



A Beary Merry Christmas

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Category: Romance, Paranormal

Description: Lora will get more than she expected on her first date with Stone, but will she get the happily-ever-after she's been dreaming of?

WARNING: This e-book contains an extra curvy female, an extra buff male, an extra ornery bear, an extra dose of sizzle, and a dash of holiday cheer.

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Chapter One

December 18th

Lora

I stared at my reflection in the mirror. It was a far cry from my standard uniform of scrubs. Not that they weren't comfortable, but there was no feeling sexy in them; only motherly. Nursing was a profession that required a mother's tenderness, though.

Letting my gaze roam my abundant curves, I sighed. I'd changed a good five times already. First dates were always difficult to dress for. You didn't want to be overdressed or underdressed. There was a delicate balance to these things.

Twisting, I studied my side profile, fluffing my long sleeve, black, skater dress. Black tights covered my thick legs, grey booties were season appropriate, as was the grey scarf attempting to conceal my unable-to-be-concealed double chin. Mindlessly, I stroked the hand-knit garment. Christmas Day would be five years since she'd passed away, and not a day went by that I didn't think of my grandmother still. I continued to have moments of disbelief, moments when I couldn't believe she was gone.

Exhaling softly, I adjusted the long gold necklace peeking beneath the scarf, touching the top swell of my breasts, breasts that were little more than a handful for most men. The top half of the black number hugged my curves in an unforgiving yet flattering way. Something was missing, though. Grey and black weren't exactly exciting, and certainly not enough to make a solid first impression.

Stalking back to my closet, I sifted through my options, for what felt like the millionth time. Spotting the cropped, faux leather jacket, I yanked it off of the hanger. Walking back to the mirror, I slid into the smooth material, giving it a tug over my shoulders, ensuring it was sitting properly. Studying how the pieces contrasted yet complimented each other, a smile split my face. “Perfect.”

My grin widened as I admired the way the jacket added bulk to my least bulky area: my chest, and ended at the tiniest part of my waist, emphasizing my pear shape. It was an unexpected combo that made the outfit more casual and edgy, yet classy and chic. I felt amazing in it, which meant I would hold my head higher when meeting him.

Blowing out a small breath, I fluffed my long, dark brown locks. Stone was my version of perfection. If I wasn’t his cup of tea in this outfit, then I never would be. I was hoping like hell that I was, though.

We’d met on a free dating site three months ago. Despite living two towns away, just across the state line, we hadn’t met before. We both worked a lot, but should have been able to meet before now, especially since he owned his own business and could technically make his own schedule. That piece definitely had me worried. He claimed to own the only gym in Black Fall, but I couldn’t find much in the way of an online presence for the business.

Or Stone, outside of his dating profile.

Every day that passed, I fell a little harder for him, and every day, my fear multiplied, certain I was being catfished.

Part of me hoped I was, because I’d never set foot in a gym. In one shift at work, I could easily take eight thousand steps. That was the unglamorous side of nursing; that, the long twelve hour shifts, and the doctors who thought they were God. Every

job had its pitfalls, though.

The other part of me worried about the repercussions his lies could cause, if they were indeed lies, and therefore prayed harder than ever that he was who he claimed to be. I tried not to think about it too much. I could seriously regret that move later, but, for now, ignorance was bliss.

Strolling to the bed, I snatched up my smartphone. Swiping to unlock the device, I went to my photos, specifically the photos I'd saved of him.

In his pictures, he appeared rough around the edges. It wouldn't surprise me to learn that he'd broken his nose a few times; it had a sizeable bump atop it, yet it didn't detract from his looks. It gave him a bigger bad boy flare, and his brown hair, always in disarray, gave him an I-don't-give-an-eff quality that upped his sex appeal.

He was pure muscle on muscle, not something I typically found attractive, but, yet again, there was just something about him. His biceps were nearly as big as my thigh, no easy feat, but it gave me hope that maybe he could be the first man to heft my abundance and make me feel dainty, and well protected. He fed a lot of hope within me, more than I was comfortable admitting to myself.

And his smile; just looking at his smile put one on my face. It was the single element that softened all of his hardness, that made me think he was a bigger teddy bear than he appeared to be at first. Getting to know him, I knew he could be tough, but I knew he had a wonderful, soft heart.

Aside from the fact that I couldn't seem to verify his identity, he was everything a girl could dream of. He texted me every morning, randomly to let me know he was thinking about me, and he called me every couple nights after seven, just in case I was working that day.

He did work a lot, though. We'd had very few conversations without interruptions on his end. At the least, if he didn't own a business, he was definitely in management, but that wouldn't be much in the way of consolations if this were all a lie.

My stomach knotted. Tears welled as I peered at his image. "God, I don't want anything for Christmas, except him." Even though we hadn't met, I cared about him. More than I wanted to. Containing my optimism where he was concerned was next to impossible. And that made him scarier than the others. I'd opened up and had already given him pieces of me that no one else had ever had, and that scared me, because he effortlessly achieved it.

As a result, tonight could go one of two ways. It could be my biggest disappointment to date, or it could be the beginning of amazing.

There was only one way to find out.

Sucking in a deep breath, I clutched the phone to my chest, spinning to give myself a final, nervous, once-over in the mirror. This was it.

Shaking my head, I forced myself away. There was no such thing as perfection. There was only the closest thing to it. Stone was the closest thing to it that I'd found, or so he seemed to be.

Flipping off the light, I walked to the living room. Grabbing my purse off of the sofa, I was just about to stuff my phone in the structured bag when it chimed. Pausing, I glanced at the screen. My heart instantly sunk as I read his message.

'I'm so sorry, babe, but I can't make it tonight. I've been fighting a cold all week, and it finally caught up with me. I know this looks bad, waiting till the last minute and all. I was hoping the meds would kick it. I promise I'll make it up to you.'

With a sigh, I dropped my phone on the sofa and trudged back to my room. Sadly, this wasn't the first time a man had cancelled on me at the last minute, but, in all my thoughts over how tonight would go, this was the single scenario I naïvely hadn't considered.

My chest tightened and my throat constricted as I walked to the closet, not bothering to turn on the light. I felt tears prick my eyes as I stripped off my date attire, tossing it on the top shelf to hang later, and plucked a pair of leggings, a tank top, and socks from my dresser, not caring if it matched or was a hot mess. I tried not to let it get to me, but in the minute since I'd read his text, every disparaging emotion under the sun washed through me.

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I wanted to be angry, a part of me was, but the greater part of me was merely disappointed and concerned. Stone had been nothing but consistent. And, thinking back over our conversation the other night, he did sound a little different, as if his nose was stuffed. I assumed it was the connection, as he lived in a town that didn't have the best call reception.

Bending, I jerked my socks on. Squatting in front of my closet, I blindly felt for my fuzzy bunny slippers. They were the last present my grandmother ever gave me.

My heart seized, a few tears breaking free, as the familiar fabric brushed my fingers. She'd always said that the right man would still make me cry; the difference was, he would apologize and try to make up for it. Every time I'd come home from a bad date, she was right there with a cup of hot cocoa, even in the middle of summer. Chocolate, warmth, and a hug were what I'd get right now if she were still here. It was moments like these that I missed her the most.

Swallowing past the lump in my throat, barely containing my sob, I straightened, dropping the slippers on the floor. Sliding my feet into the worn pink material, I closed my closet and headed back to the common area.

Spotting my phone on the sofa, I made a beeline for the kitchen. In a matter of minutes, I had a steaming cup of cocoa, topped with marshmallows, whipped cream and sugar sprinkles, and a bag of microwave popcorn.

Meandering to the couch, I set the items down on the coffee table to focus on mastering a reply. I re-read his words several times, fresh emotions hitting me with each round. I refused to tell him it was okay, because it wasn't. He shouldn't have

waited until the last minute to drop that bomb, and I had every right to react the way I want to it. I was sitting in my living room with a face full of make-up, volumizing conditioning spray in my hair, and the modern equivalent of a t-shirt and sweats because of him.

If it weren't for my mascara being waterproof, I would seriously look like a hot mess. Nonetheless, I still felt like one. I felt like a lot of things right now, and, sadly, it wasn't the first time. But it was the hardest time, because it was the most unexpected. How did I miss it? How had I gotten so caught up in him so easily?

After more than a few minutes of mulling, I sent a quick, 'I hope you feel better soon.'

Glimpsing at the time, I blew out a cleansing breath. My best friend, Sharon, wouldn't be out of work until ten. She worked in a call center about fifteen minutes from my apartment. We'd spent countless nights consuming stuff we shouldn't and daydreaming of the day we found men who were worthy of forever. The piece that made me feel ridiculous, like a naïve fool, was that I thought I'd found him. I even said as much to her a few weeks ago. How quickly things could change.

I wanted to believe that he was actually sick. I wanted to believe that he would message me again. But the last guy who said that never spoke to me again, out of nowhere. I really did think Stone was different, but, then again, I also never thought he'd cancel on me at the last minute. There was nothing I could do about either, though.

Picking up the television remote, I tuned into the Hallmark Channel for a marathon of cheesy holiday-themed romantic comedies, only until my best friend could come console me with stories about the wedding day I was beginning to think would never happen, though.

Chapter Two

December 18th

Stone

“Come on, Doc. There’s gotta be something more you can do for me.” My throat felt like it was on fire. My head had been throbbing for days thanks to the pressure in my nose. I felt like I was slowly suffocating to death.

She glanced sidelong at me, continued to type notes on her iPad. Focusing on the screen for a few more moments, she came to a stop and faced me. “Listen, honey pie, you’re a bear, not an anomaly. And I’m a doctor, not a miracle worker. I’ve already doubled the normal were dosage because of your mass. Now you just need to follow the directions, rest, and let you and your animal recover.”

I knew I wasn’t thinking straight when I had the fucked up urge to throw a tantrum, as if it would help any. “But I have a date.” Damn. That sounded pathetic and whiny even to my own ears.

“I’ll write you an excuse.” She smirked, her eyes glittering, much the way Lora’s did in her pictures.

Dammit. The paper crinkled beneath my ass on the table as I shifted uncomfortably. Desperation rose up inside me, stirring my beast. Not every paranormal creature had a perfect mate. I’d been on this earth for thirty-five years and had yet to scent mine. I refused to settle with a woman who didn’t make me happy. If I couldn’t have my perfect mate, then I at least wanted happiness. And I hadn’t stopped smiling since I started talking to the extra curvy beauty. There was something about her. She had sass and spark, yet was easy-going and compassionate.

And I was about to crush her. I'd dragged my ass for months, waiting for some imperfection to reveal itself, the way it did with every woman before her. But she wasn't every woman before her. She wasn't a lot of things, and that made me appreciate her all the more.

And feel all the shittier for getting sick now. Fuck! I didn't want to disappoint her. "Please, Doc. Come on. You've got a grown bear begging you here." My lungs seized, sending me into a coughing fit. Dammit.

She shifted her weight, throwing one wide hip further outwards. "I see plenty of needy bears all day, Stone; your pleas won't have a magical elixir appearing out of nowhere." She stepped closer, resting a hand atop my forearm. "If she's the right woman for you, she'll be there when you're well again. And if you think she's the right woman for you, then your protective instincts will ensure you keep your distance, unless you want this cold to be her Christmas gift from you."

Shit. Check mate.

Blowing out a heavy breath, I officially surrendered. "Fine. You win."

She grew pensive, dropping her gaze for a moment. "Unfortunately, there's no winning in my profession. I'm only delaying the inevitable." Before I could process what she'd said, the sadness in her voice, she spun on her heels. "No exercising for a week. I'm sending your prescription electronically to the pharmacy; fill them as soon as you leave here. Drink lots of fluids; get lots of rest, and" -she turned to look at me, her hand on the doorknob- "no exercising. Don't think I won't have Jake and the other guys ride your ass out there." She gave me a sugary sweet smile. "Feel better, honey pie." She winked, leaving me to stew over my predicament.

Dammit. Of all the times to get sick. It'd been years since my last cold.

Hopping down off of the table, I winced, my body rebelling against the motion. Whipping out my phone, I rolled my muscles, trying to ignore the soreness dominating every limb. I hadn't been strong enough to shift in several days, and my usually ornery bear had been unusually quiet and subdued. Checking the time on my phone, I quickly calculated how much time I had before I was supposed to meet her. If I hurried, I could get a dose or two in my system, let it do its thing, and see her tonight still.

Scrolling through my phone, I found her pictures. Since I started talking to her, all other women ceased to interest me. There was something about the extra curvy brunette. I couldn't put my finger on it, but there was something special about her. And, after getting to know her these past few months, I was thinking about a long-term relationship with her.

If I could get my ass well enough to meet her and not feel like I was risking her health to do so.

The doc was right. This damned cold was the last present I wanted to give her for Christmas.

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Slipping my phone back in the pocket of my sweatpants, I headed to the checkout desk. I had a lot to do in a short amount of time, the last of which would require a miracle. I was a bear on a mission, though. And anyone who had ever underestimated me quickly discovered that, when in beast mode, I was unstoppable, especially when it came to getting what I wanted.

And I wanted Lora.

Chapter Three

December 19th

Lora

“Thanks for staying with me last night, Share Bear.” I set a steaming cup of coffee on the counter for her.

“Are you kidding me? Do we even need to do the math on how many times you’ve been there for me versus me here for you? Girl, I’ve had triple the shitty nights and you’ve never bailed.” She picked up the mug and proceeded to customize it with sugar and half & half.

I rolled my eyes, placing the carafe back in its home after pouring my own steaming cup. “It’s nothing to keep score on, and you know it.”

“Exactly.” She passed the sugar and creamer towards me. “You’re my best friend, Lo. Hell, you’re more of a sister to me than my own. It’s what we do, not for

gratitude, but out of love.” She sidled up to me, throwing an arm around me, holding her morning brew with her other hand. “And I loves you.”

A chuckle escaped me as I leaned into her embrace. “I loves you, too.” Tears stung my eyes. I hadn’t known Sharon long in best friend years. I worked at the same call center she did while finishing nursing school. The moment we met three years ago, we clicked, and had become almost inseparable overnight. We were different in many ways, but there was a strong foundation of respect that allowed us to agree to disagree, to support the other person’s choices, and to be honest yet kind with our honesty. I trusted her more than anyone.

“Subject change,” she declared, breaking away. She power-walked to the living room. “Did you buy smaller clothes or have I gained that much weight since the last time?” She fidgeted with the tank top that seemed to continuously be rolling up over her full figure.

“I haven’t bought new clothes in forever.” I sat down on the sofa, hugging the dark liquid between my palms.

She scrunched her nose. “Figures. Tammy’s on a mission to make us all fatter by New Years just so she can sell her side business to us on January 1st. She’s brought in pastries three times this week.” Giving up on the snug top, she plopped down on the other end of the couch. “It’s a brilliant plan really; half of us in that place have a sweet tooth the size of Texas.”

I snickered. “You’re not as bad as some of them. Penelope used to stock her drawers with Little Debbie snack cakes weekly because she ran through them all in a week. Right before I left, I’m pretty sure she was averaging a box a day.”

Pursing her lips, she cut her eyes at me. “You can laugh because you don’t understand our struggle. Have I ever told you that I secretly hate you for that?”

“A thousand times.” I beamed. Witnessing her upset, realizing that she was no doubt kicking herself mentally for every time she caved, I softened. “Look, we all have our vices; some are just easier to hide than others.”

“What the heck is your vice? I’ve known you for how many years now and have never seen you struggle with an addiction.” She took a sip of her coffee, loaded with twice as much sugar as my own, I was sure.

“Regret.” I swallowed hard, dropping my gaze to my full cup.

“Regret?” she echoed, shifting in her seat. “How can anyone be addicted to regret?”

Working my bottom lip, I glimpsed at her. Her brown hair was in disarray, her glasses slightly lopsided; her shirt was still rolled up, and the leggings were all that concealed her plush stomach, yet I never ceased to see her beauty. I was able to find the beauty in most things.

Except in Gran’s death.

“I replay Gran’s last few weeks in my head over and over. If I would have taken her for a second opinion, or made her go to the hospital sooner, she would still be here today. It was pneumonia, not cancer, for crying out loud. She-” Tears stung my eyes as my chest constricted, making it harder to breathe. I bounced my right leg, trying to calm my mounting anxiety. Every time I thought about it, I kicked myself all over again. She didn’t have to die when she did.

Sharon scooted closer, setting a firm hand atop my thigh, halting my movement. “You can’t change what’s already happened, honey. And you can’t have a future when you’re living in the past. She wouldn’t want you to stop living just because she did.” She carefully wrapped an arm around me.

A bitter chuckle escaped me as sorrow rooted itself in my core, the tears finally breaking free and gliding rapidly down my cheeks. “Stone said the same thing.” I swallowed past the tightness in my throat. “He said a lot of wonderful things that have me feeling like a complete fool for believing him now.” I felt my features twist as I fought for control. “I really didn’t see it coming.” I shook my head in dismay. “I was so blind and, just, dumb.” Stretching, I set my mug on the coffee table. Sitting back, I swiped at my cheeks. “Am I so desperate for an ever-after that I can ignore altogether the signs that point to potential unhappiness?”

“Honey, you’re thirty. We all get a little desperate at that age. Hell, I’m more than a little desperate at forty. I’m beginning to think it’ll never happen, and that’s far worse. You still have time; you still have hope. I’ve got a cranky cat that hates to cuddle and a dead-end job laden with weight gain opportunities.” She gently shook me. “But you have hope, Lora, the hope I wish I still had.”

A small smile broke through my upset; it wasn’t genuine, though. It was to cover the fresh bout of pain blooming for my friend. “That’s really sad, Share Bear.” Blindly, I snagged her hand, sniffing, attempting to subdue my emotions. “But if I can’t give up, then neither can you. Remember, I need to get my spring wedding in a field of wildflowers and you deserve your fall country wedding. If we stop now, we’ll never get either one.”

She straightened, scooting just enough to turn sideways and face me. “It sounds awful, but I look forward to that day more than I look forward to the man.” Her eyes turned glossy. Sharon hid her pain far better than most, and she had a past that would have broken most people by this point.

My heart cracked at the edges. Grabbing her hand, I gave it a little squeeze. “Only because no man has come close to being worthy of sharing that day with you.”

Staring at the black TV screen across the room, she sighed. “Maybe you’re right,

about me and you.” She briefly crushed my hand in return. “Listen, honey, you did react differently to Stone. I’m not usually an advocate for the whole wait-and-see phrase, but, he did seem to make you happier than I’d ever seen you, and I think, of all the men you’ve chatted with, he’s proven the most and therefore deserves the benefit of the doubt.” Releasing me, she stood, peering down at me. She mashed her lips together in determination. “But only for the next forty-eight hours. After that, he’s chopped liver in my book.”

This time, my smile was genuine. “Thanks.”

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Her grin hinted at the sorrow behind her words. “You’re all I’ve got, Lo. I’m always going to be here for you, for as long as I have you.”

“Hey, if I can’t live in the past, then neither can you.” I narrowed my gape, my smile falling away.

She rolled her lips. “We all have our demons, right?” She tried to lighten her tone, to make it less obvious that she was thinking about her, but she could never hide the truth from me.

Pushing up off of the sofa, I nodded my head in agreement. “Demons, vices, coffee, and wine.”

That broke her mood. She threw an arm up into the air. “Thank the powers above for that wine.” She laughed, dropping her arm. “I know we went through two bottles last night, but don’t think I won’t be buying one on my way home tonight.”

“Just don’t let it become a vice.” I winked.

“Honey, wine is one level beyond a vice; it’s my damn sanity after dealing with those idiots all day, the ones I work with and the ones who call in.” She took a hearty sip of her coffee.

“What was it that Paul used to say?” I tapped my chin with my pointer finger pensively. “Oh yeah.” I held up a finger. “Customer service is a thankless job, but some idiot’s gotta do it.”

She rocked her hips, blowing out a deep breath. “Ain’t that the truth.” She gulped down the rest of her drink, passing me the cup. “Okay, honey, I need to get home, shower, change, and get back to the thankless job.”

“Hey.” I pressed a hand to her upper arm, commanding her full attention. “I know the overtime looks good on your paycheck, but try not to give yourself a stroke. I remember how stressful that job was at this time of year.” I gave her a quick hug. “Text me later.”

Turning towards the guest room, she shook her head in dismay. “I swear, sometimes you act like the older one.”

I rolled my eyes, a smirk curling my lips. “It’s called being concerned because I loves you.”

“I loves you, too, honey.” She tossed her hair over her shoulder flirtatiously, blowing a kiss back at me.

Snatching a throw pillow off of the sofa, I tossed it at her. “Go, before you’re late. I know how long it takes you to get ready.” It took her twice as long now that I’d taught her how to do her hair and make-up, ensuring she always looked fabulous, just in case she bumped into Mr. Right.

She laughed. “Oh, please, according to you I’m always late because I’m not early.”

“Exactly. Now skedaddle.” I flicked my wrist, shooing her away.

“Slave driver.” She scrunched her nose, but her tone was pure playfulness.

In the years since I’d met Sharon, we both had become more confident, more self-assured, and that was partly due to each other. There was comfort in knowing that

someone always had your back. It allowed you to stand taller, be bolder, and put yourself out there more.

She made that possible for me after Gran. She would always have a special place in my heart for that reason.

I watched as she disappeared into the guest bedroom. Sharon was the only guest I ever had, but she refused to claim a room as her own some place that she didn't pay rent. We'd talked about moving in together countless times, but the whole not being able to bring a date home for a nightcap squashed that idea dead in its tracks every time, not that either of us had brought someone home in a long time.

Twass the downfall of a shitty dating life.

Picking up my mug, I chugged the rest of my coffee and carried the empty cups to the kitchen. A few minutes later, Sharon shouted her farewell on her way out the door.

"Have a good day," I called, drying the second mug before I put them back in the cupboard. I tried to clean as I went to save myself from a day off doing household chores. But that meant I had all day to think about Stone.

With a sigh, I headed to my room to grab my phone, just in case. Because no matter how upset I was at him for cancelling at the last minute like that, the greater part of me hoped he would text and do what Gran said the right man would do: apologize and make it up to me.

Chapter Four

December 19th

Stone

Rolling over, I stretched an arm up over my head to rest on the pillows. I still couldn't breathe for shit, but at least I wasn't as sore today.

Snatching my phone off of the nightstand, I flipped through my notifications. Not one was from her. Damn.

The last woman I talked to online blew up my phone, to the point where I had to block her everywhere. How ironic that I found myself wishing that Lora was more like the last woman. I felt like the stalker because she never messaged me first. And, as often as I reached out, I refrained in-between. I didn't spend too much time analyzing how pathetic that made me.

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Something my dad told me several years ago was, “The right woman will turn you into someone you don’t recognize; she’ll have you doing things you never thought you’d do, and she’ll have you doing them with a smile.”

It wasn’t that I didn’t pursue women I found to be attractive, just never with so much vigor. Usually by this point, they’d done many things to annoy the shit out of me.

She was the exception. I couldn’t put my finger on it, but she was different. Or maybe I’d hit my desperation point and didn’t give a fuck anymore.

Staring at my phone, I knew that wasn’t the case. I was anxious to meet her, to see her curves in person, but not because I didn’t have other options. They just ceased to be viable options after she came into my life.

Scrolling to her name in my contacts, I quickly shot her a text. ‘Good morning, beautiful. Sorry about last night.’ I could only hope she was a forgiving woman.

Climbing out of bed, I went to take a hot shower. If I was lucky, the steam would help me breathe through my nose again. I sounded like damned Darth Vader breathing through my mouth with swollen glands. That was a guaranteed turn off on any date.

My gut knotted, my bear poking his head up as regret slid through me. I should have gone last night. I should have sucked it up and gone through with it. I wouldn’t be standing here like an idiot, wondering what she smelled like, although I couldn’t technically smell at the moment, or what her skin felt like to brush against.

I wouldn't be here with a massive fucking erection based off of curiosity. The erection part would probably still exist, but from concrete facts, not musings from the mind of a needy werebear.

Pressing my palms against the tiled wall, I let the scorching water cascade over me. Even sick, the thought of her curves had me ready to hoist her against the nearest surface and thoroughly fuck her sweet pussy. Add her softness with her unintentionally sweet voice, and I was on the verge of coming without a single stroke.

Fuck. My cock strained, the tip brushing my lower abdomen. Closing my fist around my prick, I hissed. I'd never been so damned hard from merely thinking about a woman.

Oh, God. To feel her luscious lips around my cock, hear her tender voice moaning as I fucked her, see her swells and swerves bounce as I pounded into her.

Fuck! I gasped for air, my body on fire for a completely different reason. Before I knew what I was doing, pre-cum oozed from the tip of my prick as pleasure slithered through my lower half. One hand pressed to the shower wall, I furiously pumped into my other, the mental image of her driving every maniac thrust. Water slid between the creases and seams of my closed hand, lubricating every caress.

Every breath was a heavy gasp as my body tensed, as every muscle stiffened. My limbs began to burn, my need multiplying, turning me into a frantic, ravenous beast.

Closing my eyes, I focused on her breasts. Damn. What I wouldn't give to suckle her luscious melons right now and then watch the small mounds bounce as I drove into her again and again, listening to her cries.

Fuck! Heat shot down my spine, pooling in my groin before shooting from my cock. Clenching my teeth, I bit back a groan as relief flooded every inch of me, pleasure

tumbling like waves through my core.

Breathing heavily, the humidity coating my throat with every sharp inhale, I stilled, opening my eyes. Glancing down, I sighed. Damn. It'd been a long time since I'd come that hard. It made me all the more determined to meet her.

Fuck it. Cold or no cold, I was going to meet her today, even if I had to comb every street in her town to find her.

Right after I headed to Beast Mode to ensure everything was running smoothly.

Chapter Five

December 19th

Lora

It'd been four hours since he'd sent the text according to the timestamp, which meant he was awake at six-in-the-morning on a Saturday, when he was sick.

I frowned, worry niggling in my belly. Either he was a stubborn fool who wasn't allowing his body to rest and recover or he wasn't actually sick.

Working my bottom lip, I stared at the screen. There was one way to solve all of this: call him. I'd been a nurse long enough to know when someone was faking.

Pressing the icon beside his name, I put the phone to my ear. Three rings later, he answered, and I knew right then that he wasn't lying.

"Hey, beautiful." His voice was deeper than normal, more husky and hoarse, and the stuffed-nose syndrome he'd had a touch of the other night had intensified. The phone

muffled, as if he'd covered it with his hand, but I still heard his cough.

My heart cracked at the edges for him.

Until I heard the pound of metal against metal in the background.

Brows furrowing, anger flared within me. "Why are you at work?"

He chuckled, but it turned into a half-hack, half-laugh mess. "I own the place, sweetie. I have to make sure everything is running properly every day we're open."

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“Right.” I quietly sighed, working to subdue my frustration; his words revealed far more than he’d meant for them to. He could go to work every day, whether he was sick or not, but he couldn’t meet me.

There could only be one reason for that: he didn’t want to meet me.

How could I have missed the signs? He had closet fat admirer written all over his extra fit physique. He owned a gym for crying out loud. What sort of message would it send his customers if his girlfriend was, well, me? It would compromise his brand’s integrity. And, yes, he was a brand, the face of his gym’s brand, whether he wanted to be or not.

All of my rage dissipated beneath a wave of despair. My chest constricted, my heart seeming to sink, to be crushed by the sudden pressure. A steady ache settled in the center of it. “Take care of yourself, okay?” My voice softened, despite my attempt to be stern, despite my attempt to hide my true feelings.

“Always, babe.” I heard the confusion in his tone. “Are you okay? Listen, babe, I’m really sorry about last night, and I definitely want to make it up to you.”

“Stone.” His name came out sharper than I intended for it to. I exhaled quietly. “Just focus on getting better, okay?” I heard the door close in the distance, telling me he’d gone into his office.

He sucked in a deep breath, wheezing a bit as he did so. “Listen, I know I fucked up last night.”

“Stone.” It came out as a plea.

“Let me make it up to you.” He paused, giving me a moment to process it. “Please, babe. Any time; any location.” He sounded genuine...and pitiful. He definitely needed to be in bed resting.

The ache continued to grow and expand, consuming more of my core as I thought about never hearing his voice again, never receiving another text from him. The permanence attached to that thought sliced me deep. And I knew, in that moment, that sooner was better than later.

I didn’t need his picture in front of me to vividly recall every detail of him, from the weight of his dark brows to the curves of his lips. With each feeling I attached to him, he became easier and easier to remember.

I genuinely cared about him, and I didn’t want to hurt him, even if he did hurt me. “Your gym. One hour.” That gave me fifteen minutes to get dressed and ready.

“Yes.” He immediately sounded better, more cheerful, as if he was excited to see me. “I’ll text you the address, beautiful.”

Tapping down the joy manifesting from his response, I focused on my mission. “I’m not dressing beautiful, just so you know.” My plan didn’t involve going on a proper date. It involved getting him home, in bed, resting, before I said a permanent good-bye.

“I don’t care, so long as I get to see you.” As if he only just thought it of, he added, “I’m not dressed well, either.” There was a sweetness, an innocence, about the way he said it, like he was so focused on me that he forgot about himself for a moment.

He had a knack for doing that, for making me feel special, worthy of all of his

attention, when he could give it. And that alone made all of this bittersweet.

Glancing down at my outfit, realization dawned on me: I was actually doing it. I was shocking myself right now. I'd never taken the lead in a relationship; I'd always been passive. It was only slightly ironic that I was stepping up as he was about to step down. "See you soon."

"See you soon, beautiful."

Hearing the smile in his voice had me smiling, had hope blooming within me before I could stop it. Crap.

Hanging up the phone, I leapt up off of the sofa and dashed to my bedroom. Throwing my closet door open, I snagged a pair of thicker-than-normal black leggings, my oversized University of Florida Gators hoodie, compliments of my best friend who went to school there, and my gray Ugg knock-offs. Moving to my dresser, I pulled out dark gray, spaghetti strap, tank top, a lacy bra and panties set – just in case – and a pair of socks. Dropping everything on the bed, I made quick work of changing into my uber-casual ensemble.

Rushing to the bathroom, I doused my hair in silkening, conditioning serum that smelled amazing, ran a wide-toothed comb through my often-unruly strands, and brushed my teeth.

Straightening, I looked in the mirror. It didn't look like I was putting forth much of an effort with my outfit; I needed make-up. And contouring. God bless bronzer and its ability to slim the roundest of faces. It wasn't that I didn't love myself, double chin and all, it's that I wanted him to be impressed, to want to do a double and triple take; I wanted him to think about me from time to time, even if he never told me.

Prior to nursing school, I was a cosmetologist. Hair and make-up were my passion

before everything happened. I kept Gran looking fabulous up until the end. A burning pain developed in my chest.

Focusing on my reflection, I grabbed my basket of products and dove in. Five minutes later, I was on my way out the door, plugging the gym's address in my phone's GPS, praying my signal didn't drop along the way.

Sliding behind the steering wheel, I set my structured purse on the passenger seat with my phone. Shoving the key in the ignition, I started my faithful Nissan and immediately turned on the heater. Glimpsing at myself in the rearview mirror, I took a deep breath, blowing it out slowly. "Here goes nothing."

Putting the vehicle in reverse, I backed out of the parking spot, pulled out of the lot and onto the main road that led to the highway. My stomach did somersaults the further I got from home, and the closer I go to him. I was more than a little nervous, more so than last night even. There was less at stake yet, somehow, the pressure was amplified, and music did nothing to calm my nerves.

As the Black Fall welcome sign came into view along the side of the road, butterflies fluttered amongst the knots in my stomach. I'd done my best to ignore the anxiety pumping through me, but, seeing how close I was, I lost the battle.

Inhaling deep, I turned off the heat, suddenly feeling like I was suffocating. It was a crisp thirty-degrees out, according to my car's thermostat, cold enough to warrant some hot air, but it was too much right now. It was all swiftly becoming too much. Oh, God.

Slowly, I wound through the quaint mountain town. There was a certain degree of charm to it. Despite my unease distracting me, I was still able to acknowledge its appeal.

“In point-five miles, turn-”

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Grabbing my phone off of the passenger seat, I let out a groan as my service abruptly disappeared. He wasn't kidding about the bad cell reception. I had been paranoid most of the drive, randomly checking my signal. The closer I got to Black Fall, the fewer bars I had.

And now I had none, not even a roaming or extended network available.

Looking at my dash, I carefully watched the odometer. Coming to a crawl at the stoplight, I peered right and then left, trying to determine which way to go. Unease slid through me. There seemed to be more businesses to the right, but that didn't mean much.

Glancing in the rearview mirror, I cringed as I saw an SUV. It had appeared seemingly out of nowhere. Crap.

On a wing and a prayer, I swung my car to the right, letting out a small growl of frustration as the vehicle quickly followed me. Trying to think on my toes, I did the only thing I could do: pull over and let them pass.

Maneuvering my car into the small passage meant for bicyclists, I turned on my flashers, signaling for the truck to move beyond me. To my utter shock and dismay, the SUV parked right behind me. My angst multiplied. I was in a strange place with no reception and no clue as to where I was going.

A well-built male with rich chocolate skin stepped out of the vehicle. He was shorter than most men I knew yet he seemed twice as intimidating.

Pressing the automatic lock button on my door panel, I made sure there was at least some semblance of safety to the situation.

Steadily, he approached my Nissan, his jeans and sweater moving with his lean frame, giving hints at the muscle beneath them. Coming to the driver's side, he tapped on my window, immediately stepping back, putting space between himself and my car.

Reaching for the panel on the door, I pushed the appropriate button, cracking my window just enough to communicate.

"I haven't seen you in town before, and you look a little lost. Where are you headed?" His voice was velvety, with the perfect amount of rasp, in a baritone sort of way.

I watched as he kept his distance, standing a few feet away, as if he knew I was unsure of him. "Um, Beast Mode."

His brows furrowed momentarily, his gaze analyzing me. Smoothing his features, he nodded. "Drive about a mile down this road, following the curve. At the fork, stay right and Beast Mode will about a quarter mile down on the left."

"Thanks." I gave him an appreciative smile. Maybe I had been jaded these last few years. I didn't live in the city, but Montgomery was certainly bigger than Black Fall. You had Southern hospitality in my town, but safety precautions were still required.

He beamed, revealing a set of pearly whites. "You moving here?"

Studying him, I debated how much to reveal. He seemed friendly enough, but I sucked at reading men. "No." I shook my head negatively.

Standing patiently, he openly assessed me, as if he could see through my tinted

windows. Cocking his head slightly, he narrowed his gape. “You here to meet Stone?”

Feeling my brows rise, surprise setting in, I conceded. “Yes.” Idly I wondered if Stone got a lot of out-of-town visitors. This whole time I’d thought I was special; he made me feel special, but maybe I was one of a dozen. That should have made this easier emotionally, but it only made it worse, compounded the throbbing in my chest.

He stared at me for a long minute, his grin broadening. “You must be Lora.”

Confusion washed through me. Okay, so maybe I’m not one of a dozen, but then, how does he know who I am? I shifted uncomfortably in my seat.

“Shit. Sorry, love. Forgot my manners.” He took a careful step forward, towards my car. “I’m Nate, the deputy sheriff of Black Fall, and Stone’s best friend.” He added that last part at the final second, realizing I would need the information to make the connection.

The moment he said it, it clicked in my brain. I recalled Stone talking about his best friend on several occasions. Seeing him in person, I finally understood what he meant when he said they were opposites in looks but shared the same brain and the same heart for extra curvy women.

Relief washed through me, my nerves settling for a brief moment. At least one part of Stone’s story checked out.

Suddenly realizing I was staring at him and hadn’t responded, I unbuckled. I was comfortable enough with Nate, based on his considerations and precautions in not encroaching on me too fast, to properly greet him. And, for some odd reason, I felt like he deserved it. He’d saved me from driving aimlessly through unfamiliar territory. Opening my door, I stepped out of my sedan. The cold air instantly brushed

every exposed inch of my flesh. Extending a hand towards him, I met his gaze. “It’s nice to meet you, Nate. And yes, I’m Lora.”

His eyes widened as he took me in, an awkward silence stretching between us as I held my hand out. Visibly shaking himself, he scrubbed his face before taking my hand. “Damn. Stone’s one lucky beast.”

Biting my lower lip, I felt my cheeks rouge. “Thank you, I think.”

A dimple appeared in his cheek as he smiled. “Oh, that was definitely a compliment, love. But, I’m not looking to get my ass kicked by a good friend today, so I’m going to leave it at that.” He chuckled softly.

Suddenly, a breeze blew through. I shuddered as a chill chased down my spine. Stuffing my hands in the large front pocket of my pullover hoodie, I curled inwards.

Nate jumped forward, reaching around me and opening my car door. “Do you need me to show you the way to Beast Mode?”

Taking a blind step backwards, I gripped the door’s frame before dropping into the driver’s seat. “I think I can find it with your directions, thanks.”

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Shaking his head in acknowledgement, he patiently waited for me to buckle up. “It was a pleasure to meet you, Lora. Drive safe.” He waved farewell before he closed the door.

Starting my car again, I once again blasted the heat. With a wave, I pulled back onto the road, more confident this time. Within a few minutes, I parked in one of the appropriated spots of the small parking lot outside of Beast Mode.

Looking through my windshield, I studied the scene. The brick building was larger than I expected, yet not as big as some of the gyms in my area. The letters mounted on the front of the building spelled out the establishment’s name. ‘Beast’ was in clean, solid orange, and ‘Mode’ was in white. Between the two words was a ferocious looking bear head, his teeth bared, embodying the first word perfectly. A single line of well-trimmed shrubs lined the narrow space between the building and the sidewalk.

Meeting Nate had been unexpected, but learning that at least part of Stone’s story was true made me feel better, lightened the weight currently sitting on my chest. Realizing that he wasn’t a closet fat lover had me relaxing a bit, some of my queasiness subsiding.

The longer I peered at the gym’s exterior, the better I felt, the less stressed I became. Running into Nate changed things. Dare I say he had excitement slipping in amongst the unease? This whole time I’d been so negative. This entire trip, I’d steadily built the Berlin Wall, fully anticipating the worst. But what if the worst wasn’t coming? What if it was all in my head? What if Stone reacted to me as well, if not better, than Nate did?

I didn't know what fate had in store for Stone and me yet, but being a Debbie Downer wasn't improving the situation. It was only turning me into someone I'd never been: bitter. Yes, I'd been burned; I'd been hurt and tossed aside like I was worthless, but I'd never allowed it to make me bitter. I'd never put the inconsiderate mistakes of others on anyone else.

Stone made a mistake last night in waiting till the last minute, but he messaged me this morning and he agreed to meet me now. He wasn't walking away yet, so why was I planning to?

Sharon was right. I could give Stone forty-eight hours. He'd made me happy, proven my happiness mattered these last few months. The least I could do was pretend his mattered, too. There was no denying the change in his voice when I asked to meet him today.

If I was honest with myself, I was prepared to walk away now because I knew it would hurt ten times more to do it later. It was self-preservation at its best. In three months and not a single meeting, I'd grown to care about him on a deep level, one that had me acting out of character and spontaneously driving forty-five minutes for a chance to see him finally.

And that was why I did it. I could erect all of the walls I wanted, but I couldn't lie to myself. I wanted him. I bought into the life with him that I pictured in my mind, that I dreamed about, that he shared dreaming about.

I wanted this, and that was reason enough to go for it. Worst case scenario, Nate was a wonderful reminder that there were other men, handsome, attractive men, who were interested in a full-figured woman like me.

If Stone wasn't my prince charming, then I needed to celebrate. Because it meant, as wonderful as he'd been, the right man was going to be even better.

Checking my reflection in the rearview mirror, I took a deep breath. Shoving my keys and my unusable phone in my jacket's pocket, I stepped out of my vehicle. Adjusting my layers briefly, I stared at the front door. The sticker on the glass read, 'Beast Mode: Where beasts come to train.' Something about the slogan made me smirk, probably because I knew, based on his photos, that Stone was a beast in the gym.

Shutting and locking my car, I strolled up to the entrance. Reaching for the handle, my heart began to pound in my chest. This was it. Fate was about to reveal itself. Three months of pictures, phone calls and text messages came down to these next few minutes.

Yanking the door open, I bit my lower lip, in awe of the space before me. My brows arched upwards as I stood frozen, looking around in utter shock. I never expected to be impressed by a gym. Shiny machinery wasn't my thing, but, then again, neither were brawny, buff beefcakes.

It wasn't what I'd pictured in my head. Everything was streamlined, modern, and clean, yet there was a certain warmth to it; it invited you in. Gray walls were what grounded the colorful design; it was bright yet not overpowering. The motivational quotes on the walls, each in a different color, tied in with the piping on the edges of the black equipment.

Walking inside, I was immediately greeted by a lean, young woman, no older than twenty. She was dressed in black workout pants that showed off her toned legs and pert derriere and a company t-shirt. Her blonde hair was pulled back into a high ponytail. I'd always heard male voices in the background. Naïvely, I wasn't prepared for Stone to have a fit female on staff.

Coming towards me, she beamed at me, no judgment in her depths. "Hi. Welcome to Beast Mode. How can I help you today?" She was overly polite. Most people would have come off as fake being that cheery, but I could tell she was genuine, which only

made me feel guiltier for judging her.

So often as a curvy woman, I assumed the world was judging me; I hated society for judging me. But I'd just done what I loathed to her. I assumed who she was as a person based on her size, and I assumed I wouldn't like her.

Closing the distance between us, I mustered a polite, albeit guilt-laden, smile. "Hi. I'm here to see-"

"Me." His voice had my heart thumping a rapid melody. "I've got it, Lana."

The petite blonde's gaze bounced between us before a sparkle appeared in her depths. Biting back a grin, she nodded her head. "Let's hope you do." She patted his chest encouragingly as she strode past him, back behind the circular black reception desk.

Gradually, I shifted my focus towards him. My breath hitched as I finally fully peered at him. He looked even better in person, a rarity in the dating world.

Thick, dark grey, cargo-style sweatpants hung perfectly off of his slim hips. A black Beast Mode t-shirt clung to his bulk, showcasing every inch of his chest and arms while simply gliding over his trim waistline. His brown hair was in slight disarray, exactly as it was in every photo I'd seen: carefree, fresh out of bed, sexy.

His nose was red, the first telltale sign of his cold, yet he was still handsome. His lips were pouty, but they had a hard edge that took away from their plumpness. A little more than a five o'clock shadow softened his sharp jawline and rounded out his just-rolled-out-of-bed style.

He inhaled deep, his gaze roaming me openly. "Damn. You look even better in person." The grin that split his face, lighting his eyes, hit my heart like an arrow.

Abruptly, he threw his arms around me. “Hey, beautiful.”

I was caught off guard, momentarily stunned. It only took me a few seconds to recuperate and reciprocate his embrace, though. As I let go, as I sunk into his warmth, all of my stress melted away. There was something about him, about the way he held me. I couldn’t help but think about doing it again and again. It was difficult, nearly impossible really, to explain, but, somehow, it felt like I’d been in his arms before and was simply returning home again after a long journey. It felt right. He felt right. I swore I felt his heart beating atop mine, syncing with my own. His bulk seemed to fit perfectly around my plush edges. The way we locked together, like two puzzle pieces, was unexpected. He was unexpected.

Swallowing hard, I took a step back, unprepared for the emotions that welled within me. I hadn’t expected his strength to feel so amazing around me, so incredible. His embrace was reminiscent of a cocoon, with just enough constriction and just enough breathing room; just enough security and just enough wonderful.

Shaking myself mentally, I met his gaze. “Hey.” I felt my lips curl upwards into what was surely a goofy, gob smacked grin as I got lost in his honey brown depths.

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Electricity seemed to sizzle between us, even after I'd let him go, and it was that tiny experience that had my earlier fears falling away and fresh ones stepping in. I'd been a long time, if ever, since I'd felt this degree of magnetism with someone. I wanted to haul him against me, hold him tight and never let go. It was the most irrational urge I'd had in forever, and it pointed towards one obvious fact: he was different then the others. Not just in looks and actions. It was more than that. It ran deeper; what I had with him ran deeper. Which meant, if he walked away, the pain of it would run deeper.

The present had me even more shaken up about the past, about last night. He shook me up. He plucked every one of my heartstrings and then pulled back for a moment, as if he was hesitating.

And it was his reluctance that fed my own, that had me pausing to consider the unthinkable.

Until he hugged me.

Darn it! Why did I have to rush things? Why-

"If I wasn't sick, I'd kiss you right now." Heat flickered in his depths, nearly illuminating his eyes.

A smile broke through my shock, heat brushing my cheeks. I chuckled, most of my tension dissipating with that one admission. Regardless of what was true or false, there was one undeniable truth: the chemistry and attraction I'd experienced digitally with him transferred into real life. And if I had any question as to whether it was one-

sided, his statement obliterated it.

Well done, Fate.

Chapter Six

December 19th

Stone

God, damn, she was gorgeous. Her skin was flawless, and her ass. Fucking A. I was tempted to risk a smack for the chance to touch it. Her leggings left little to the imagination, and had my undivided attention.

Shit. If I thought for one second that I could kiss her and not get her sick, or sound like I was on the verge of a panic attack with every wheezy breath, I would. Seeing her had me forgetting every symptom I had. Nate was right. I was going to be kicking myself for a long time to come over last night. Because, knowing her character and seeing her beauty matched it, I would fucking lose it, I would never forgive myself, if last night cost me all of her.

Suddenly remembering my manners, I moved to the side, allowing her to see my second home. I'd poured a lot of time, money and effort into Beast Mode. I was proud of what it had become: a staple in a were-dominated community. "Would you like a tour of the place?"

She considered me, not rushing to reply. "Sure, but only if you promise to talk as little as possible. I don't need you getting worse on my account." She softened her words with a gentle smile.

The way she looked at me, the way her eyes melted into pools of brown butter,

pierced me, and had butterflies fluttering in my belly. And I knew right then that she was real, that the feelings I had for her were real. And I knew that she was the one. I didn't know how. Lord knew my bear was damn near dormant at the moment, but, for me, she was it. I didn't know when it'd happened over these past three months. Hell, it could have happened just now. Nonetheless, this woman officially owned my heart. And I knew, no matter what she asked for, I would try to deliver. She was so much more than I expected. She was prettier than in her photos, but it was more than the superficial shit. There was something warm and endearing about her.

Fuck! We'd only just met and I was already dreading saying good-bye. The way she blushed and fidgeted beneath my gaze made me want to hug her, kiss her, fuck her, and never let her go. Damn. "Deal." I couldn't contain my smile as I took her in. She seemed like a present with many layers, and I'd only peeked at the outer one. Suddenly, all I knew about her wasn't enough. I wanted to know everything, to know all of her.

As I led her around the space, I watched her intently. She didn't react with enthusiasm the way most new gym members did. She responded with awe. She took in every detail, and I knew when some piece of the design made sense to her by her slight nod and the sparkle that appeared in her eyes.

No one else had ever realized that the design segregated the workout floor while maintaining a certain uniformity.

But she did. I saw it.

On the phone, I found myself sharing things with her I never had with anyone else, not even my best friend. She slipped past my defenses so easily. And today, she came in and instantly saw beyond what everyone else did. She was different from the others, in the best way. She wasn't my true mate, but finding a true mate wasn't guaranteed. Lots of weres never found theirs. Regardless, she was someone I could

see myself happily spending forever with.

Dammit. I was almost done showing her around when my nose decided to turn into a faucet. The fucking thing couldn't decide whether it wanted to be clogged or not. Despite the leakage, the pressure in my sinuses felt strong enough to split them, if sinuses could burst even.

It fucking sucked. There was nothing sexy about being sick. "I'll be right back, beautiful." With a snap of my fingers and a point of my finger, Gary was on his way across the room to cover for me. Pinching my nostrils, I looked at her.

She'd been relatively quiet; the last thing I wanted her to think was that I was abandoning her.

With a flick of her wrist, she shooed me away. "Go." Her voice was tender, light hearted, with not an ounce of upset.

How the hell had I gotten so damned lucky? She was smart, sexy, and sweet. She was everything a werebear could ask for, even if my bear didn't want her.

Chapter Seven

December 19th

Lora

Poor guy. He was trying to pretend like he wasn't sick. He tried to hide every swipe of his nose, every deeper than normal inhale, and every almost-cough. The man was clearly miserable, yet he trudged onwards, pushing himself. His body had to be sore, and I was pretty sure his throat hurt, too. He'd attempted to cover his wince, but it was my job as a nurse to catch everything patients hid.

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As Stone walked away, an older male with peppered hair and a lean, athletic body approached. He thrust a hand towards me. “Hi. I’m Gary, one of the personal trainers on staff here.”

“Hi.” I allowed him to take my hand, but was quick to withdraw it. I couldn’t pinpoint what it was, but there was something off about the man, and not in a mysteriously sexy sort of way.

My muscles immediately tensed, intuitively recoiling. A ball of unease formed in my gut, prompting me to take a step back. The way he looked at me had warning bells screaming in my head. He was a predator, or a predator in the making.

“You’re not here to lose weight, are you?” He gave me a charming yet incredulous smirk.

“No, she’s here to see me.” He practically growled at the man.

I jumped as one strong arm came around my waist, possessively hauling my back to his hard front, surrounding me in his warmth. The way he curled around me comforted and soothed me. I didn’t know how, but I knew Stone would protect me; I felt protected already.

Gary held up his palms in surrender and slowly backed away.

It wasn’t until he was gone that Stone relaxed his body, inadvertently showcasing just how edgy he’d been. “Let’s get out of here.” He kissed the top of my head. The move seemed so natural. “Where do you want to go?” He tightened his grip on me, tugging

me flush against him, causing heat to gather in my womb.

“Your house.” I blurted the answer before I could consider my phrasing. I knew it was an innocent request, but he didn’t. Most men assumed far more. I hoped he didn’t assume far more, because, with the way my apex was responding to the feel of him, the way my breasts were beginning to swell, the way desire was awakening within me, I knew I wouldn’t have the strength to deny him.

“You don’t have to tell me twice. We can order take-out and watch a marathon of whatever you want.” Breaking away, he snagged my hand, dragging me back towards the front of the gym.

I breathed a sigh of relief, if but temporarily, as he released me. I needed the time and space to regain control of myself. Of everything thus far, my body’s reaction to his touch was the most surprising.

Stepping into his office, he walked around his desk. He clicked the mouse for his computer a few times, opened the top drawer of his desk, grabbed his keys and wallet, and made a beeline for me again. Flipping the light switch off, he stuffed his wallet into the pocket of his sweats. Meeting my gaze, a smile lifted his lips. “Let’s go, beautiful.”

Closing the door behind us, we paused so he could lock it. Putting a hand on the small of my back, he guided me out, tossing a, “See you later,” at the front desk on our way past it.

“Uh huh.” Lana snickered, assuming the worst I was sure.

Gliding his arm fully around my waist, he pulled me into his side. “Ignore her. Please.” The fact that her words worried him, the fact that he believed her words would upset me and was quick to reassure me, in fact did reassure me of my decision

today.

Placing my hand atop his on my midsection, I nodded, letting him lead me outside. Shifting to move behind me as we approached the exit, I felt his eyes on me. Before I could reach for it, he pushed the door open for me and angled back as I stepped outside. The cold air slapped my skin even through my layers, causing me to stop and shiver. It had to be a solid five degrees cooler than when I'd arrived.

He grunted. "You are so damn sexy."

Biting back a smile, I glanced over my shoulder at him. I burst out laughing at the goofy grin on his face. If I doubted his attraction to me, that single expression made it undeniable. My heart seemed to bounce in my chest, elation and relief swarming me.

Closing the distance between us, he cocooned me in his heat once again, and the cold ceased to penetrate me. I could easily become addicted to the feel of him, the feeling of being impenetrable so long as I was in his arms.

Without thinking, I followed him to his truck, coming to an abrupt halt at the sight of the luxury Rover. There was no gym management position that paid that well, which meant he had to be telling me the truth. Either that or he was secretly a trust fund kid.

Pausing, he studied me, his features twisting minutely. "No one will touch your car, and I have the whole place wired with hidden cameras if they do." He sniffed, rubbing his nose with one finger.

Rationally speaking, I shouldn't get in the car with a man I just met. But therein lied the problem: I hadn't just met him. I'd seen him for the first time, but I'd met him months ago. I knew a solid chunk of his life story and he knew a solid chunk of mine.

I knew he was supposed to be named Winston Alexander Pullen, but, due to a typo,

he was legally named Winstone, hence the nickname Stone. I knew he was born and raised in Atlanta, but he liked the freedom that came with no neighbors, so he moved to Black Fall. He planted roots here because his parents were free spirits who abandoned stability the moment he turned eighteen. They lived off the grid now and only visited once a year with about the same amount of phone calls a year. He never knew if they were okay or not; it's why he was the way he was with me.

He started Beast Mode because he wanted a place where he could workout without stares or judgment. He busted his ass as a delivery driver during the day and a bartender at night until he had enough capital to put a down payment on the property and to purchase the equipment he needed to get going. When he came up a little short, Nate invested the rest and had a twenty-percent ownership as a result, but remained a silent partner for the most part.

This man was smart, sexy, kind, and, based off of how he treated and protected me today, he genuinely cared about me, which gave me every reason in the world to get in the SUV.

Meeting his stare, I nodded my head in agreement. "Okay."

Pursing his lips, on the verge of a smirk, he moved to the vehicle. "I promise not to bite...hard." He winked, opening the passenger door for me. There was something endearing about his tease; it was probably the combination of his red nose and the childlike gleam of mischief in his depths.

Walking around him and the door, I climbed into the passenger seat. Sitting in his car, watching him as he closed the door, being in awe of him as he stalked around to the driver's side, I couldn't help but think this just might be the best impulse decision I'd ever made.

Chapter Eight

December 19th

Stone

Reaching across the console, I grabbed her hand, lacing our fingers. I didn't know why, but I felt the need to touch her. Her presence wasn't enough.

Leaning back, I drove through town. From time to time, I snuck a glance at her, and every time, she was sitting contentedly, merely taking it all in. And, as cheesy as it sounded, I was content to merely take her in. I could stare at her for hours.

Fuck. I'd never been a sap, but damn if she wasn't changing me. With other women, it was forced. With her, it was effortless.

My bear chose that moment to head butt me, making his presence known. Fuck. After four days of silence, now he decided to demand his freedom.

Letting go of her hand, I rolled my shoulders, doing my best to calm the ornery beast. He'd been in a fowl mood for years; it'd been years since he'd played with a female. Nate and I wrestled on occasion in our bear forms, but it wasn't the same.

You couldn't make a true mate magically appear, no matter how hard you wished for one. And, Lord knew I'd wished for one, more times than I cared to admit. Weres are social creatures. We like company, most of us anyways.

Pinching the back of my neck, I barely suppressed my bear's roar. Shit. The last thing I needed was my bear breaking free and scaring her off.

"Are you okay?" Her voice cut through my tension.

Glimpsing at her, my heart skipped a beat. The furrow of her brows, combined with the way she bit the inside of her lip, showed that she cared, or was, at the least, genuinely worried about me. The last thing I wanted to do, though, was worry her.

Dropping my hand, I gave her a reassuring smile, clearing my throat. "I'm good, now that I'm with you." I took her hand in mine again, hoping I was convincing enough.

She analyzed me for a few, long seconds before giving me a small nod of approval. It wasn't apparent whether she believed me or simply wasn't pressing the matter.

Suddenly, her lips curled into a knowing smirk. "Whatever you say, handsome." She laughed. The sound was music to my ears.

Fuck, she's pretty when she smiles.

"So you think I'm handsome, huh?" I watched her reaction closely.

She took her time replying, her expression revealing less than I hoped. "I wouldn't be here if I didn't think you were."

My heart took off, beating wildly for her. All I wanted to do was reach over and kiss her, but that was the surest way to get her sick. Dammit. "The moment I can breathe through one nostril, I'm kissing you for as long as you allow me to."

Her eyes became glossy.

For one second, I thought she was going to cry, and panic shot through me. It shook me enough to regain full control over my bear and myself. Every protective instinct within me fired up, my bear on the verge of a ferocious rumble, almost as if he supported my desire to love and protect this woman.

“This is a little surreal for me.” She swallowed hard, staring openly at me. “I don’t know what I was expecting, but it wasn’t this.”

Pursing my lips, I tried not to jump to conclusions. “Is this good?”

Again she made me wait for her answer.

Pulling into my driveway, I threw my Rover into ‘Park’ as quickly as possible so I could angle my body to look at her head on. Twisting in my seat, I took her in. My nerves were suspended in mid air, my stomach in knots. For some reason, it was important that she said what I wanted to hear, what I wanted it to be.

I wanted it to be good. I wanted to be good for her, good enough for her. I wanted more than I ever have. I wanted her.

She shook her head. “So far today, yes.”

When the fuck did I forget to breathe? I gasped like a damn overzealous fool. She truly had turned me into someone I didn’t recognize. Typically I was smooth and cool, the opposite of the fumbling mess I felt like right now. “Let’s keep it that way, then.” I winked.

Hopping out of the vehicle, I rounded to her side and opened the door. I saw her eyes glitter as she studied me, unbuckling. I was mesmerized. There was just something about her. I kept repeating that, like an idiot, in my head, but it was the truth.

Reaching out, I caught her around the waist as she slid out of the SUV. The weight of her in my arms was heavenly. Irrationally, I wanted to hold her tighter and never let her go.

But I had to. For now.

Lowering her, I didn't release her until I was certain she was steady on her feet. The way she looked at me had my heart doing backflips. I'd surprised her; I'd impressed her, and damn did it feel good.

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Fuck, I wanted to kiss her so damn bad. Licking my lips, I watched her as she bit her lower lip, holding back a small smile. Damn. Heat glided down my spine, pooling in my groin. My cock reacted to the sight of her alone, but when she did innocent moves that were anything but innocent in my mind... Fuck, indeed. I wanted to shove her against the side of my Rover, kiss her until she was breathless and then carry her to my bedroom and make love to her all night long.

Breaking the spell, she averted her gaze. "The cold air has to be hurting your throat and chest."

It wasn't until she mentioned it that I felt the sting with every inhale. She really did make me forget every symptom. "You're right."

Reaching out, she placed a gentle hand on my chest. "Let's go inside before you get worse."

Grabbing her hand, I lifted it to my lips, kissing her fingers. I was in awe of her. She was sexy and strong and smart. She worked fulltime and went to school fulltime for four years straight. Since she'd lost her grandmother on Christmas, she volunteered at a soup kitchen every year during the day before spending the night with her best friend. If that alone didn't showcase her beautiful soul, then I didn't know what would.

She covered shifts at work for single moms when their kids were sick. She donated everything she couldn't use or didn't want. She was quick to reply to my messages most of the time, and didn't play games. She was one of the few people in this world who treated everyone like they were a person with feelings. She was nothing short of

amazing.

And seeing her today only made me want her more than I already did. Knowing what I did about her combined with her gorgeous curves, soft eyes, and pouty lips. Fuck! I was freefalling right now.

Being sick was the only thing keeping me in line. Hell, it was probably a blessing. I was on the verge of jumping her with a cold. God only knew if my control would have snapped by now had there been no risk to her health.

My bear clawed at my insides, causing me to move a few steps away from her. Smacking him down, I barely suppressed his roar.

Plastering a smile on my face to hide my irritation with my beast, I glimpsed at her. “Let’s go inside, beautiful.” I held out my hand, waiting for her to take it.

For once, I was grateful she didn’t act immediately. It gave me a few more second to compose myself and ensure my bear was contained for the moment.

Chapter Nine

December 19th

Lora

His home was reminiscent of a mini mansion in the woods. The two-story brick house had a good size front porch, complete with a swing. The landscape was minimal, but sufficient for the setting, as it was surrounded by forest. He had a true front and back yard that was insulated by oaks, pines, firs and many other types of trees, an eclectic mix, their trunks acting as a frame around the property.

Despite having an older, traditional style of architecture, the house itself looked newer. If I had to guess, it was built within the last five years.

Accepting his outstretched hand, I closed the car door and let him lead me inside.

Stepping across the threshold, the air felt warmer than outside, but it was obvious the heat wasn't on. Crossing my arms over my chest, I looked around, not journeying deeper insider. I was taken aback by the cathedral ceilings. It turned out, he didn't have a two-story house; he had a single story home with extra tall ceilings. It made the space seem larger, grander, and barer.

The open concept design had little in the way of décor. The kitchen countertops were sparse aside from a toaster and a massive bottle of vanilla protein powder. The walls didn't have a single photo on them. Perhaps the most obvious, though, was his lack of a Christmas tree. Even though I had no one to celebrate the holidays with, even though Sharon was the only one who saw my apartment aside from me, I still decorated. It added a layer of warmth that made you want to go home at the end of a long day and curl up on the sofa in comfortable clothes with a cup of something good. It made me feel like I wasn't as alone as I truly was.

"Make yourself at home." He closed the front door and walked to the oversized kitchen island. Opening a drawer, he pulled out two folded pieces of paper. "We only have two places that deliver in town: a Papa John's knock off or semi-decent-on-a-good-day Chinese."

Rolling my lips, I considered him. Pizza sounded better, but Chinese food was the best option for him probably. He could order soup and veggies or soft lo mein noodles. Those could be swallowed easier than potentially crunchy crust pizza. "Roll the dice with Chinese?" I cocked a brow. Just because I thought it would be good for him didn't mean he wanted it.

Shoving one of the menus back in the drawer, he whipped his cell phone out. “Worst case scenario, we order pizza after.” Stalking towards me, he handed me the tri-folded paper. “What do you want, beautiful?”

God, that smile. He was breathtaking. It took effort to peel my gaze from him. I wanted to pinch myself. Was this real life? Was I really here, with him, in his house?

A nervous chuckle escaped me. “There’s no way to eat Chinese food and be sexy.”

His laugh turned into a cough. He quickly covered his mouth. He sucked in a deep breath. “Babe, you’re sexy. There’s nothing you could do that would make you less sexy.”

As a nurse, many scenarios came to mind, but I didn’t offer them up. Instead, I savored his compliment. This handsome, powerful male thought I was sexy. “Thanks.” I cast a fast glimpse at him, fully acknowledging his words.

Browsing the limited selection, I passed the menu back to him. “Small chicken lo mein with broccoli.”

“You got it, beautiful. Now go make yourself comfortable.” He jutted his chin towards the living area.

I should have been uneasy. I should have hesitated. In the past, I would have hesitated. That just went to show, once again, how different things were with Stone. His home wasn’t filled with the touches that welcomed you in, but I found myself sauntering to the leather sofa, without a second thought, pulling off my Ugg knock-offs, setting my phone and keys on the coffee table, and sitting Indian style on one end of the couch.

A large, flat screen TV was mounted on the wall across from me, above the fireplace.

No wires or boxes were visible. I'd always hated the mess behind electronics. It was why I only had one television in my entire apartment and a laptop rather than a desktop computer. That single piece gave me a newfound appreciation for his minimal décor. He didn't have a lot, but he still paid attention to the finer details.

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Sitting patiently, I listened to him order a massive quantity of food. Based on his size, though, he probably ate a solid three to five thousand calories a day, as he worked out an average of two hours a day, focusing on weights and strength training. Being a business owner kept him busy as well.

Part of me secretly wished I could gorge myself regularly, but that would be the opposite of what my body needed, especially at five feet two inches. I definitely indulged, but typically it was only with Sharon on the days we were both off together, which were few and far between.

It'd been a few months since we'd done a full girls' day, complete with pedicures, Starbucks, good food and juicy gossip. I missed those. I could seriously use one soon, too.

I jumped as a blanket came down across my lap. My hand flew to my chest, a nervous chuckle escaping me.

"Sorry to scare you, beautiful." He pressed a kiss to the top of my head. Strolling over to the fireplace, he flipped a switch and blue flames appeared in the hearth. Pushing a stone, he revealed a drawer from which he retrieved a remote control. Moving to the center of the fireplace, he pressed another set of stones and they folded down, revealing a slim compartment with all of the boxes.

Walking back to the sofa, he lifted the blanket's excess beside me, sat down, propping his feet on the coffee table, and laid the blanket across his upper thighs. "What do you want to watch, babe? I have access to almost any movie or channel." Clicking the remote, the TV turned on.

“Hm.” I worked my bottom lip. What did you choose when you could choose anything? Better yet, what did you choose when you were pretty sure your tastes were the opposite? I knew from our conversations that Stone liked action movies, especially when they involved boxing, as he wanted to go pro at one point, and a few comedy movies, but not stupid-funny ones. I, on the other hand, liked what most women did, aside from Sharon: romantic comedies and period dramas. The only commonality was comedy, but most of the current titles leaned towards over-exaggerated humor, which meant classics were the way to go.

A wistful smile curled my lips and I thought of Gran. Every year we watched the same holiday movie, because she was a big Chevy Chase fan. She thought he was an “adorable hoot.”

Looking at Stone, I was caught off guard by the intensity of his gaze as he took me in. Heat turned his usually brown eyes into molten honey pools that seemed to pierce me. There was something striking about him, almost otherworldly. He was beautiful and mesmerizing. I wanted to get lost in his depths. I wanted to get lost in him.

But that wasn’t a good idea while he was sick. It was the surest way to ruin my holiday plans.

Grabbing hold of that logical part of myself, I broke the trance, turning my focus to the television. “National Lampoon’s Christmas Vacation.”

A little laugh escaped him. “That was unexpected, but, then again, you’re full of wonderful surprises.”

I heard the approval in his tone. I liked that he thought I was different. You always wanted to be different than the women in his past, because things didn’t work with them for a reason. “It’s a tradition in my house.” I shrugged my shoulders, aiming for the admission to be nonchalant, but the catch in my voice betrayed me.

He didn't comment. He didn't say anything to sway the moment. He simply wrapped an arm around me and pulled me close, pressing his lips tenderly to my head. The act was sweet, romantic even, and utterly perfect.

Before I could stop it, hope swelled in my chest. For so long I'd wanted this, someone like him. Half of me wanted to scream in celebration, the other half of me wanted to run in fear. Because, chances were, if he seemed too good to be true, he likely was too good to be true.

But darn was I praying hard for him to be the exception. Every woman only needed one man who was the exception, one to come along and change their luck, end their losing streak, one to make her forget every reject and rejection before him.

I only needed one.

And I wanted that one to be Stone.

But you couldn't alter fate. I knew, if we were meant to be, we would be. If not, someone even better was waiting for me down the road, as hard as that was to fathom.

Chapter Ten

December 19th

Stone

The hours passed like minutes. We watched a marathon of classic holiday comedies and ate two rounds of Chinese food. All the while, I couldn't help but think that I was the luckiest man alive. I had never been so content to sit around on my ass all day.

Looking down at her sleeping form, curled into me, my heart was full. I didn't know how or when, but she'd captured my heart and filled it to the brim with joy. I was the happiest I'd ever been, even while sick, and it was because of her. I never wanted to lose her. Hell, I didn't even want to let her go now, and she'd been asleep for half an hour already.

The tickle in my throat worked into a cough. I cringed inside, holding as steady as possible, trying not to jostle her. My throat screamed with irritation. I couldn't wait for this cold to be gone. I had so much more to look forward to with her when it was.

Gently scooping her into my arms, I stood and carried her to my room. I'd always liked bigger women, probably because they were nearly non-existent in the were community. Our metabolism didn't allow for it. It took an average of a thousand calories merely to shift into our other form and another thousand to turn back.

From a psychology perspective, it was more likely because I wanted someone who was the opposite of my mother. She was nice, but far from nurturing.

I could tell, just in how she was with me today, that Lora wouldn't be like that. She accepted every hug, didn't shy away when I coughed or my snot ran, and, on several occasions, she reminded me to drink more fluids, to ensure I stayed hydrated. I'm pretty sure she would have done more than that if I let her, but it was bad enough that being sick prevented me from taking her on a proper date. I definitely owed her one when this crud ran its course.

Shifting her weight, I pulled back the covers and laid her down. She looked like my dream version of Sleeping Beauty: plush, curvy, soft and utterly breathtaking.

Dammit. Covering her full figure, I rushed to the kitchen. Snatching a napkin from the drawer on the island, I blew my nose. Why couldn't weres be immune like the books made us out to be?

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Opening the upper corner cabinet, I grabbed my meds. I hated taking them but I was desperate. Downing my doses with a glass of water, I washed my hands at the same time as the cup and put it away, not bothering to dry it.

Abruptly my bear rose up, roaring at me. He'd been nudging me randomly throughout the day, wanting his freedom.

But I refused to give it to him. Not while she was here. I couldn't risk it.

That didn't stop him from trying, repeatedly.

I felt the familiar burn in my muscles as he fought to break free. Gripping the edge of the counter, I rebuffed, growling back at him, dominating the unruly animal until he submitted, if only temporarily.

He felt the same as I did. He wasn't immune to the aches in my body that came with illness, but, for some reason, he wanted to pester me.

Giving one last warning snarl, I shoved away from the counter and headed back to her. I hadn't expected her to stay the night, but I damn sure wasn't about to wake her up. Because it would be cruel. And because I was a selfish prick.

I didn't want to let her go yet. I wanted her for as long as I could have her. And, after today, I was hoping that would be for eternity.

Chapter Eleven

December 20th

Lora

Snuggling deeper into the warm, fuzzy blanket, I breathed easy. I'd never found a more comfortable spot in my bed.

Oh crap!

My eyes flew open as yesterday came rushing back to me. I barely tempered my scream as I saw exactly what I was cuddled against. Anxiety shot through my veins, my heart taking off like a racehorse.

Swallowing hard, I angled my weight on one arm, carefully extracting my other from around the large, brown Grizzly bear.

I took tiny breaths, trying to control my instinctive panic, doing my best not to do anything to awaken the animal. I was almost free when one paw pressed to my upper arm, holding me in place; its claws inadvertently brushed my skin.

Oh, God. My breathing became more labored as I wracked my brain for an escape.

Suddenly, I remembered Stone. Where was he?

Moving only my eyes, I looked around the room, a squeak erupting from me at the sight of his tattered clothes beside me, around the bed, and on the floor, too, I was sure.

My nerves quadrupled. Closing my eyes, I fought to remain calm and collected. But damn if my heart didn't feel ready to pound through my chest cavity. And my lungs didn't want to expand normally, fear slithering through every organ.

Something wasn't adding up, though. Bears injured humans, could kill them from injury, but they didn't devour them like a meal. We weren't appealing to them in that way. So where was Stone's body? The remnants of his clothes were here, but he wasn't.

Opening my eyes, I weighed my options. In the end, I decided to risk it. In a loud whisper, I called for him. "Stone."

The bear's eyes shot open, and I swore it looked directly at me.

I felt my features twist as I attempted to stifle my reaction, to be deathly still.

Abruptly the bear rolled out of bed. The moment he landed on his paws, I leapt to my feet and backed away until...

My jaw slackened, my heart beating faster as I watched in utter shock and horror. It couldn't be. It can't-

I gulped for air, my eyes widening as he stood, no longer a bear, but a full fledge, sexy as hell, man. My man. The man I'd spent all day with yesterday, the last three months chatting with, and the night sleeping beside.

I kept gasping for air, but nothing was happening. My lungs refused to work. My heart refused to stop thundering. My pulse created an echo between each rapid heartbeat. My brain couldn't-

I couldn't-

I had to be dreaming.

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The room began to spin as I stumbled forward, seeking leverage, something to help hold me up, but everything blurred before me. I was certain I would collapse at any second.

But then I felt him. He hoisted me into his arms effortlessly. He cradled me to him.

Ironically, the very person I was afraid of moments ago was the very person making me feel safe and protected now. He was the one who had my heartbeat regulating and my lungs operating properly. One part of him stirred my soul; the other soothed it; the perfect simulation of man and beast.

A thousand questions flew through my mind, and yet, I found myself content to simply let him hold me. For now. Until I was no longer shaking. Until I was confident enough to face him, to ask him.

How could I be equally frightened and comforted by him? How could I be equally horrified and mesmerized by him? How could he be man and bear? How on Earth did a relationship with someone like him work?

Burying my face in his chest, I inhaled him. He smelled of sandalwood, musk and pine with a hint of cinnamon. Knowing both sides of him, his scents suited him perfectly, a combo of nature and warmth.

He held me until I told him to. He remained steady, his muscles never sputtering beneath the weight of me, until I asked him to set me down. His heartbeat in my ear as he clung to me reassured me of one important thing: he had feelings. This was a big secret, one that probably unnerved him as much as it did me at some point.

Running his fingers gently along my cheek, he drew my gaze to him. His brows furrowed ever so slightly in concern. “Let me put some shorts on and then we can talk about whatever you want.” His voice was the softest it’d ever been, albeit still a bit hoarse from being sick.

Silently, I shook my head in agreement. As he turned towards the dresser, I saw the tattoo covering seventy percent of his back. It was the same bear that was on his business, the same bear he also was, or had inside him. I wasn’t certain of the correct terminology. The artist did a good job. It was striking, commanding one’s attention, attention to the wings of muscle across his broad back, down to his narrow waist and then further to his buns of steel. He was exquisitely built.

And he was a bear. Dear God.

Slipping into the bathroom, I heard him blow his nose and wash his hands before returning to me, dressed in a pair of athletic shorts. Truly looking at his build for the first time, studying his well defined abs, wide chest, puffed pectorals and burly biceps, I couldn’t help but compare him to a bear, to a ferocious beast...that was the most comfortable creature to sleep on, that didn’t harm me, despite being beside me for who knew how long, that, in the wild, sought food, not battles with humans.

Oh, God. Was I actually rationalizing this? Was I actually accepting this?

Staring at him, seeing the fear in his depths, my heart cracked at the edges. I knew nothing about him in this new context, but somehow, I knew he didn’t choose to be this way. Who would? He could never be his real self with anyone who wasn’t like him, or that he didn’t trust completely without hesitation or doubt.

Looking at it like that, my heart only further splintered. It single-handedly proved his feelings for me were real, in every way. He genuinely cared. He truly wanted me. He...he just gave me what no other man had: complete confidence in him.

Closing the distance between us, I cupped his face, stretched up on my tiptoes and captured his lips, morning breath, unkempt hair and all.

His arms came around me like a vise, hauling me against his hardness. He took control of the caress, turned my unexpected kiss into a flaming exchange complete with tongues and teeth. He had heat flickering in my womb, desire multiplying within me. He had-

An erection the size of Texas.

Good, God. My pussy pulsed, anticipation welling within me. Arching slightly, I pressed deeper into him, rocked my hips against him, letting him know he wasn't alone.

Abruptly, he broke away from my lips, gasping for air. "Fuck, babe." The way he looked at me could set every tree in the forest around us ablaze. He tightened his grip on me, grunting in frustration.

Releasing me, he took a few steps, putting distance between us. Rolling his shoulders, grabbing the back of his neck with his and squeezing it, he peered at me, passion still flickering in his depths. He groaned, closing his eyes and dropping his head. He took a deep breath before he opened his eyes and looked directly at me. "It's not the most romantic thing to say, but I want to fuck the shit out of you so damned bad."

My heart beat wildly in my chest. Longing pumped through my veins, coiling in my core. My breasts tingled. The way he bit his bottom lip as he took my curves in had me feeling like the sexiest woman alive at the moment. I never ceased to feel special, to feel wanted, sought after, appreciated, with him. He made me feel like I was worth any cost.

Including his health and my own.

Crap. I really didn't think a few minutes ago. I acted on impulse; I reacted to my emotions. And now I was probably going to get sick. The funny part? I didn't even care. He was worth it. That kiss was worth it.

But sex required energy, stamina, and a certain degree of healthiness that he didn't have today, human or bear.

"When you're better." I had to ignore my body's cry of disappointment. I wanted what he had, every hard inch of it. A shudder worked through me, had me struggling to be the responsible one for once.

Cracking his neck, he shook his head in understanding. Stalking to his dresser, he plucked out a white Beast Mode tee. "I need some more layers between us if-" He grunted. "Fuck, babe." He jerked the shirt on before reaching into his drawer and grabbing another one. Turning, he set it on the sturdy bed. "Put this on and I'll clean your jacket."

"Clean it?" I frowned, peering down, inspecting it. Sure enough, a thin layer of brown and white hair dusted the front of it.

He cleared his throat. "Sorry, beautiful. My bear is...messy." He gave me a sheepish grin.

"Does he have a name?" I carefully removed the hoodie, grateful I always wore a tank beneath it, and passed it to him.

His brows shot up. "Damn, you're sexy." He shook himself, taking the outerwear and refocusing. "A name?" He frowned. "I never thought to give him one."

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Picking the shirt up off of the bed, I checked the size: men's 2XL. It would probably hug my hips but would work. Yanking it on over my head and giving it a tug, I left it sitting above my ass in the back so it draped forward in the front, offering a more comfortable fit. "You should. Even if you're the same, your form is different, so he's still separate from you, kind of his own person." I shrugged, trying to ensure he knew it wasn't a scold or a command.

"He scared the shit out of you, yet you're standing up for him?" He smirked, a glitter of something I'd never seen in his depths. "I see why he likes you."

"So he is separate from you?" I felt my features twist as I tried to understand an obviously complex situation.

"Yes." Nodding his head towards the door, he expelled a small breath. "Let's go out to the living room. I don't trust myself in here with you, especially with you wearing one of my shirts. It looks too damned good on you."

A laugh bubbled in my chest. "You slept beside me for hours in this room."

Placing a hand on my lower back, he ushered me out. "That was before you kissed me. You set the beast free, beautiful, and I'm not referring to my bear."

I bit back a smile, giddiness I hadn't felt since my elementary school days present. "Got it."

He hung back for a moment, causing me to pause mid-step and look back at him. A wolfish grin split his face. "Yes, you do got it, babe."

My smile broke through, heat brushing my cheeks. “You’re incorrigible.”

Closing the distance, he planted a kiss on my cheek. “Only with you.”

“What are you with everyone else?”

A gleam of mischief appeared in his depths. “An ornery bear.”

“Somehow, I don’t buy that.” I pursed my lips, taking in his disheveled beauty. His five o’clock shadow had become more pronounced, adding to his sex appeal.

His expression grew solemn. “One of these days, you’ll see that you’re different, in a good way.” He veered off towards the kitchen. “Are you hungry, beautiful? What do you want to do today?”

I watched as he pulled a lint roller out and proceeded to painstakingly clean every hair off of my hoodie. “You wouldn’t stay in bed all day if I left, would you?” I already knew the answer to that. It was cute and irritating at the same time.

Glancing up at me, he stopped working on my top for a moment. “I don’t make promises I can’t keep.”

Narrowing my gape, I considered him. “You, sir, are trouble.”

“With a capital ‘T’.” He winked at me, resuming his hair removal.

“I need to call Sharon and let her know I’m okay, but then, I guess I can spend another day lounging around with you. Someone has to keep you down.” I didn’t want to lie around all day, but, at the same time, I wasn’t ready to leave him. And that was how I knew I needed to. Not wanting to be away from him meant I’d formed an attachment. It meant my feelings were growing, had grown in less than twenty-four

hours.

In less than a day, I didn't want to say good-bye. In less than a day, I didn't want to imagine life without him. In less than a day, his home was beginning to feel like my own. In less than a day, his arms had become the home I wanted to seek at the end of each day.

Less than a day.

I could only fathom how I would feel a hundred days from now.

He was so much more than I expected. He was a bear for crying out loud. Nonetheless, he was a bear I could easily see myself falling in love with.

And that was the scariest, most harrowing yet breathtaking piece of it all: knowing I could come to care for him more than I have anyone else on this Earth.

Halting, he stared across the space at me. "I understand if you want to go, babe." He set down the lint roller. "I can take you to your car." He didn't bother disguising the hurt in his voice.

Once again, we felt the same way about leaving each other.

"There's no place I'd rather be right now. But I will have to go home later. I work tomorrow." Walking around the sofa, I sat down, Indian style.

Picking up my cell phone, I opened the settings. "Do you have Wi-Fi?"

He laughed. "I only live in the woods, beautiful. Of course I have Wi-Fi."

"Good. Then I can iMessage Sharon." I typed in the password as he gave it and

waited for my phone to connect. The moment it linked, notifications began to pop up on my screen, including a solid ten from my best friend. I quickly sent her a text giving her just enough information to hold her off until tonight. I already knew she would be on my doorstep later with a bottle of wine, wanting all of the details.

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And I was right. Only she had two bottles of wine instead of one.

Chapter Twelve

December 21st

Stone

Impossibly, I cared for her more today than I did yesterday, and already I knew I would love her a little more tomorrow, and each day after that.

Yesterday, we laid around, ate pizza, drank hot cocoa, mine doused with protein powder, and watched a mix of action movies and romantic comedies. Today, I woke up feeling better than I had in weeks. I still had this stupid cold, but my lungs were clearing up. I was beginning to breathe easier, which meant that soon I would be able to smell her. I wanted to bury my nose in her hair. I wanted to know when she was near by her unique scent.

Damn. I missed her already. Letting her go last night was hell. It didn't matter that we talked from the time she had signal until she was at her front door, still wearing my shirt beneath her hoodie. Fuck, she looked good in it. If I thought my cock was hard the other day, the perpetual hard-on I'd had these past twenty-four hours put it to shame.

I felt like an eager, impatient child. I couldn't wait to see her again. Unfortunately, she worked the next three days straight. On the up side, it gave me time to kick this crud. On the down side, it gave me time to miss the hell out of her and every sweet

curve on her body. Damn, the ass on her. I loved her for that alone. It was a hell of a lot bigger than I expected it to be, especially for a white girl. Fuck! I couldn't wait to see her bent over.

Shit. I squeezed my cock through my shorts. Damn. I was this fucking needy for a woman who wasn't my true mate. I couldn't imagine wanting someone more. No wonder true mates met and fucked so fast. It was a miracle I didn't lose control with her yesterday, especially during that kiss.

Damn, could she kiss. Her lips felt like sensual pillows. She tasted like pure sweet nectar. And the feel of her rounded edges against me...

Fuck. I groaned, pinching my cock harder. Heat shot down my spine. Desire knotted low in my belly. My balls tightened, my cock straining further upwards. All of the blood in my body pooled in my apex. I didn't even know if a cold shower would work right about now, but I was desperate enough to try.

Chapter Thirteen

December 24th

Lora

Giving myself a final once over in the mirror, I smiled. I couldn't wait to see him. Stone and I had gotten closer than before, communicated more than ever before. In the blink of an eye, he became my addiction, the way I got through each day.

He kept me smiling. Each text had my patients asking for details and my co-workers green with envy. He made me happy. He made me feel like the most precious gift in the world, even if I wasn't his true mate, and he was precisely the kind of man that Gran wanted me to end up with. The fact that he could shift into a bear was merely a

unique bonus that I was certain my grandmother would have gotten a kick out of; she had always believed in fairytales and magic.

After learning more about the animal side of him, and the fact that Stone was still cognizant and in control in that state, he made me feel even more safe and protected. No man would be foolish enough to challenge a big, burly bear.

Or my big burly man for that matter.

We didn't have titles, because, in the modern era of dating, apparently relationships were implied but not labeled. There were some things I would never grow accustomed to.

But it didn't matter whether I had the title of his girlfriend. He'd said he was one hundred percent committed to me, and I was equally as committed to him, and us.

Twirling, I laughed. I was wearing the same outfit I was supposed to meet him in the first time, down to the hair, make-up and cropped leather jacket. This time, I knew I wouldn't get a cancellation notice, though. Instead, all day, I'd gotten messages counting down to four o'clock, when we were supposed to meet for coffee. Then we were going back to his place to cook dinner together. And, if I was lucky, I would get him and all of his deliciousness for dessert.

Good God. I didn't even sound like the same person. He brought out the playful, teasing, carefree part of me, the piece that rarely saw the light of day before him, and usually only with my best friend.

Thinking of Sharon, I let out a devious squeal. I couldn't wait for her and Nate to meet tomorrow. I had a feeling he would be just what she needed, and Stone was certain after I text him a picture of her that she would be exactly what Nate wanted for Christmas. The only part that put knots in my stomach was the fact that Nate was

a werebear, like Stone. I wasn't sure how my friend would take that news. Fingers crossed she took it well, if they had a spark of course.

Doing a happy dance, I gathered my phone off of my bed and dashed to the living room. Snatching my keys, duffle bag and structured purse off of the console table, I sauntered out the door, off to meet the man of my dreams.

Chapter Fourteen

December 24th

Stone

Watching her as she approached the glass door, my heart skipped a beat. Holy fuck she was beautiful. I had the insane desire to pinch myself. She was beautiful the other day, too, but her curves were on full display and my cock was at full attention. Even my bear sat up, peeking through at her. She was even more breathtaking than I remembered.

Seeing her, I was glad I dressed in my nice khaki slacks and blue sweater. She would still outshine me, but I didn't feel like a complete schmuck. Fuck. I was damn proud to call her mine.

Stepping toward the door, I opened it for her and damn near stumbled as her scent hit me. My heart took off and my bear rose up on his hind legs, immediately fighting me for freedom to do what we'd always wanted to do: claim our true mate.

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Letting the door close behind me, I met her outside. Before she could say a single word, I drew her against me and captured her lips. For thirty-five years I'd waited and wanted her. I'd prayed so damned hard for my true mate, but had given up on finding her. Then I met Lora, and she was everything I wanted, minus being the perfect mate for my bear, too. All along I was drawn to her and couldn't figure out why. Hell, even my bear liked her. And now I knew why.

She was our true mate, the single person who balanced man and beast, the one that loved and bonded with both, the one both would kill and die for to protect. She was the peacekeeper. She was our reason for existing. She was what would finally unite us after thirty-five years.

I held her tightly, kissed her even harder, emotions welling in my chest, forming a lump in my throat. Everything I felt for her abruptly multiplied as my bear embraced my feelings for her as his own, no longer fighting me. It felt like my world, our world, was spinning on its axis, tilting to put her at the center of it.

Fuck. Thirty five years of dreaming was finally in my arms. My heart split open, tears stinging my eyes. I'd never been so overwhelmed by my damned feelings. I thought it was hard to let her go before, but fuck if I ever wanted to let her go now.

Kissing a trail along her cheek, I inhaled her scent, deeper this time, allowing it to permeate my lungs, every fiber of my being. Looking at her, I knew I wore a massive, goofy grin, but I didn't care.

Her brows furrowed as she studied me. "Are you okay?" Her voice was soft, just like every inch of her beautiful body. She assessed me the way I assumed she assessed

every patient, the lucky bastards.

Holy fuck. Was I giggling? Cutting myself off, I focused on her. “I’m perfect, and you, you are perfect, babe, in every way.”

She flushed, biting back a shy smile. “I feel the same way about you.” Her words were like an arrow, shooting straight through my heart.

Every breath was full of her sweetness, of lavender, vanilla and honey. It had my bear roaring maniacally. It had my heart continuing to beat erratically. It had me abandoning my plans of a proper date. “Babe?” I got lost in her chocolaty depths.

“Yeah?” She swallowed hard, burrowing deeper into my warmth.

I heard her heart pitter-pattering a melodic cadence that could calm the crankiest of beasts. “You’re my true mate.” I knew she would understand. We’d openly talked about my kind and my search for my mate. It took a lot of convincing to open her back up to me, but, in the end, the truth brought us closer together.

And reality had me celebrating for her. I never wanted her to feel like a consolation prize, because she was anything but.

Suddenly her eyes widened, her lips lifting at the edges. “Seriously?”

I nodded my head. “Seriously. I couldn’t smell you before to know.”

Rolling onto her tiptoes, she kissed me hard and fast, the sweetest laugh erupting from her. “You just made me the happiest woman because that means I’ll never have to worry about losing your love.”

My heart cracked, an ache briefly settling inside it. “Oh, beautiful, even if you

weren't my true mate, you wouldn't have had to worry about that." Hugging her, I brushed my lips across the top of her head several times.

Leaning back, I took her in. I couldn't believe she was mine. Instinctively, I must have known to be drawn to her the way I was, to react to her the way I did.

Pressure knotted in my groin. Fuck. I couldn't wait to strip and lick every inch of her perfection. Shit. Looking at her now, that was all I could think about.

Rotating my shoulders, I sucked in a deep, cleansing breath, trying to control my suddenly raging hormones. Biting my lip, I tried not to picture her writhing beneath me as I thoroughly claimed her, but failed miserably. "Babe?"

She licked her lips, further teasing me. Her presence alone was a damn cock tease. "Yeah?"

"Can I owe you two wonderful, proper dates so I can take you home right now and wonderfully, properly claim your beautiful self?" Nerves knit in my stomach, slithering up to my chest.

"Only if you promise to give me an O." She pursed her lips, slitting her gaze.

"An O?" I studied her, waiting anxiously to discover if it was something I could give to her. Hell, right about now, I'd swim across the fucking Atlantic Ocean to own her heart, body and soul forever.

Her eyes lit with mischief. "An orgasm." She smirked.

Relief washed through me. That I could definitely and would happily give her every damn time. "Hell, babe, I'll give you three."

Her giggle went straight to my heart. “I’ll be counting.” She spun on her heels.

Fuck. That tiny bit of sass told me this was going to be the best sex I ever had, even if I didn’t come. Merry fucking Christmas to me.

Chapter Fifteen

December 24th

Lora

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Dropping my bags on the floor, he scooped me up into his arms and made a beeline for his bedroom.

I squealed, throwing my arms around his neck. Leaning in, I stole several kisses before he laid me down in the center of the bed. I laughed as he growled playfully, leaping on the bed and covering me.

He peppered my face with kisses. “You are so damn cute.” Sitting back on his heels, he pulled off my boots. Licking his lips, he openly stared at me.

One by one, he began to remove my layers, feathering kisses over my flesh as he did so, until I was naked and he was still clothed. Sitting back on his heels again, his gaze roamed me. He didn’t bother to hide the heat in his depths, proof that he truly wanted every inch of me. “Fuck, you’re gorgeous.” The reverence in his tone had my chest constricting, had emotion welling within it.

Bending forward, he drew his lips along the fullness of my thigh, across the span of my hips and down my other thigh.

Biting my bottom lip, I tensed as he hovered over my apex. Only one other man had gone down on me, and it was less than memorable or enjoyable.

Abruptly, he leapt off of the bed and hauled my ass to the edge of it. Wrapping his arms around my thighs, using his shoulders to force my legs towards my chest, he peered up at me. “Get ready to count.”

I gasped as his fingers parted my lower lips and his tongue connected with my clit.

Pleasure flickered through my core, sending waves tingling outwards.

Languidly, he tasted and teased me. The moment I knew what to expect, he changed it up, increasing his pressure, manipulating his speed, alternating his approach, adding another element of surprise.

Before long, he had me wriggling, bowing into his every touch, unashamedly begging for more.

Pressure bound my limbs. Need knotted in my womb, had me straining, whimpering, for more. My nipples were tight peaks, begging for attention. My pussy was a wet mess, longing dripping from me as he carried me to the edge and threw me over.

Grabbing his forearms for leverage, I cried out, pleasure assaulting me. Shudder after shudder of delicious sensations swept through me, had me gasping for air, had me pressing into his caress, had satisfaction warming my curves even as fresh longing bloomed, for him, for more of whatever he was offering.

Dragging his tongue along my slit once more, his mouth departed me. A devilish gleam appeared in his depths. "Count," he commanded.

Oh, God. Novel flutters tickled my pussy. The authority in his tone, the unyielding demand of his word had me ready to do whatever he asked and then some. "One."

Drawing a finger down my sopping slit, he pressed a hand behind one knee, pushing my leg back, spreading me further, baring more of me to him. He made it clear that there would be no hiding from him.

My lips parted around a moan as he shoved two fingers inside me, pausing once they were all the way inside me. Lowering himself again, this time, he closed his mouth over my breast. Without warning, he nipped and sucked one turgid tip while

thoroughly, furiously fucking me with his fingers.

My cries reached new volumes as he drowned my plush figure with a different type of pleasure. Just when the pleasure was ebbing, about to be smothered by the pressure of my need, he switched breasts and rubbed the pad of his thumb along the spine of my clit.

All of me clenched, constricted, preparing for the inevitable. I dug my nails into his arm, my other hand holding his head to my chest. “Fuck, babe.” I groaned, arching into him. I swore my body was going to split down the center, my yearning reaching new heights as he relentlessly commanded my curves.

I found myself holding my breath, my pleas broken weeps of desperation as all of me knotted. Stressing, stretching, shoving into him, I threw my head back, overcome and yet needing more.

Then he added another finger, filling me completely, pushing me over the edge again.

“Oh, fuck!” Pleasure cascaded through me, the intensity of it twice what it was the last time, my nerve endings still hypersensitive. My pulse pounded in my ears, my vision blurring at the edges. My voice was hoarse as all of me was flooded with relief, with powerful, beautiful sensations that required all of my energy yet replenished it somehow. Tingles prickled every pore, awareness amplifying my senses, my response to every caress and stroke.

He slowed, gradually bringing me down from my high. Heaviness settled into my limbs as he broke away. Quickly, he stripped and returned to me. With one, lithe move, he set me back in the center of the bed. Covering me, he aligned his prick at my entrance. He cocked a brow expectantly, holding still.

I bit back a smile, feeling myself flush. “Two.”

Balancing the weight of him on his elbows, he captured my lips. Gently, he rocked forward, pushing into my wet heat, slowly filling me.

Lifting my legs, I curled them around him, crossing my ankles behind him, hauling him closer.

We both groaned as he fully sunk into me. A wave of pleasure burst through my lower half, had my pussy pulsing.

He exhaled heavily, pressing his forehead to mine. A shudder vibrated him. “Fuck, babe. You feel so fucking good.” His voice was laden with tension.

Abruptly, he pulled out of me, retreating. He shook his head negatively. “I can’t do it. I’m not gonna last in that heavenly cocoon.” Damn, he was cute when he was flustered. “What do you want, beautiful? Fingers or mouth?”

My heart warmed. “It’s okay. Two is more than I’ve ever had at one time.”

“Nope.” He refuted my offer. “A promise is a promise, and I don’t ever plan on breaking one with you.” He met my gaze, ensuring his sincerity was received. He was every ounce of the amazing I dreamed of and then some. He was putting his own needs and wants aside to fulfill mine.

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There was nothing more I could ask for. “Surprise me.”

He slit his gaze. He made it clear that I had just awoken the beast, a mischievous smirk appearing. “You get both.” Tenderly at first, he slid his fingers into my channel before lowering his head between my legs. He planted a kiss on the inside of each thigh. He looked straight at me as he dropped his lips to my apex. He took a few breaths, waiting, watching, letting my anticipation build before he darted his tongue out. No sooner had his tongue connected with my pearl than he set a ravenous pace with his fingers.

Still hypersensitive, he sent me straight to the erotic peak.

I sucked in a breath, my womb seeming to bind around itself. I felt one thrust short of splitting down the middle. The sheer force behind his touch had my curves shaking, had my muscles tensing, had me bowing and pleading. “Oh, God, babe.” I was surprised I didn’t tumble over within the first thirty seconds.

My yearning continued to climb, to strain, to reach for that invisible cliff’s edge. He pushed me further than I’d ever been pushed before. Pleasure spread briefly before it was crushed, squashed by my need.

Every inhale became sharper than the last. Every stroke seemed to punch deeper into me, hitting novel erogenous zones each time. Every sweep of his tongue over my clit, around my sensitive bundle of nerve endings, had me on the verge of shattering.

Until I shattered into a million pieces.

My vision blurred, my heart pounded, my pulse thundered, my limbs trembled, my pussy pulsed, my curves quivered as wave after wave of pleasure stunned every inch of me. I didn't recognize my own voice. I never knew the heights of intensity my pleasure could reach. Liquid heat oozed from me as rush after rush of eroticism washed through me.

Until the room began to spin. Until I was forced to lie back flat. Until every ounce of energy I had remaining was stolen.

Blinking, he slowly came into focus. Concern creased his brow. "You okay, babe?"

I couldn't tell if I was nodding my head or not so I replied, "Perfect." It came out as a mumble, though.

An amused grin split his face. "I think next time we'll stick with two." He winked at me. Swiftly, he stole a kiss.

"Three." This time the word was audible.

Angling back, he assessed me, his features turning down. "Are you sure you're okay?"

The longer I lay there, the calmer my body became. I was touched by his worry, though. It proved the depths of his feelings for me, was evidence of his compassionate heart.

Reaching for him, I jerked him against me. "It's time for you to count, handsome." I pressed my lips to his, giving him a chaste, emphatic kiss.

He grunted. "Give me that backside and I'll be at one in less than two minutes."

“Okay.” Shoving at his chest, I prompted him to move, giving me space to roll over. Arching my back, I presented him with exactly what he wanted.

“Damn, babe.” He ran his hands over my large globes and around to my hips. “I’ve wanted to bend you over ever since I saw your ass in person.”

Before I could reply, he drove into me, cutting off my thoughts. He didn’t hold back. He plunged into me over and over, faster and faster, harder and harder, deeper and deeper, causing pleasure to burst through me all over again, causing cries to erupt from me. He had me fisting the sheets, the pillows, anything I could grab.

Dropping onto his hands, his muscled arms framing me, his body imprisoning me in the most delicious way, he never lost his rhythm, even as he draped my hair over one shoulder. His harsh breaths tickled my ear.

Suddenly he tensed. “Oh, fuck, babe.” Pleasure and torture unified in his voice as his heat coated my channel.

I winced as a sharp pain shot through the tendon between my neck and shoulder.

Gradually coming to a halt, he peppered my back and shoulders with kisses. “I’m sorry, beautiful.”

I startled as his lips came close to his mark.

“Lay down, babe. I’ll be right back.” He kissed my head this time.

It wasn’t unbearable; I just wasn’t prepared for it. I knew it was coming. We’d talked about the claiming process before I knew he ever would claim me, but, for some reason, I didn’t think it would hurt like this. They always masked the pain in fiction.

His warmth disappeared, and I lowered flat on my stomach, breathing through each pulsing throb. If I had been thinking straight, I should have taken some ibuprofen ahead of time. A minute later, I moaned, relief spreading through my neck and shoulder as the steaming hot, wet cloth soothed the enflamed region. The puncture marks stung briefly, but mostly I felt relief. Another warm rag was pressed between my legs. “You are amazing.” I moaned, relaxing into the bed.

He kissed the outer edge of my shoulder. “You’re amazing.”

Closing my eyes, I smiled, satisfaction slithering through me, seducing me into dreamland. “I love you.” Exhaustion jumbled my thoughts, clouding my mind, weighting my limbs.

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“I love you, too, beautiful.” The heat at my apex vanished. “Sweet dreams, baby girl.”

I felt his lips touch my forehead right before I succumbed to sleep. I didn’t need to dream about my perfect man anymore, though. I had him, just in time for Christmas, too.

Chapter Sixteen

December 25th

Stone

There was no better feeling than sleeping with her in my arms all night and waking up to her natural beauty in the morning.

My gaze instantly went to her mark. Pride pumped through me at the sight of it. She was mine.

My bear roared, scratching at my insides.

I chuckled softly, rectifying my thoughts. She was all ours.

Thinking about my bear as an individual, her remark did make sense. I should give him a name. I didn’t know why I hadn’t before now. It seemed like common sense.

Damn, she was something else. I looked forward to all of her pieces of wisdom. I

looked forward to all the memories we would make together. I looked forward. That was the amazing.

She gave me something to look forward to every day, even if it was just spending every minute I could with her. She was the best damned present I'd ever received, one that I planned to cherish always.

When you waited thirty-five years for your prayers to be answered, it meant more. I was always told that the right person, the right woman, would be worth the wait.

I never believed them. I didn't believe that one woman, one person, could erase a lifetime of longing, a lifetime of loneliness, of knowing the pain of loneliness.

But she did. One look at her and I couldn't remember what it felt like to not have her, to not know her sweet curves, kind heart and beautiful spirit. It's not that I forgot the pang my chest once felt; it's that her presence ensured I would never know it again, therefore allowing me to move past it.

She shifted in my arms, stretching. The way she peered at me through hooded lashes with sleep filled eyes had my heart skipping a beat. Her hair was a sexy mess. Her lips were still swollen from my kisses the night before. Her make-up had worn off, revealing the beauty beneath it. She was breathtaking; I could stare at her, just like this, all day.

She curled around me, wrapping an arm around my waist, planting a kiss on my chest.

I couldn't contain my smile. "Good morning, beautiful." Brushing her hair back, I kissed the top of her head. "Merry Christmas."

Angling to stare up at me, the sweetest smile curled her lips.

My breath caught, my heart skipping a beat. I could just imagine the sunlight radiating off of her as she walked down the aisle towards me, towards our formal forever. Now that was definitely a day I looked forward to.

“Merry Christmas, handsome.”

Merry Christmas indeed. I hugged her to me, savoring the feel of every plush inch of her flesh against my own. I was content to lay like this forever with her.

Or at least until Nate and Sharon arrived.

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The End