most likely stopping an all-out brawl that Ford started.

Yeah, he could see it all playing out in his head now and knew it was going to be one hell of a night.

The sound of a phone going off woke Ary, and she blinked her eyes open. She turned in bed and looked at Charlie fumbling with his cell.

“Yeah?” The sound of a male voice coming from the receiver could be heard, but it was too muffled, so she couldn’t understand what was said or who it was. “Fucking hell, Bram.” He scrubbed a hand over his face and sat up in bed. “We both knew this was going to happen, so chill the fuck out. You shouldn’t have let him get to that point.” A beat of silence passed. “Yeah, yeah. I’ll be there in ten.” He ended the call and set it on the table. “I’m sorry, baby. Ford is piss-ass drunk and starting shit down at Slater’s.”

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Worry instantly settled into her. “The rundown biker bar right outside of town?” She was wide awake now and stared at his naked, muscular back. “I’ve heard that place is pretty dangerous.” And where the scum of the earth liked to hang out. Charlie was going there, and in the middle of the night no less?

“Yeah, and it is only getting more dangerous with Ford there starting a bunch of drunken shit.” He looked over his shoulder and smiled at her. “Don’t worry. Everything will be okay. Go back to sleep, baby, and when you wake up, I’ll be right next to you.” He leaned forward and kissed her on the forehead.

She watched in silence as he quickly shoved his legs into a pair of jeans and pulled a T-shirt over his head. He kissed her once more before he strode out of the house and to a place nightmares were made of.

She lay there alone, in his huge king-sized bed, smelling his scent surround her and wishing she wouldn’t worry so much. He could take care of himself, had been long before she came around. She had heard horrendous stories about prostitutes, drugs, and near murder at Slater’s. Why were Charlie’s brothers at a place like that anyway? Why that bar hadn’t been shut down was beyond her, but one thing was for sure—there was no chance of her going back to sleep anytime soon.

Slater’s was one of the roughest bars Charlie had ever been to. Because of its location, it made it damn near impossible to see from the road. So if you didn’t know it was there, you would never stumble upon it. He took the long, winding dirt road that took him past the pines and blue spruces until the dim lights of the bar came into view.

He parked his truck beside a line of Harleys and made his way inside. Slater's was on the edge of Sweet Water city limits, hidden behind a thick line of trees and off the main road.

Classic rock blasted through the shitty, scarred door and surrounded him when he walked inside. Cigarette smoke, alcohol, sweat, and sex lingered in the air. The interior wasn't big and only held a handful of tables, some busted up chairs, and a few stained barstools. The sound of breaking glass had him turning and looking to his left.

There, in the center of a loose circle, stood Ford. Bram was holding him back for the time being. An aged, human, beefy biker stood in front of Ford, his thin lips spreading over his yellow, crooked teeth, and his huge, rounded belly shaking up and down from his laughter.

Ford looked on the verge of shifting, and Charlie was surprised he hadn't yet and that Bram was able to keep him under control.

Ford's mouth moved, and whatever he said had the biker's laughter dying and his face turning a deep shade of red. An old and used-up looking human woman stepped up to the biker and whispered something in his ear. He shrugged her off, peeled his faded, leather Cut off his body, and cracked his knuckles.

"Shit." Charlie ran a hand over his jaw. If that human knew what the fuck he was messing with, he'd turn around right now and walk his ass out the door. Charlie shoved the people aside until he was standing beside his brothers.

The stench of sweat was overpowering. He turned toward the biker and looked him up and down. He had to give the old human some credit, because there wasn't an ounce of fear permeating from him.

“Listen, just walk away, man.” He could practically see the steam coming from the human’s ears.

“Whatchu say, boy?” He took a step toward Charlie, his fists in balls by his side, and the sound of his teeth grinding filling the space between them.

“Whatever my brother said to you to get you pissed off, I apologize. He’s drunk and clearly going through some shit. I’d be happy to buy you and everyone else a round of shots, or beer if you prefer.” No doubt, Charlie and his brothers could have taken all these humans, but he was tired and certainly wasn’t in the mood for any fucking drama. Placating the lot of them seemed far easier.

All he wanted to do was get Ford and Bram back to his truck and crawl in bed with his female. It took a moment, but slowly the human’s anger dissipated, and he took a step back.

“All right, but after that, your boy needs to get his ass outta here.”

Charlie nodded, because he intended to do just that.

He and Bram carried Ford out, who didn’t know when to keep his damn mouth shut and yelled out every curse word in the English language. At least with Charlie and Bram’s manpower they were able to drag him to the truck.

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“I’m going to buy them some drinks, and then you can tell me what in the hell is going on,” Charlie murmured, and Bram tilted his chin in acknowledgment. He headed back inside, bought the house a round of shots and beers as an apology, and went back outside to Bram and Ford. He made it one step before a deep voice to his right came from the shadows.

“You fucking pussy-ass bitch.” Instantly, he recognized that voice. The hair on Charlie’s arms stood up, and his muscles warmed and grew as his blood started pumping fast and hard through his body.

Frank stepped out of the shadows, followed by three more scuzzy and intoxicated-looking humans. The jackal had a bottle of tequila in his hand and a sneer distorting his upper lip.

“I let you have that bitch. If it weren’t for me stepping back and letting her go, Ary would still be mine, and I’d own every inch of her.”

Ary wasn’t around to stop him this time. Bram and Ford were around the building where he had parked his truck, and he knew both of them were too drunk for their senses to pick up the shit that was just about to go down. That was fine by Charlie, because he wanted to take Frank down, and if these crackhead humans wanted some of his bear too, then so fucking be it.

Cracking his knuckles and rolling his head on his neck, Charlie grinned at Frank and the humans. He allowed his bear to flash to the surface, letting them see exactly what they were about to be dealing with.

“Do you know what you’re messing with?” Any sane shifter fought with an opponent of their own size. A coyote didn’t fight a lion, and a jackal sure as hell didn’t fight a bear. Even in human form, he was at least double the size of this asshole who kept advancing on him.

His goons behind him seemed more hesitant. They may not have the keen senses a shifter did, but they could tell they didn’t want any part of this.

“Man, I didn’t sign up to fight no bear,” one of the greasy humans muttered.

“Yeah, man, you never said anything about us fighting an animal.” The humans took a step back in sync, and Frank growled in frustration.

“Y’all are a bunch of pansy-ass pussies.”

“Hey, we didn’t sign up for this shit. You just told us you needed a few extra hands to get rid of the asshole who’s been hitting on your girl.”

His girl? Oh no fucking way was this jackal motherfucker going to put any claim on his Ary. Charlie growled low in his throat, which had the three humans turning and booking it in the other direction. Good, because this fight was between the two of them.

A bigger man would have walked away, but all Charlie could see was Frank’s hands on Ary and the foul, disgusting things he said to her earlier in the day.

No, this motherfucker wasn’t going to get away with what he did, and he would be put in his place. When this was all said and done, Frank the jackal would never come near Ary again, not if he wanted his balls still intact.

Frank laughed, guzzled the last of his liquor, and tossed the bottle against the side of

the building. It shattered, and the noise echoed off the high walls. "I know what you are, but I don't think you know who I am." He rolled his shoulders back. "I've taken on bears before, and you ain't no different from them pansy-ass motherfuckers." His voice was slurred, and it was clear he was drunk, but intoxication wasn't going to save him now.

In a move faster than Charlie thought possible, given the jackal's inebriated state, Frank swung out and connected with Charlie's gut. The wind was momentarily knocked out of him, but he straightened to his full height, felt the shift take over, and grinned at the little fucker. Frank shifted as well. The sound of their bones breaking and realigning and their clothes tearing away pierced the night.

There they stood, jackal to bear, and all Charlie wanted to do was rip into him until blood coated his fur and there was nothing left. Frank made the first move, his actions sloppy but fast. The rage in him was on the verge of insane and manic.

A searing pain lanced through Charlie's side, and he roared. He swung his paw out, connected with Frank's muzzle, and sent him flying against the brick building.

For a few seconds, Frank was down, but because the asshole was crazier than shit, he got back on all fours and charged at him again. Charlie was done with this. He charged for Frank and met him in a head-on collision. He was three times the size and weight of the jackal, and with rage filling every part of his body because this dick still wanted Ary, he knew there was no chance he'd lose.

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Frank might have gotten in a few shots, but that ended now. Tackling Frank to the ground, Charlie used one big paw to hold his snapping head down and brought his muzzle close to his. Roaring out as powerfully as he could, he smelled the rotting stench of Frank's fear finally break through the surface. Maybe he was finally realizing this wasn't a fight he was going to win.

He struggled beneath Charlie for a few more minutes, and Charlie thought how easy it would be just to clamp his jaw on Frank's neck and snap the thin bone.

Finally, the fight left the jackal, and Charlie shifted back into his human form. It certainly hadn't been the longest or most vicious of fights he'd been in, but it had been the most important.

"I'm only going to say this once, so your crazy ass better be paying attention. February is mine and will always be mine. I'll protect her until I can't breathe any longer, and if I ever see you near her again or hear you've been talking about her, I'll hunt you down and finish this. I will not offer you another warning. Do you understand?" His voice was a low rumble of repressed anger. It took Frank a few seconds, but when he finally realized Charlie spoke the truth, he nodded once.

Charlie stood and, without a backward glance, headed to his truck. He saw Bram leaning against the side with a cigarette between his lips.

"I was wondering if you were going to just beat his ass already or if you just planned on playing with him for fun," Bram said. "Was gonna join in the fun when I saw what the hell was going down, but I thought you needed that fight all to yourself."

Charlie flipped Bram off and opened the back passenger door to grab an extra set of clothes he always kept. Ford was passed out cold and taking up the entire back seat.

“You taking your truck back or are you too drunk to drive?”

“Nah, man, I had just as many drinks as Ford, but when I knew it was time to call it a night, he just kept going. Just bring me back in the morning to get it.”

Once dressed in jeans and a T-shirt, Charlie climbed in and waited for Bram to do the same. Once they were on the road and heading back to his place, Charlie decided now was as good a time as any to find out what the hell was up, but before he could talk, Bram filled him in.

“Mina called Ford right before you guys showed up. Told him she is back in town for a wedding.” It wasn’t as bad as Charlie thought. Yeah, Mina had been with Ford for a while. And after they broke it off, his brother had just been... different.

“Okay, well, why in the hell would she call him and tell him she’s in town? She trying to hurt him all over again? It’s been ten fucking years.”

“Charlie, she called to tell him she’s in town for her wedding. She’s getting married to some doctor or some shit like that, and using her folks’ estate to have it on. She wanted him to hear it from her first.”

Charlie looked over at his brother and felt his heart breaking for Ford all over again. “Shit. No wonder he was all kinds of fucked up.” He should have just let Ford kick someone’s ass. At least that way he would have gotten some of his anguish out.

Charlie adjusted his mirror so he could see Ford lying on the backseat. Damn, looks like there are going to be plenty more of these nights in the near future.

Charlie took his brothers back to his place, since he'd have to drive them to get Bram's truck in the morning. After getting Ford settled in the guestroom and seeing Bram to the other spare room, Charlie went to the master suite. He needed a shower to wash the fight off of him. He was surprised to see Ary up in bed with the sheets drawn up to her chin. The sight had him chuckling.

"Baby, you look so damn worried it's cute." She eyed him, and he knew the moment she realized he was in different clothes. He held his hand up right when she was about to talk. "I plan on telling you everything, kitten. Let me just take a shower first, yeah?" She swallowed and then nodded.

He took the quickest shower imaginable and stepped back into the room with a towel slung low on his hips. Ary was sitting on the edge of the bed and staring right at him.

Exhaling and running his hand over the damp hair at the nape of his neck, he sat down beside her. He supposed he'd start with Ford's issues then move on to Frank.

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“I had to get Ford because his ex-girlfriend is in town and told him she’s getting married.” At her confused look, he lifted his hand and smoothed his finger between her eyes. “He was with Mina for a while, but then they split up, and Ford just got... well, darker, I guess.” He exhaled. “So he got drunk tonight at Slater’s, and I had to smooth things over with the human he was trying to fight. He and Bram are staying overnight, so I can take them back to get Bram’s truck in the morning.”

“Oh God. Is everyone okay?” Bless her heart for thinking of everyone else.

“Yeah, baby, they’re good.” Shit, how did he now bring up Frank? He didn’t want to upset her further and knew bringing up that prick’s name would do that. Before he could bring it up, she told him what she already knew.

“You saw Frank at the bar, didn’t you? Fought him too?” At his nod, she looked away and swallowed again. “I smelled him all over you, his blood too. You’re okay, though?” He smiled when she started running her hands up and down his chest.

“Yeah, baby.”

“Did you kill him?” Her voice cracked slightly. There was pure worry in her eyes.

He shook his head slowly. “No, but he won’t be bothering you again.” She turned her head and looked at the ground.

“I’m not happy you got into a fight with him, but I don’t doubt he probably instigated the whole thing. Frank was always good at pissing people off.” She sighed heavily and turned to look at him. “I’m glad you’re okay and you didn’t kill him, even though

Frank is worthless. But please promise me that we will put him behind us. I don't want him coming between us."

Turning her so they were facing each other, he stared into her eyes. "February Felina, I would never let anything hurt you. Ever." He took her hand and placed it over his heart. "Do you feel that?" At her nod, he continued. "My heart beat before you came along, but it was for the sole purpose of living. Then you walked into my life, as unconventional as our meeting was, and it beat for a totally different reason. You are why it pumps blood through my body, and you are what makes it keep going." Tears started to fall down her cheeks, and he leaned down and kissed away the salty remnants of her emotions. "I love you to the end of the earth and back."

She smiled at his statement. "I love you too." He took her mouth and tasted the flavor of her tears and everything that made up his mate. She was his, he was hers, and there was nothing that would ever change that.

His mark may have disappeared from her flesh, but his scent poured off her, and a low growl of possessiveness left him at that knowledge. From this point forward, it was only the future they had to focus on.

Epilogue

Two years later

"Momma!" The tiny wail that came from the living room had Ary dropping the plate she was washing and running out of the kitchen.

"What?" She looked around the living room and saw Cole standing by the patio doors. "What's wrong?" She rushed over to him and scooped up her little boy. Scanning his body for injuries, she breathed out in relief when she saw none. "Why did you cry, Cole? Are you hurt?"

“No.” A little frown formed between his eyes. He started mumbling unintelligible things and pointing outside.

“He’s mad that I brought him inside because he wouldn’t listen and kept trying to eat worms.” Charlie came up behind her, pushed her hair off her shoulder, and kissed the exposed skin. A shiver worked through her, a reaction she had when he touched her even two years later.

Looking down at Cole’s tiny hands, she noticed for the first time they were filthy. “Cole Charlie Wylde, were you not listening again?”

A fat tear rolled down his chubby little cheek, and she brushed it away and kissed his forehead. Her little man looked just like Charlie, right down to his blue eyes and blond hair. Cole threw his arms up and went tense in the way toddlers did during a temper tantrum.

She set him down, and he ran to the corner of the room where his toy box was. Charlie turned her around and framed her swollen belly with his hands.

“You feeling okay, kitten?” He kissed her right cheek then her left.

“I guess. I just feel fatter than usual and ready to have this little girl.” He rubbed her belly, and she swore if he took a needle to her, she’d pop like a damn overfilled balloon. He smiled and continued to rub her stomach.

“You want me to massage your feet?”

She moaned. “Man, you know the way to a woman’s heart.” He chuckled deeply and led her to the couch. Once she was in position, he picked up her bare foot and started kneading the top and then the heel. The baby decided to start kicking like crazy.

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Their daughter was due in just a few weeks, and Ary couldn't wait. Not only was she having a little girl, but she was also an ocelot shifter. Heaven help her. She would be living with two bear shifters and now another ocelot, who probably had a fiery little attitude if her acrobatics in her belly were anything to go by. Charlie looked up at her and did that sexy little half-mouthed grin.

"Have I told you I love you?"

"Not since this morning, but I am always willing to hear it a second time, and a third and fourth." He started massaging her other foot, and not even the sound of Cole banging his toys together, or the tea kettle screaming, could take her away from this one perfect moment.

"Well, Mrs. Charlie Wylde, I love you more than a fish loves water."

She threw her head back and started laughing.

"You are so dang cheesy."

He was grinning when he sat beside her on the couch and enveloped her in his big arms.

"Maybe, but I still mean every word I say." Resting her head on his chest, she listened to his heart beating steady and strong. Yeah, she knew he meant it all, corny or not, and because of that, she loved him to the end of the world and back.

She couldn't help smiling at the thought of that phrase. It had been what he told her

the night he came back from Slater's and poured his heart out to her in a poetic way.

His words might have seemed cheesy in context, but he meant them from the bottom of his heart, and she knew that without a doubt. He had given her a beautiful little boy and soon a little girl, and he constantly made her feel like the most cherished woman on the planet.

He was soft and gentle with her, but was also fierce and strong and protected her and Cole with every part of his being.

“You know what, Charlie?”

He smoothed his hand up and down her back. “What, baby?”

“I love you more than the flowers love the sun.”

He started chuckling, and everything came rushing back to her—the noise of Cole laughing and throwing his toys against the wall, and the sound of the tea kettle still screaming. She went to stand, but Charlie helped her back on the couch and went to the kitchen.

Even with her life hectic and boringly domestic at times, she wouldn't change it for anything in the world.