



BEARing it All (Wylde Brothers 3)

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Category: Romance, Horror

Description: Bram Wylde was more bear than human, but he embraced it. With the need to fight regularly to let off steam, he allowed his alpha bear to run free when others kept their inner animals under control. When he saw Kenzie Harlow, a timid deer shifter with wide, innocent eyes, every possessive instinct in his body rose up. He vowed she'd be his by the end of the night.

Kenzie had only known captivity at the hands of Rook, a panther shifter who'd been so obsessed with her he kept her as his property for years. But when she finally made her escape, she didn't know where to go. She had no one, nothing. But then she ran into Bram, a bear shifter who was more animalistic than maybe even Rook. And then Bram declared her his mate, and she knew what that meant. Forever.

When Kenzie found herself at Bram's isolated cabin, she knew keeping her distance would be nearly impossible. The chemistry between them was too strong, too powerful to control.

But if Rook couldn't have her, then no one would, and Bram would show the panther just how feral he really was when it came to protecting his mate.??

Reader note: This story was previously published as *Fighting Dirty for His Girl*. It has been reedited and revised. Material may be sensitive to some readers.

Total Pages (Source): 46

The stench of blood, sweat, and testosterone filled the small, dank basement. If a shifter wanted to do a little bare-knuckle fighting, Slater's was the place to be. There were no rules or regulations, and the only time a fight ended was when the other male tapped out or lay unconscious on the dirty ground.

It was what Bram fucking loved. It also made the excitement that much more tangible when he had thrown back a few shots of whiskey, so he was partially numb. He might have been too old to be fighting like this, like he was some kind of young bear, but even at thirty-three, he had this wild energy coursing through him, and it seemed the only way to alleviate all of it was to kick another male's ass.

Tearing off his shirt and tossing it aside, he prepared to fight the lion shifter in front of him. Bosco was a big motherfucker, and probably had a good thirty pounds and two inches on Bram's two twenty-five, and six-foot-two frame.

None of that mattered much, not when the two of them could shift and their human forms would no longer be in calculation. This was all about letting out the animal that resided in them until blood pooled on the ground and flesh was torn.

Bram honestly didn't know why he was like this. He had this violence inside him, one that couldn't be expelled until he threw punches and connected with a living body.

He had always been like this, and although his brothers, Ford and Charlie, never had this intense need for violence and aggression inside them, they never judged, not

really, and Bram never felt guilty for it. In fact, he relished it, absorbed the sensations that coursed through him, and let his bear have free rein.

Maybe he should have been more reserved, had better control of his inner beast like his brothers did, but he had never understood why Ford and Charlie felt the need to keep their bear under control. Yes, they were part man, but the animal always reigned supreme over their human side. It was as simple as that.

A human was no match for a predator, even if said man was also housing a fierce creature inside him.

“I’ve been waiting a long time to get my chance with you.” Bosco tore his shirt off, and the lion rippled under the male’s tan flesh. Yeah, Bram had seen the male eyeing him at every fight Bram participated in. Clearly, the lion had some kind of vendetta against Bram, but he didn’t give a fuck, because he was about to show Bosco why he never lost a fight.

Bram’s bear rose to the surface, snarling and snapping for the chance to get at the lion. He already had a few shots of liquor, and although he wasn’t drunk, the alcohol allowed him to feel more in control. Cracking his knuckles and grinning, Bram let his bear free. Bones popped, human skin tore open, and after only seconds, the transformation was complete.

He stood to his full ten-foot height and roared out. Bosco looked unaffected, the cocky bastard, but soon he’d be limp and bloody beneath Bram’s paw.

They met in the middle, tore at each other, bit into each other, and growled in anger. Pain was a hot poker throughout Bram’s body, but he wanted more, got high from the pain, and wasn’t about to be defeated. A wave of adrenalin washed through him, and he used all of that renewed energy to finish this.

He needed another shot. He was ramped up now, and before he went home for the night, he needed to get rid of it.

Bosco let out a howl when Bram sank his teeth into his side. He wasn't going to kill the asshole, but maiming him was a whole other story. In a matter of seconds, the lion grew limp beneath him, and Bram took a step back. His massive chest rose and fell, and he looked down at the animal by his feet.

His bear was a fierce fucking creature and gave him the power he needed. He couldn't describe why he was more primal than his brothers, but that was the reality of it. He got high off of it, and it made him stronger, bigger, and gave him the outlet he needed most of the time. Fighting seemed to placate his bear's need to come out with a vengeance.

A few males off to the side eyed Bram cautiously. They stepped forward and dragged Bosco to the corner where they could check out his wounds. Bram hadn't caused any serious injuries, but the lion would be hurting for a while; that was for sure.

If Bram hadn't taken him down, it would be him that was lying limp on the ground. It was either man-up or get his ass kicked, and Bram was not going for the latter. He shifted back into his human form, grabbed his clothes that were in a pile on the floor, and quickly slipped just his jeans on.

Page 2

Source Creation Date: July 10, 2025, 8:03 am

His chest was a bloody mess of open wounds and claw marks, and he knew his face wasn't much better, but they were his war wounds, and he wore them with honor.²Kenzie Harlow stared out the window and watched as the sun set over the horizon. They were relocating once again, and although Rook never told her why they would up and leave, she knew it was because the heat was too hot for him where they currently were.

She glanced over at him, but only with her eyes. She didn't want to draw any unnecessary attention her way, especially when he was in a foul mood, which was more times than not.

“The distributors have pulled out. Now, I have half the fucking city hitting me up asking where their shit is. Where should we meet?” Rook all but barked in the phone, and even though he had never told her what his business was, she wasn't a fool, especially for as long as she had been under his thumb.

He ended the call and murmured something to Marek, who was driving. She had seen enough cocaine around his home and watched him snort several lines before he grabbed one of the servant girls and disappeared behind a closed door. He was a drug dealer, womanizer, and her captor.

There were too many times to count that he had uprooted them and taken off in the middle of the night, although things must've been pretty bad, since he had gotten a call, told her to pack one bag, and all but tossed her in the car. The sun had been bright in the sky too, and Rook always preferred the cloak of darkness.

Yeah, things must have gone downhill very fast. His dark-blond hair was impeccably

styled, and his eerie green eyes told of his panther-shifting genes. His attention was trained on the tablet in his lap. His starched dress shirt and pressed slacks made him look like someone important, but what he did was not something that benefited anyone but himself.

He was a big male, but it wasn't his size that frightened her or others. It was his volatile temper. He could change at the drop of a dime, and when he did, all would scurry off to a dark corner. And when his anger was volcanic, he took it out on her. She even had a few scars to show for his voracious rage.

He disconnected the call without saying goodbye, and she quickly averted her eyes. They passed by beautiful scenery, and she saw a sign that stated they would be entering Sweet Water, Colorado, in the next five miles. For as smart as Rook was, he wasn't very inconspicuous, not when he was driving around in the sleek black stretch limo.

"Come here, Kenzie." His voice was pitched low, like smooth milk chocolate, but she heard that tone enough to realize he was furious. And besides, she hated chocolate. His plans weren't going the way he wanted them to, and because of that, he needed to use her as a distraction.

Kenzie knew well enough that denying him what he wanted only ended up in her crying out in pain. She slipped from her seat and moved over to his side. Rook immediately pulled her into his lap and started stroking her hair. She rarely wore it up, not when Rook preferred it down and liked to pull on it. Not speaking or moving and just letting him pet her as if she was a prized possession, Kenzie felt the familiar tendrils of disgust wash through her anytime Rook touched her.

"You know how much I love you, pet?" Kenzie forced herself not to shiver in revulsion. "You're the only one I care about."

It was lies, all lies. He was the only one he cared about.

But she didn't say anything. Kenzie closed her eyes and took herself away from the here and now.

She could still remember when Rook found her huddled in the corner of an alley, a filthy dumpster as her only companion. She had only been a ten-year-old doe shifter when her parents had been murdered in a random shooting. Before she could be taken into custody by the state, she fled. She had no food, no money, and only the clothes on her back, but even at such a young age, she would rather die in a gutter than let another family raise her as their own.

It probably had been the stupidest mistake of her life, because if she would have gone with the state, she would've never met Rook, and therefore wouldn't have been in this situation.

That had been eleven years ago, and now at twenty-one years old, she knew far more, had seen more horror, and had lived a thousand lives already.

He had only been twenty-five when he found her. He'd coaxed her away from the dumpster, and it had been the first time, due to her normally skittish personality springing from the timid animal inside her, that she hadn't felt frightened.

Page 3

Source Creation Date: July 10, 2025, 8:03 am

How wrong she had been.

And over the years, he'd kept her away from the horror and violence of his world, showed her the parental affection she missed and craved. But once she turned eighteen, everything had changed.

He had changed, as if he'd been waiting for that date to roll around.

It was as if he had been waiting until she became legal—which was ironic, since everything he did was illegal.

He wasn't the kind and gentle savior she had grown to care about. Over the next three years, he had grown even more possessive and obsessed with her. She knew what she was to him... a piece of property.

She was never allowed out of his sight, and if he was not right beside her, he made sure one of the men working for him was. There had been too many times that she wished things had been different and that she had made different decisions.

"You're mine, Kenzie." She knew he wasn't speaking to her but to himself. She was just the person close enough to him that he could abuse with his body and words.

He lifted his hand and gave three knocks on the partially opened privacy screen that separated them from the front seat. Marek and Tank, cougar shifters, and Rook's right-hand men, sat in the front seat and were just as sadistic and deranged as their boss. Seconds later, the privacy window went up completely, and Kenzie's heart pounded wildly in fear.

“You’re afraid of me.” He leaned in impossibly closer, gripped her chin roughly, and turned her head, so she was forced to look at him. Closing his eyes and inhaling deeply, a low purr left him at what he saw and sensed. “I like that you fear me. It makes me feel powerful.”

All she could do was disconnect from the situation.

“Look at me, Kenzie.” He was angry, and it came through in the way he said her name.

She opened her eyes and stared into his cold green eyes.

“Tell me how much you love your Master.”

Never.

It was her one defiance, the one thing he could never take from her. Her virginity would never be Rook’s. He could never take that from her. In her mind, she’d always seen herself giving it to the one person she loved, the one person who innocently, genuinely... truly loved her back.

He growled low. This was the same tired story. He’d wanted her love since the beginning. She’d never give that to him. Never.

He slipped his hand under her shirt to rest the pads of his fingers over the raised scar from the one and only time she tried to escape.

“You remember when you got this, pet?” He pressed his fingers into the inch-long scar that ran right beside her belly button, and even though it no longer hurt, she tensed.

“Yes,” she hissed.

He’d since let go of her chin, but she was numb to his touch, numb to the acidic feel of his hands on her, but even that numbness couldn’t dispel the overall sickness that always filled her when he was near.

“That is my gift to you, one in which you can always look at and know you are mine.” He leaned in an inch closer. “And a reminder that if you try to leave me again, the consequences will be given in the form of me beating you into compliance and submission.” Rook tightened his hand on her waist, and Kenzie bit her bottom lip to hold in her cry.

Yeah, he’d taken a blade to her belly when she tried to escape two years ago. That had been the only time she tried to leave him. But she knew death was probably a far better outcome for her.

The next twenty minutes, he left her alone, periodically barking orders into his phone. His agitation was clear, and that worried her. When he was upset, she was that outlet he used.

The car slowed before coming to a stop. “I’ve got some business to handle inside, and I need Marek and Tank with me in case shit happens. You can either be handcuffed in the limo and wait for me, or I’ll allow you inside with Tank and Marek watching you.”

It may not have seemed like anything, but having more than one option, and one that didn’t consist of being restrained and left to wait for him to return, was a gift of sorts.

“I’ll go inside.” No way would she stay in the car, especially when her wrists were still sore from the last time he bound her and made her wait hours upon hours for him to return and release her.

He nodded once, but there was no emotion on his face. “They’ll watch you until I’m finished.” He pegged her with a hard stare. “You try anything, and you’ll regret it, Kenzie.” He got out of the limo and gestured for her to follow him but kept her by his side as they entered the disgusting bar. Marek and Tank flanked them, and she knew their focus was ever-aware of their surroundings.

Page 4

Source Creation Date: July 10, 2025, 8:03 am

As soon as they entered, a man stopped in front of Rook, and the two of them leaned in close and started talking too softly for her to hear. Rook turned around and said, “I have to go with him in the back. You’ll stay with them.” He gestured to his henchmen. “Understand?”

Rook was in his businessman mood, one that was all professional demands and nothing like how he really was.

Kenzie watched as he followed the greasy-looking human toward the back of the bar and behind a door. Marek snapped his fingers and gestured for her to have a seat at a table beside her.

After she was seated, all she could do was sit and wait. The front door was only a few feet from her, and she did glance at it several times, but with the pit bulls standing right beside her, she had no chance of escape.

God, it had been so long since she thought about actually making a run for it. Yes, she thought about leaving Rook every second of the day, but it had been two years since she actually thought of trying it again. The fear of what Rook would do to her if she was caught kept her fear a living entity inside her and made her the weak female she never wanted to become. After several minutes, there was movement behind her. Marek and Tank started talking softly, gesturing to a group of scantily clad females just a few feet away.

“Stay here.” And to her utter shock, they made their way over to those females. Although they were only a few feet from her, the fact that they’d given her any breathing room meant they were more focused on getting laid than following orders.

For long seconds, all she could do was stare at them. They didn't turn their backs to her and glanced her way several times to make sure she was obeying but would always move their attention back to the women. Then a few moments passed, and the two did turn their backs to her.

If you want to live... this is how you do it.

She'd never get another chance like this again. Her heart was in her throat, and she heard her pulse pounding in her ears. Trying to keep her emotions in check, because the last thing she needed was them smelling her fear and the need to escape, she looked at the door again. A little voice inside her told her this was all too easy, maybe even a trap. But she kicked that voice in the balls.

If this was her only chance of escaping, she was going to try with her last breath, because there was no way she was going to go back to Rook alive.³ Bram made his way back up the rickety stairs that led to the main part of Slater's. The bar was an old, shitty combination of drunks, dirty shifters, and crack-addicted humans. It certainly wasn't a place he frequented for the scenery, but anytime he wanted to get into a good old-fashioned fistfight or shifter brawl, Slater's was the rundown place to go.

He stepped up to the scarred bar and rested his battered forearms on the dirty wood. The scent of stale beer, sweat, blood, and of course cheap sex filled the small interior and had him crinkling his nose in distaste. It was the smell of desperation, and Slater's was always filled with it.

"Damn, Bram, looks like you nearly got your ass handed to you." Whiskey, the roughened human who stood behind the bar, gave him a crooked smile. His teeth were a light shade of yellow from chain smoking and overlapped each other in an almost distracting way. He may be harsh on the eyes, what with his long, graying, and greasy hair and crow's feet that were so deep it was like they were etched into his flesh, but he was one hell of a human.

“You should see the other guy.”

Whiskey chuckled and turned to pour Bram a shot of Crown. He slammed the chipped glass in front of Bram, tipped his chin forward, and went on to help a scantily clad female. Her tits were practically hanging out of her elastic top, but of course Whiskey zoned in on that immediately.

Bram threw the liquor back and hissed as some of the alcohol hit his split lip and dripped onto a set of claw marks on his chest. Turning and surveying the packed bar, he noticed a group of four human females. The scent of their arousal was thick and obvious, even in the cloying stench of the bar. They giggled and whispered to each other as they looked around. No doubt, they were trying to decide who they were going to let take them home.

The girls who played hard to get didn't come to this establishment.

Page 5

Source Creation Date: July 10, 2025, 8:03 am

The scent of honey invaded his nose and pulled his thoughts away instantly. It was like an electric shock to his core. His body wasn't his own from that one scent alone.

He instantly became hard, and his bear rose up as if it hadn't just beaten the shit out of a lion shifter and was bone-tired.

Inhaling again, he turned around until the scent was directly in front of him, surrounded him, consumed every single inch of his being. He didn't miss the underlying aroma of a male panther mixed with the sweet scent, and that had a growl leaving him on instinct.

He'd never in his life had this kind of reaction to a scent, let alone the aroma of a female.

He scanned the bar until he spotted her, where the scent came from. And everything else faded in the distance. There she stood amongst trash and decay, like a cool, fresh breeze.

Mine.

That realization slammed into him so powerfully he stumbled back, gripping onto the bar behind him for support. He was unable to concentrate on anything other than the small doe shifter with the large gray eyes and innocent expression.

She is ours! his bear roared out, trying to come forth again and go after what it really wanted, but for the first time in Bram's life, he held the beast back.

He felt feral, lost... needing only her.

Her long honey-colored hair looked so soft, and he imagined the strands tangled in his hands. She was perfect, with hips that flared out, thighs that beckoned him, and breasts that would be more than a handful.

Christ.

His dick throbbed behind his fly, and his blood roared in his ears. He took a step closer, and although she was several feet away, he could smell her so potently. It washed away the dirty sex that filled Slater's, was stronger than the scent of the fucking panther that lingered on her. And all Bram wanted to do was take her, claim her... mark her.

His bear was a violent asshole on the best of days, and although it was pacing, it wasn't the volatile energy that consumed it.

She soothed the beast.

This girl didn't need to be in a filthy, violence-filled bar that would tear her apart without a care of her innocence.

He took another step.

She didn't notice him right away, but her apprehension and fear were a thick cloak that had that calmness she created in him vanishing. His bear was on alert, ready to take down whatever or whoever had caused their female to feel this way. Shit, he was acting like a mated male, calling her his.

She scanned the interior, and he could tell she wanted to run, but from what? Did someone hurt her? Was she trying to escape from them? Those thoughts had an angry

need traveling inside him, one that wanted flesh between his teeth and the metallic flavor of blood on his tongue. He'd always been intense, knew his bear could take control if he wasn't careful, and right now, he was more than willing to let his animal out to do some real fucking damage to whoever harmed her.

She was his, and there was nothing that was going to take her away from him. Nothing.

He moved closer until he was standing nearly over her. And when her sorrow-filled eyes landed on him, they widened. He could only imagine what she thought of him. The wounds on his face were nasty as fuck, and those were only the ones that could be seen. He probably looked like he had just killed a man, nearly had too, but he didn't want her to look at him as though he would hurt her.

I'll never hurt her.

His tongue swelled to taste her, to see if she tasted as sweet as she smelled. He wanted to run his canines along her flesh just enough to open the skin and let his scent in, to mark her, to let everyone know whose mate she was.

His dick throbbed with the thought of having his mark on her, his sign of ownership. He sounded like a domineering womanizer, but he was a shifter, one who was more bear than human, and he had just found his mate.

That realization had a low grumble of pleasure leaving him. She was his.

Mine.

All he could think about was her, about keeping her safe, about taking her to his home and touching every part of her. He'd known if this moment ever came in his life it would be instantaneous, and right now, he was running on pure instinct. Those

carnal desires were telling him to focus solely on her.

His need to take her, mark her, and let every fucking male on the planet know she was his slammed into him again, and again, and again.

Make sure every male knows that if they fuck with her, I'll rip their balls off and snap their necks.

Page 6

Source Creation Date: July 10, 2025, 8:03 am

It was his animal wanting to make that thought a reality, but Bram agreed 100 percent. This little doe was theirs, and he wasn't going to let her get away. He couldn't.

It was as easy as that, and when this was all said and done, she'd be giving herself to him completely, begging for more. He dared anyone to come forth and try to take her from him. At the very thought of that happening, he growled low in his throat, and he saw and heard her swallow in clear apprehension.

Leaning down so they were eye-to-eye, he said without trying to hide the wild bear inside him, "You're mine, little deer."

Her eyes widened further, and the scent of fresh fear filled his nose. She had no need to be frightened of him. He'd never hurt her. He'd protect her above all else.

One thing was for certain: Bram was going to claim his mate, and he was going to do it so fucking hard it lasted forever.⁴Kenzie had been ready to make her escape, but then this alpha bear had come thundering over, claiming she was something to him, and that plan had gone down the drain. She was frozen with shock, a little bit of fear, but most of all... sudden arousal.

He stood in her way, blocking her only escape. Her one chance was shot.

Kenzie craned her neck back and stared into the intense blue eyes of the bear shifter in front of her. He was covered in blood and sweat, had so many wounds on him she couldn't even count them all, but underneath that violence, he was beautiful.

There was a nasty gash above his right eye, a fresh bruise forming along his left cheek, and his full bottom lip was split. He'd clearly been in a fight, and if he was walking around as if there wasn't anything wrong with him, Kenzie didn't even want to see what his opponent looked like.

"What's your name, little doe?"

She didn't like him calling her that, didn't like this dominance that clung to him like a second skin, and having him this close had her getting a straight shot of pure adult male bear. It was intoxicating. Kenzie swallowed the second lump that had formed in her throat since this alpha male had come up to her. Her heart thundered, and she couldn't quite understand her body's reaction to this stranger.

He couldn't be any better than these trashy humans and shifters that filled the ratty bar. His appearance alone sent warning bells through her. He was tall and muscular, and a part of her wanted to lean closer, to breathe in deeply and take his essence into her body. It was a ludicrous feeling, and certainly not one she played on.

Those thoughts immediately gave way to the fear of Rook.

Fear and caution were always at the forefront of her mind. Kenzie knew how to tread lightly around Rook, knew the panther shifter thought of her as his possession.

"Your name, sweetheart, what is it?" The bear inquired again, and Kenzie felt a cold sweat start to cover the length of her spine. He took a step forward. She glanced at Marek and Tank, but the cougar shifters were still occupied with a blonde and redhead.

Any moment now, Rook could come out. She didn't want the bear hurt because of her, and although there was no doubt he could handle himself, Rook was a psychopath. She stood, moving back, away, trying to escape.

“I don’t think I’ve ever had to work this hard to get a female’s name before.”

Her back met the hard, cold wall, and she turned her attention back to him. He towered over her. Although he easily outweighed Rook in muscle mass and was several inches taller than the panther, Rook was a sadistic bastard. He believed in pulling fingernails off, breaking kneecaps, and torturing his victims until they complied with whatever he demanded of them.

As she stared into the male’s bright blue eyes, took in his dark hair with a faux-hawk style, she felt something shift inside her. Deer were known to be on the skittish side naturally, and she’d never been any different. But for some inexplicable reason, she found herself opening her mouth and telling him exactly what he wanted to know.

“Kenzie.” She licked her lips, and he lowered his eyes to watch the act. “My name is Kenzie Harlow.” She sounded out of breath, and her chest rose and fell with such force her breasts were almost touching his abdomen. She didn’t like how he made her feel so off-balanced.

She felt this unexplainable pull toward him, one she wanted no part of.

Before he could say anything in response, the scent of Rook invaded her nose. His aroma was a strong mixture of his expensive, suffocating cologne and his underlying vileness. It had always made her gag, but for some reason, Rook’s odor was pushed away by this bear’s naturally arousing smell.

Page 7

Source Creation Date: July 10, 2025, 8:03 am

The bear's gaze was still on her lips, but when he inhaled, a low, vicious rumble left him.

“Who the fuck are you?” Rook barked out. “And what are you doing talking to my female?” Rook's deep, clipped voice came through like a serrated knife to her belly.

Kenzie tensed, and she noticed the bear clearly took note of that fact. His jaw hardened, and a muscle under his left cheek jumped violently. He kept his body right in front of hers, blocking Rook from her vision. Ever-so-slowly, he turned only his head, and she could imagine how he looked: fierce, commanding, and wouldn't take shit from anyone, the sadistic panther shifter included.

How strange for her to feel something so magnetic for a male who just walked up to her and claimed she was his.

“Bos—” Tank's voice was gruff from years of smoking.

“Shut the fuck up,” Rook growled.

“Want us to take him out back?” Marek asked with an excited tone in his voice.

“You shut the fuck up too.”

Although Rook's right-hand men were all too ready to do some dirty work, she didn't miss their apprehension. They should be wary, because Rook always expected to be obeyed, and those two had put this situation into motion.

Everything became eerily silent. “You fucked up by not watching my property, and I’ll deal with you two later.” A beat of silence surrounded them after Rook spoke.

The air around the bear shifted dangerously, and the hairs on her arms stood on end from the electricity that came off him. “Who the fuck am I?” The bear turned fully around but made sure to keep his body in front of her in a protective manner.

“Come here, Kenzie. Now.”

To anyone else, they wouldn’t have picked up on his intense anger, because Rook was a professional at keeping himself in check, but Kenzie knew better. She heard the threat laced with his words, one that was just for her.

She didn’t want to see anyone hurt.

The bear in front of her stayed calm, despite Rook’s presence, but there was no masking the scent of his rage.

Kenzie tried to move from behind the bear, but he threw his arm out, successfully locking her in a cage of bone and muscle.

“I asked who the fuck you are,” Rook said again in an even more threatening manner.

“You want to know who I am?” the bear prompted calm, evenly, and with so much intent Kenzie felt it deep down. “I’m Bram Wylde, the male who’s going to kick your sorry fucking ass for thinking this female is your property, because I sure as fuck can guarantee she’s not yours.”

And just like that, the tables had turned.⁵ Kenzie’s heart was going to tear through her chest. She could hear the blood rushing in her ears, felt the hard, frantic beat of her pulse in her throat, and knew things had just gone from horribly wrong to

devastatingly worse.

Again, she tried to move past this stranger, but it was like trying to run right through a brick wall. She wouldn't see someone hurt because of her, not even if that someone looked like he could handle his own in a back-alley fight.

"Please, just let me go to him." I can't bear it if anyone is hurt because of me. Just thinking about going back with Rook had bile rising in her throat, but knowing that if this stranger, this bear shifter who was selflessly putting himself in front of danger for her, died because of her fear had nausea assaulting her.

That was a far worse thought than being Rook's captive.

"No way in fucking hell am I letting you go anywhere near that asshole." Bram's voice was just as sharp as Rook's had been, and Kenzie lifted her gaze up to his. She couldn't see his eyes, but his profile showed steely determination and concentration.

"Boy, I don't think you know who you're going up against." Rook undid the first few buttons of his shirt at the collar and grinned. Marek and Tank took a step forward, but Rook held his hand out to stop them without breaking eye contact with her protector.

Why was this stranger even willing to go head-to-head with a madman like the panther? He didn't know her, so the only other logical explanation was he had to be just as crazy as Rook.

"I think you should ask yourself that same question."

The deep vibrations of Bram's voice went all the way through her once more. Kenzie couldn't help but shiver from it. God, if Rook didn't kill her over this, then he'd certainly make sure she hurt.

“Bram,” she said his name for the first time. It felt good leaving her tongue and lips, but she didn’t think too hard on that right now. “Please, just step back.”

Although she felt this change in him as soon as she said his name, he refused to look at her. Instead, he had this stare-down with Rook, and with each growing second, she felt the tension and hostility rise.

Page 8

Source Creation Date: July 10, 2025, 8:03 am

“You’re blocking what’s mine, and I don’t ever ask twice for something, but I’m feeling generous. So, get the fuck out of the way, or I’ll have no choice but to take you out.” Rook cracked his knuckles, and a sadistic grin widened over his face.

She knew that look. It was one indicating he was itching for a fight, and if he didn’t get that aggression out now, he would exact that violence on her.

Bram refused to move, but none of that mattered, because in the next moment, the sound of a human female screaming pierced the room. The sound of bones cracking, of humans becoming animals, coursed through the air.

Marek and Tank had shifted.

Things were about to get violent, and there was nothing Kenzie could do but warn Bram and try to urge him to leave while he was still alive.

She glanced at the front door, saw a horde of people surrounding it as they watched what was about to commence, some trying to flee frantically.

“Come on, bear.” Rook crooked his fingers at Bram, and she felt her fear grow.

It wasn’t just about Rook being crazy, but something deeper. It made her feel unbalanced, and right now, she couldn’t have any of that. In a move she hadn’t anticipated, Rook charged forward. His face was slightly red from his anger, and she knew since he was showing outward signs of his emotions he was near his breaking point.

Bram used his body to push her farther against the wall, and the possessiveness, the protectiveness that came from him startled her. This male had some strong emotions rolling off him, and they were all for her. How had things gone so wild in a matter of minutes?

And before she could grasp what was happening, Bram was shifting into a massive bear.

The force of his changing into his animal and then charging toward Rook had her pressing her hands against the wall to steady herself. She was motionless, everything inside her frozen as fear and panic took over.

Rook had already shifted, and the sleek black panther and huge brown grizzly bear faced off. Marek and Tank stood in the background, but Kenzie didn't miss the group of men who emerged from an underground cellar and moved closer to the fight.

They were bloody and torn and looked in the same shape as Bram had when he approached her.

"Oh God." This was a living, breathing nightmare, and she was right in the middle of it... the cause of it. She hadn't been quick enough to stop this from escalating. And then the sea of bodies closed in.

Bram roared out so loudly that it had Rook hissing in response. She couldn't see the two males any longer, not when humans and shifters alike crowded forward until she was swallowed up. She had to get out of here while everything was in chaos, but a part of her wanted to stay to make sure Bram was okay. She didn't want him getting hurt, even if a huge part of her knew he could easily take care of himself.

She rose on her toes, saw through a few people who'd parted that the two animals were going at each other. Everything around her was one big clusterfuck.

Kenzie started pushing her way through the crowd, but all she could think about was Bram and making sure he got out okay. A quick glance behind her showed him holding his own with Rook, although she didn't miss the large claw marks that riddled his side or the blood that was a steady trail down his thick, dark fur, dripping onto the floor and saturating the air in a coppery, tangy scent.

She was shoved to the side by a drunken human, and when he righted himself and grabbed onto her, she felt revulsion take control of her entire body. His touch was like acid, and her inner deer started to rise to the surface, ready to sprint away. That really was all she was good for, running away, but a lot of good that did her all these years.

“Let go of me.”

The greasy human's hand tightened on her arm, and his hot, foul breath filled her nostrils.

An anger she'd never felt came barreling out of her at full speed. The door was only a few feet from her, and this human was keeping her from her freedom. Bringing up her knee, she connected with his dick and felt a sick satisfaction when he cried out in pain and let go of her to cup himself.

“You stupid bitch.”

She may be a stupid bitch, but she would be a free one.

Bram was a fierce male, which was clear as day in just the minutes she spent with him, and she knew he could handle himself—or at least she hoped so.

And then she made it to the door, pushed it open, and felt the cool air brush along her face. It nearly brought her to her knees. To her right was the town of Sweet Water,

and to her left was a road that disappeared into nothing. The sky was dark, and all she could see to her left, away from civilization, was the thick covering of trees.

Page 9

Source Creation Date: July 10, 2025, 8:03 am

No, that was a death trap. It didn't matter how fast she ran; a panther could catch her in no time. The town was a better option, where she'd be able to hide, blend in. Maybe she could get someone to help her, to take her in for the night until she thought of something else. She had no money and only the clothes on her back, but she had her life, and that was more priceless than anything else.

The sounds of the wild animals inside grew to a deafening roar, and Kenzie didn't want to be one of those girls who got killed right as they touched freedom.

No, just go. Run as fast and as far as you can.

And then she did just that. She ran as fast as she could, taking to the tree line, moving around boulders, fallen logs, but her sight on the town ahead.

And then she heard him. She sensed him. She smelled the sadistic panther on her heels.

A quick glance over her shoulder showed Rook coming closer. She was no match for him, and before long, he was on her, tackling her to the ground. The air left her violently as she was moved onto her back, Rook's big animal body crowding her. He hurt her, so much, not just emotionally, but physically, deep, to the bone... to her heart.

His black fur was matted in several places, and she saw a few gaping wounds covering his body. That sight had pleasure coursing through her, because even if he hurt her or even killed her tonight, he had suffered as well.

His hot breath covered her face and throat, his menacing growl filling her head.

A flash and a pop sounded, and he was back in his human form.

“Shh, pet.” Bile rose to the surface. “No, precious. You’re the only one who truly makes me feel powerful.” He leaned in close to her ear. He slipped his hand down to her neck where he slowly started adding pressure. She felt his claws dig into her flesh, tearing her skin, opening her up. The scent of blood filled the air, consumed her nose and head.

Everything that came out of his mouth was a lie and always had been. The air slowly started to leave her, and Kenzie was ready for death, even welcomed it.

Gasping and feeling panic rise inside her, she reached out and grasped the hard, gravel-laden ground. Instinct told her to grab his hand, force him to loosen the hold, but she wanted death, didn’t she? Her mother and father’s faces flashed before her eyes, and although she just wanted to let go and be with them, their voices rose inside her head, telling her to fight, to not give up.

An image of Bram flashed through her mind, and as strange as it was, a wave of serenity went through her.

It was then, as her parents’ voices filtered through her ears and Bram filled her mind with calmness for the first time since she was a young girl, that Kenzie realized she didn’t want to die, not by Rook’s hand.

Bram protected her, kept her shielded from this panther until shit hit the fan. Her fingers brushed along a large rock, and she tried in vain to reach it. After several attempts, she finally managed to get it in her grasp.

She clutched at it for only a second before bringing it up and toward Rook’s skull

without any hesitation. The sound of the stone cracking against his head came through in sickening clarity.

And then he loosened his hold on her throat. A blank look covered his face, and a gushing trail of blood slid down his temple and splashed against her chest.

“Kenzie,” Rook gasped out. “You’ll always be mine.” That was the only thing he said, in a deep, guttural voice, before his eyes rolled back in his head and his body went limp against hers.⁶ She quickly moved out from under him and stood there transfixed as she watched the blood continue to fall from his head and make a pool in the dirt beside him. It looked like spilled ink under the moonlight, growing and growing until she was forced to take a step back so it didn’t reach her feet.

The front door of the bar slammed opened again, and she spun around and raised the rock in her hand. Marek was thrown out of the bar in his human form first, and then Tank had the same fate, but he was still a cougar. Bram came out, his body still that of a bear. He was a massive animal, and when he roared out at Marek and Tank, the vibrations seemed to rattle the glass of nearby vehicles.

She was only a few feet from him but close enough that she saw his massive wounds. They made her wince, had bile rising in her throat, and all she wanted to do was bring the rock down upon Rook’s head once again. How anyone could get off on harming another was beyond her, but Rook had been the worst of the worst. Kenzie looked back down at Rook and saw him in the same state.

Source Creation Date: July 10, 2025, 8:03 am

She would have thought she killed him, but the rise and fall of his chest told her the bastard was still alive. The dark blood that continued to make a puddle around his head had since slowed, but it was like everything came crashing into her all at once. The world tilted, started going in slow motion, and she knew she wouldn't stay upright for much longer.

Through the whirling and buzzing noise that filled her ears, Kenzie was aware of the gravel crunching near her, coming closer and closer, and then of the hot, humid breath of something right in front of her. She turned back around and saw the bear standing before her. He rose on his back legs, reaching at least ten feet tall. There was no fear from her as she stared at Bram, but she knew there should be.

This was a very wild and unstable male, and she sensed as much in the bar, but there was no denying there was something different about him, something that drew her in. She stared into his eyes that were no longer blue but a deep brown. Dizziness overcame her, and she couldn't hold the rock any longer, and the dull thud of it hitting the ground beside her pierced her foggy mind.

"I'm going to be sick." She said the words right before she bent at the waist and emptied everything in her stomach. Darkness swarmed at the edges of her vision, and she wobbled on her feet. Right before she toppled over and let the shadows of the world consume her, she felt strong arms wrap around her.

The last thing she saw was Bram's face right in front of her, and his now sea-blue eyes promised all kinds of things that would never happen.^{7A} A jarring motion had Kenzie slowly coming back to consciousness. The past events were at the forefront of her mind, but she couldn't find it in herself to feel any kind of remorse. Her eyes felt

heavy and gritty, but she couldn't open them.

Inhaling deeply, she took in the scent of evergreen and something darker, more arousing, and wild. Even after everything that happened, her body had its own mind, had its own desires. She was lying on a leather seat, and when she inhaled again, she could smell the material right below her nose.

“Shhh, relax, little deer.”

The voice was deep, soothing, but slightly distorted. Her pulse beat frantically in her ears, and she knew that was the cause for the funny way he sounded. A heavy, warm hand landed on her bare arm, and she flinched away. It was gone a second later.

“I won't hurt you. I would never hurt you.”

She knew that voice, and even as he said the last sentence, she knew he had been speaking to himself. Kenzie sank farther into the seat as burning pain lanced through her side. Biting her lip to control herself from crying out, there wasn't a doubt in her mind that Rook had done a number on her. He had always harmed her in human form, but the fact that he had unsheathed his claws and brought his animal into his “punishment” had her thankful the events had turned in her favor.

She may be bruised and battered, but she wasn't broken. Emotionally and mentally ruined was a whole other thing. The only thing that kept replaying through her head was Rook's last words. They still had her flesh tightening, because she knew he always got what he wanted, and what he wanted was to see her suffer. He wouldn't let her go. He couldn't, because he wanted her too badly.

Bram's voice was low as he spoke to himself, but she knew he had to be aware she was awake, even if she didn't say anything and was motionless. He was a bear with senses far keener than a human's.

“I should have fucking killed him, ripped off his balls and shoved them down his throat.” He spoke to himself again. The air in the vehicle grew thick with his rage, and despite her initial feelings that she should stay away from him, it was clear he was nothing like Rook. Her thoughts drifted away as she felt the heaviness of darkness crash into her again.

The rhythmic motion of the truck, the deep timbre of Bram’s self-musing, and the fact that she just wanted to escape reality had Kenzie succumbing to the shadows that surrounded her once again.

She welcomed oblivion, because it was sure as hell better than the situation she was in right now.⁸ Bram looked over at Kenzie, who was now sleeping. He had sensed when she awoke, yet he also sensed her pain and exhaustion. She was in shock, and he knew he had to keep control or would lose the fight for supremacy with his bear.

Page 11

Source Creation Date: July 10, 2025, 8:03 am

As it was, he was hanging on by a thread, trying to not go back and finish the fight at Slater's that would have three males lying dead at his feet. The little deer was his mate, and he had fought to protect her and had felt his bear calm for the first time. But when he realized she left and the two cougars attacked him in unison, he let his animal fully out.

The shifters that fought with him in the underground fight club had gotten in on the violence, but soon they were going after each other, their animals attacking anyone who got in their way.

He had been in the mind frame to go after the panther and finish him, finish what his brave little female had done, but she was hurt and his first priority. He had seen her wounds, and red had covered his vision.

The scent of her blood filled the air, and when he turned and saw her standing over Rook's still form, something inside him had grown proud of his mate. But that pride over his female had vanished. Then she had passed out, and he felt something grow inside him that he had never felt before—fear. He was scared he would lose her before he even got the chance to know who she was.

He took the last turn that would take him to his cabin deep in the heart of the Sweet Water Mountains. Another ten minutes and he was pulling his truck in front of the two-story home he and his brothers built with their own hands years before. Having her here felt right, but he couldn't let his primal side take over.

He and his bear were in agreement that they needed to tend to her wounds and get her well. After she was better, he could discuss with her what he wanted... her as his

mate. He also needed to know what in the hell her relationship was with the panther.

The possessive need that had come from the asshole in regards to Kenzie had been nearly as strong as Bram's, but what the panther didn't have was that connection to her like he did. They were mates, and nature dictated he had supremacy over any douchebag who fucked with her. Bram didn't doubt the prick would come for her, because he sensed the obsessive need in the other male and knew he wouldn't stop until he got what he wanted, and it was clear he wanted Bram's female.

But what the panther didn't know was that Bram would fight dirty for her, and if that meant pulling out every resource he had to accomplish it, then so fucking be it. Although he didn't mind using his bear's strength to defeat his opponents, he would go bare knuckle with this fucker.

He quickly got out of the truck and walked around until he reached the passenger door. When he had the door open and Kenzie gently cradled in his arms, he took a second just to look at her. She was passed out, and what had been peach-colored flesh back at the bar looked a sickly shade of gray.

But still, she beckoned him like no other female had. Her eyes were closed, and he couldn't see the beautiful steel-colored eyes that had stared up at him so innocently. He had no doubt his wee mate had been horribly abused at the hands of the panther, but he clenched his jaw and pushed those thoughts away, for now. He couldn't think about that right now, not when his first priority was tending to Kenzie.

Once he was inside, he laid her down on the wide leather couch. She seemed so small on it, and that sight had his chest clenching in discomfort. Bram left her only long enough to get the first aid kit. Kneeling beside her had the scent of her blood filling his nose.

Her jeans were covered in blood, and her shirt was torn almost completely off at the

side. Gripping the torn shreds of her top, he ripped the material the rest of the way. He unbuttoned her jeans, pulling the zipper half down. A fierce growl left him. The claw marks that marred her delicate, smooth skin were deep.

They ran from her ribs to her hipbone. He had a suture kit, and even though he had sewn himself up plenty of times after a fight, had even done so to his brothers, he was hesitant to pierce Kenzie with the needle. The thought of causing her any more pain was like a dagger in his heart, but it had to be done. Bram disinfected the wounds as gently as he could and went about suturing her up. He was just thankful she was still passed out and unable to feel what would no doubt cause her even more pain.

Page 12

Source Creation Date: July 10, 2025, 8:03 am

It was a lot different from suturing up his brothers, because with them it was just do it and get done, but with Kenzie, he went slow and easy and kept glancing at her face to make sure he wasn't causing her any discomfort. A light sheen of sweat coated her forehead, but once he was done patching her up and had a clean dressing on the wounds, he let his ass hit the floor.

Damn, if that wasn't one of the most stressful things he ever had to do, then he was in for one hell of a trip when she was healed up.

Bram ran a hand over his jaw and stared at her. What in the hell was he going to do? He knew damn well he wouldn't and couldn't let her go. Even if she weren't his mate, it was clear that psychopath wasn't going to leave her alone, so that only meant one thing.

He would have to kill the fucker.

After putting everything away and draping a blanket over her, he walked to the breakfast bar and leaned on it. Having her in his home made him feel a bit calmer, but he was still feeling his animal pacing within him.

The motherfucker wanted blood and wouldn't be sated until it got what it wanted. A glance over his shoulder showed that she appeared comfortable, which went a long way in relaxing him. After grabbing the Crown from his liquor cabinet and drinking it straight from the bottle, he finally felt the exhaustion from his numerous fights of the night settle within him.

His chest hurt like a bitch, and when he looked down to inspect the damage, he was

surprised there wasn't any bone showing for how fucked up it looked. He needed a shower hot enough to wash away his blood as well as the blood of the fuckers he'd knocked down.

Taking one more long pull from the bottle, he set it aside and headed into the bathroom to do just that.⁹Kenzie came awake in a start and sat up, but the rapid movement caused her to gasp in pain and clutch at her side. Sweat broke out along her face and neck, and when she glanced down at her side, she could see fresh blood start to seep through the white dressing that covered her from rib to hip.

She looked around the rustic cabin but realized it was only part of the décor, as it had all modern updates.

The kitchen was to her right, and a lot of dark wood, stainless steel, and black granite adorned it. The couch she was on was leather and warm beneath her. A fireplace was to her left, and a big-screen television hung right above that. Aside from that, there were no pictures or other things to decorate the house. Bram's smell saturated the interior, but even if she hadn't been able to smell him, she would have known a male lived here. It screamed bachelor pad.

Kenzie looked down at her side once more and started peeling away the tape that held the bandage in place. She had stitches, and the fact that Bram had tended to her was so touching that she actually felt tears in her eyes.

There hadn't been a time in the last eleven years when someone had done something so kind for her. Not even when Rook first found her did he show genuine care for her like Bram did tonight.

The sound of the pipes creaking as water was being shut off had her slowly rising and turning toward the sound. Her pulse kicked up, and she twisted her hands together in front of her. The cabin was quite large with an intricately carved staircase that led up

to a loft.

The sound of a door opening had her glancing over at the first door down a short hallway. Steam billowed out, and then the light clicked off. Bram stepped out, a towel covering his head and one around his hips. Everything stalled inside her as she let her eyes travel up and down his body. His wounds were horrid and were now a bright red from his shower, but even that didn't detract from the overall power that made up the bear.

His shoulders were wide and his arms massive with layers upon layers of muscle. His chest looked like stone, well-defined, with a six-pack that was so ripped it almost seemed unreal. He also had that tight V of muscle that disappeared beneath the towel. She sure as hell didn't know what it was called, but damn did it look good.

Rook had been in shape, but where her former captor had leaner, sleek muscle, Bram's was hard, raw-cut power that challenged anyone to mess with him. He screamed masculinity, and never had she seen a person more... male.

Source Creation Date: July 10, 2025, 8:03 am

The towel seemed five inches too short, and boy did it not leave anything to the imagination, but if she were being honest, there was no way in hell she would have thought something that big could be possible.

As if he sensed her obscene appraisal of him, he lifted his head and stared at her. The towel still hung loosely over his head, and the sight made him look like some kind of roughened fighter. Kenzie supposed that was a pretty good description of him after what she had seen tonight.

“You’re up.” It wasn’t a question but more of an accusation. “You should be resting, especially with the wounds on your side.” Placing her hand lightly on the point of discussion, she realized the pain was still there, intense even, but she had been so caught up in Bram’s physique that she had blocked it out. “Please, sit down.”

He came forward, but Kenzie couldn’t find it in her to actually do as he said. When he was close enough that she could make out each individual bead of water that dripped down the dips and bulges of muscle, she found her mind wandering once again. Her mouth watered, and her tongue itched to trace one of those lone beads all the way down the length of his chest.

Oh God, she was growing aroused, and this was so not the time for that. Kenzie noticed the change in him instantly. His chest started to rise and fall at a faster rate, and the scent of his animal pheromones came at her like a gust of wind. It was so strong and intoxicating that she took a step back on instinct.

The deer inside her grew calm and pliant from the aroma, and all she could think about was stripping out of her clothes, pulling his towel free, and giving in to the

desire to lick every part of him. She was seriously deranged, sick, and twisted.

Her time with Rook must have messed her up more than she thought, because what person in their right mind lusted after another in a situation like this? They were both injured, yet she was wetter than she had ever been before.

“Sit down, Kenzie. I need to... look at your side.”

He sounded winded, like he just ran a marathon. His eyes traveled up and down her body, making her feel so very exposed, but in the best way imaginable. Slowly, she lowered herself to the couch, but she instantly knew what a bad idea that was, especially when his erection was right in her face. The towel still covered him, but his shaft tented the material so much that her throat went dry, and she knew her eyes were wide.

“Don’t worry. I won’t hurt you, Kenzie.” Voice pitched low, he sounded more animal than man at that moment. Had she ever wanted to see a male naked as much as she wanted to see Bram? No. The answer was that simple. Her reaction to him was so uncontrollable that there was only one explanation for it.

He was her mate.

That epiphany came at her like a freight train. Her pulse increased, and her palms became clammy. Never in her life did she think this would have been possible, especially since she had been trapped with Rook for years.

Bram lowered himself to his knees and then turned and grabbed something off the ground. Although he pressed his back up to her at the bar, she hadn’t realized it was covered in tattoos. The intricate, swirling designs were masculine yet looked fluid against his tan skin. When he turned back around, he held a first aid kit. Even on his knees, he was a large man, and Kenzie lifted her eyes over his abs, up his pecs, and

stopped at his face.

The towel that covered his head now hung loosely around his neck, and his dark hair was messy. He was watching her as intently as she watched him, and she knew his decree of ownership over her had meant so much more. He had known what she was to him from the moment he saw her, but it had taken all this time, and all this drama, for her to realize.

“Kenzie.” He licked his bottom lip, and she dipped her gaze to watch the act. She sure as hell shouldn’t be thinking about things like this after the life she led and what she had just done. Rook may or may not be dying right in front of that bar, yet here she was picturing herself under Bram, his big body tensing as he braced himself over her and thrust all those hard, long inches into her very willing body.

He closed his eyes briefly, and his nostrils flared slightly. She knew he could smell how wet she was, and that had heat rising up her neck and covering her face.

Source Creation Date: July 10, 2025, 8:03 am

Without opening his eyes, he said, “I think you tore a stitch.” His words were gritty, like sandpaper along her body, and all they seemed to do was heighten her arousal instead of dim it.

“W-What?” Kenzie licked her lips.

He opened his eyes, and this time he was the one to watch the act. Setting the first aid kit beside her, Bram leaned in so close she could smell the soap he used, and an involuntary moan left her. He must think she was insane for her response to him.

Despite his close proximity, he didn’t do anything but hold his place, but God... she wanted him to break that control.¹⁰ Kenzie’s face was right by his throat, and she saw the muscles of his neck work as he swallowed. It seemed grossly inappropriate for him to tend to her while he was only wearing a towel, and when he was extremely aroused. Although honestly, how could she complain?

“I’m just going to check your sutures, because I think you pulled some of them. I can smell fresh blood.” He swallowed again, and Kenzie tried to focus on other things. That was easier said than done. He pulled off the bandage, and she was thankful for the small distraction.

“I can’t believe you actually stitched me up.” Talking about something safe sounded like a good idea.

“I had to. I couldn’t stand looking at you hurt, Kenzie.” Hearing him say her name was an auditory orgasm and caused tingles to start in her toes and go all the way to the top of her head. How strange was it that she had only known him for a few hours

but already felt more connected than she ever had with anyone else?

Bram turned his head so they were facing each other, and she held her breath. Their faces were so close that she didn't doubt they breathed the same air, or that if she just leaned an inch forward, their lips would touch. He looked at her lips again, and Kenzie knew that if she didn't put some space between them, she would end up doing something foolish and far too reckless.

"Did I mess it up too badly?" Keep with the diversion. It was the best tactic, especially when her hormones were in overdrive, but then again, she had never been around her mate before. She could remember her parents talking about when they first met each other, how the attraction was instantaneous and powerful, but she had been so young then and hadn't really understood.

Now, as she stared into Bram's strong, handsome face, she knew exactly what they had been talking about. The only problem was Kenzie couldn't allow herself to be with Bram. That was far too dangerous, and if she wanted to live and keep Bram safe, she would have to run as far away from him and Rook as she could.

For a moment, all she could do was hold her breath and pray he didn't push her for more, because God help her she would have bent to his will and given him everything. Clearing his throat and looking back down at her side had a sigh leaving her.

"I think it'll be okay. I just have to fix the popped stitch, and you'll be good as new." He tilted his head to the side and glanced at her. The corner of his mouth kicked up, but she could see he didn't find anything humorous. The tension rolled off him and saturated the air, and his lust was just as strong as hers was. Nothing more was said as he went to work on her side. He was only fixing one stitch, but it felt like he was sewing up the whole length again.

Kenzie refused to show any outward pain, but she knew he was aware of her discomfort, because he stopped and let her breathe it out. When he was finished, he applied a new bandage and stood. Kenzie averted her eyes when she saw he still sported a massive erection, and her cheeks heated uncomfortably.

“Are you hungry or thirsty?”

“No, thank you.” She refused to look at him again, not because she was trying to be rude, but because she was just too damn embarrassed by the turn of events. Clearly, things needed to be said in regards to the whole mate thing, but she didn’t know where to begin or how to even proceed with starting a conversation like that.

Playing ignorant was not an option, because even though she had been under Rook’s thumb for the past eleven years, she had always been true to herself, even if she had been too much of a coward to stand up for herself.

“Okay, well, let me get dressed, and I’ll be right back.”

She looked up just as he turned to leave and watched the play of muscle on his body as he moved.

Source Creation Date: July 10, 2025, 8:03 am

“Wait.” Kenzie stood and gripped the edge of her shirt, pulling the two ends together tightly. Bram turned around, and her face heated even further when she realized he clearly didn’t care that she could see how aroused he was, because he made no move to cover it up. “Your uh...” She gestured to his chest, and he glanced down. “Can I return the favor and patch you up?” Surprise filtered across his face, and after a second, he nodded.

“Yeah, I’d appreciate that. Let me just slip on some sweats.” He disappeared down the hallway, and Kenzie sat back on the couch, breathing out deeply. A moment later, he was back in the living room. She stood and tried to avert her eyes, but of course he hadn’t put a T-shirt on. The sweats he wore hung low on his waist, and that delicious V of muscle stood out starkly. “Where do you want me?”

On top of me, naked and sweaty.

Shaking her head at her ludicrous thoughts, she gestured to the spot she had just vacated. He leaned back and threw his arms over the back of the couch. Bram’s legs were slightly parted, and he took on a totally relaxed stance. She wasn’t about to stitch him up, because honestly, she had no clue on the first thing about that, but she could at least clean the wounds and put dressings on them.

After grabbing what she needed from the kit sitting beside him, she sat on the couch and leaned forward. The position was awkward and didn’t give her enough room to work, so she got down on her knees in front of him. Bram opened his legs a little more, and she flicked her eyes to him. His lids were lowered at half-mast, and the blue irises seemed to glow.

“I won’t bite, Kenzie.” He said the words low, and her temperature rose. Moving closer so she could fit her body between his thighs, she quickly went to work on cleaning the wounds. It helped somewhat to keep her mind off the obvious erection he still had.

The cuts and gouges were horrendous and numerous. She couldn’t dress them all, but she got the bigger ones covered and went to work on cleaning the smaller claw marks.

God, look at what they did to him. When she had first seen him, he had cuts and bite marks all over his body, but after the fight with Rook, his chest was now riddled with them, so much so that it made her lightheaded to even look at them.

For as horrifying as this situation was, and seeing as her future was on a ledge, she wanted to talk about how she was feeling.¹¹ This had never happened to Kenzie before, and she’d certainly never wanted a male. It was exhilarating to actually feel comfort and desire instead of fear and revulsion. Even after realizing what he was to her, and wanting desperately to just enjoy this moment, this time with him, she had to tell him she couldn’t stay.

“Thank you for saving me back at the bar.” She looked up at him to find him staring at her. “And thank you for tending to my wounds. A lot of people would have just looked the other way.” She poured some peroxide on a square of gauze and pressed it against one of the longer cuts. He didn’t flinch, didn’t move, and she didn’t think he even breathed. “It isn’t safe for me to be here. If Rook is still alive, which I’m sure he is, he’ll come for me, and I don’t want you put in any more danger.”

A low growl left him, and she snapped her head up, surprised at the primal, possessive sound. Aside from that, he didn’t respond, just continued to look at her, and so she went back to tending to his chest. The minutes ticked by, and the silence descended on them. Clearly, he didn’t want to talk about what she just said, so she let

it go... for now.

“Do they hurt?” She ran the gauze over a set of nasty-looking teeth marks and winced when it started bleeding.

“I’m used to it.”

For some reason, she wasn’t surprised, but then again, her first impression of him had been raw, animalistic, and commanding. “Why are you used to it?”

He shifted on the couch, and his thighs brushed along her hips. A gush of wetness immediately spilled from her, and she prayed like hell the smell of the peroxide masked the scent of her arousal.

It took him a minute to answer, but when he did, his voice was clear and without a hitch in it. “It’s just what I do.” She looked up at him, but before she could question what he meant by that, he continued talking. “I get into a lot of fights, because I like it. It makes me feel good.” Kenzie focused on mending him, although his words had a strange feeling moving through her. Rook had liked fighting as well. Were her instincts wrong about Bram? Could he be just as unstable as Rook? What person enjoyed fighting and getting hurt?

Source Creation Date: July 10, 2025, 8:03 am

“One of these times, you might not walk away.” She didn’t know why she said that, because really it wasn’t her business. He wasn’t her business. But even thinking that last part had a sour taste forming in her mouth.

Her deer wanted to curl up beside this primal animal, become vulnerable, and let her trust go totally into him. He was the alpha to her submissive, and she wanted the protection and safety she knew he would give her. Kenzie could feel that coming from him, and it took her breath away.

Those were scary and dangerous thoughts, and Kenzie wouldn’t think about them any longer. None of that stuff was what would be in her future, and pretending like she didn’t have a shitty past and an even shittier present wasn’t an option. Bram had saved her life, taken her into his home even though he didn’t know her or the ruined background she carried. She needed to leave, disappear, and stay under the radar so Rook could never find her.

“That won’t happen.” His cockiness wasn’t that much of a surprise, but she still looked up at him and raised an eyebrow.

“Oh, and why is that?” She could hear the breathy way she phrased the question and quickly cleared her throat. Kenzie would be lying if she didn’t admit his masculinity was a turn-on. He slowly leaned forward, so their faces were once again only separated by inches. Kenzie forced herself not to move.

She wasn’t scared of him, which was shocking. It was strange that her deer wasn’t cowering, but then again, she assumed that was one of the gifts of a mate. He showed outward signs of his interest for her, but he still kept this stoic expression in place. He

lowered his eyes to her chest and then slowly lifted them back up to her face.

“Because, little deer.” He moved in another inch, and she swore his lips brushed gently against hers for the briefest second. She should move away, feel some kind of terror that this unknown man was in her personal space, that for all she knew he could hide who he was from her, but all she could do was grip the edge of the couch and wait for him to continue. “I never lose a fight. Ever.”

He sounded so sure, so positive that there was no doubt in her mind he told the truth. For a pregnant pause, neither of them spoke or moved, and she found herself closing her eyes and waiting for the inevitable kiss. She waited and waited, but instead of his lips pressing against hers, he said, “You should get some rest, and when you’re feeling better, I want to know what the panther is to you.”

She opened her eyes and got lost in the blue pools.

“And if he is still alive, I’m going to hunt him down and rip his throat out.” He lifted his hand and cupped her cheek. “And do you know why I want to kill him?”

She shook her head, not knowing what he would say, since he knew nothing about her.

“Because he hurt what’s mine, and you’re mine, Kenzie.” He looked down at her mouth, and she licked her lips, which had him groaning deeply. “But you know you’re mine, don’t you, little deer.” He didn’t phrase it as a question. “Yeah, you know it. I can smell your realization as well as I can smell how much you ache for me.”

Oh. God. He was too much for her, saying things she couldn’t handle, and too male. He didn’t mince his words and made no apologies.

He stared into her eyes for several long seconds and then let his hand drop from her cheek. He gently gripped her arms and slowly eased her away from him as he stood. For a moment, all Kenzie could do was stare at his retreating back. Immobilized from her lust and disappointment at their almost kiss, she felt like a puddle of liquid on the ground. Right before he stepped into the hallway, he stopped, keeping his back to her. The light created shadows across the muscular, inked expanse.

“And, Kenzie?”

Blinking past the haze that had overcome her, she slowly stood. He looked over his shoulder at her.

“I’m not letting you run from me. I want you here. I need you here.” He pierced her with his striking blue eyes. “I can keep you safe, and I know you know this, too. You’re mine, Kenzie.” Her chest rose up and down frantically. “You know it, and I know it, and before this is all said and done I’ll have you under me, my cock buried in your sweet little body, and my mark covering your flesh.”

Her hand landed on her throat at his blunt, distorted, and obscene words. At that moment, she was looking at the animal, speaking to his bear, and he was letting her know that she was his. That should have scared the shit out of her, had her running in the opposite direction and reminding her of the horrors she faced at the hands of Rook, but she didn’t move a muscle.

Page 17

Source Creation Date: July 10, 2025, 8:03 am

This was nothing like what she felt with the panther, because Bram was nothing like Rook. There was so much truth in his words that her knees threatened to give out.

“Come on, little deer, and let me show you where you’ll be sleeping.”

He turned fully around and held his hand out to her. Kenzie looked at it then back to his face. She took that first step toward him, knew this was wrong on so many levels, but couldn’t stop herself. Her deer was taking the reins, following its instincts and going toward the first person she felt safe with since she turned eighteen.

What in the hell was she doing, and would she come out of this unscathed?12Bram watched the change of emotions on Kenzie’s face. He should have been gentler with her, not so demanding and possessive, and should have bitten his tongue, but dammit he wasn’t going to let her run from him or her past, and he had seen she was going to do just that.

He didn’t know what that motherfucker had done to her, but his instincts told him she had been harmed beyond words.

Yeah, he may have been too coarse, but he didn’t know any other way to be. Bram had never had a mate, had never wanted to care for another person as much as he wanted to take care of her. He didn’t know how scarred she really was or what unspeakable things that fucking panther had done to her, but he would find out, and then he would hunt him down and kill the motherfucker.

The shifting emotions in her could have brought Bram to his knees. What he needed to do was go slow with her, ease her into the fact that they were mates. She might

know they were meant to be together, and that his bear wouldn't let her go, but he didn't think she truly knew the lengths he would go to keep her safe and to make sure she never felt pain again in her life.

This was fast, intense, and like nothing he had ever experienced, but that was the way of mating, and he wasn't going to let it pass him by. For the first time in his fucked-up life, Bram was slowing down and embracing what was right in front of him.

Hell, he had lived a life of violence and getting drunk to pass the time. He wasn't proud of his life, especially not when his girl was standing right in front of him smelling of her sweet and innocent desire for him.

"I'm sorry. I don't mean to frighten you even more." Running a hand over his jaw, he waited for her to make another move. She affected him like no other, made him want to do unspeakable acts, but it had only taken a couple hours for him to fall to his knees and give her the world.

She looked down and smoothed her hands over the remains of her shirt. He told her he would wait until she was rested to know what had happened, but maybe she needed to tell him now.

"Do you want to tell me what happened with him?" Smothering her was not what he was going for, and a surefire way for her to book it out of there was for him to push her too fast and too hard.

"I—" She took a deep breath, lifted her head, and looked up at him. There was indecision and hesitance written across her face.

"Listen, you don't have to say anything right now. I know I can be an assertive ass on the best of days, but I am a male of my word, and I will protect you and keep you safe until I'm no longer breathing." Bram hoped she would eventually trust him enough to

tell him what the shifter had done to her, but he didn't blame her for her uncertainty.

Just thinking about the male had blind fury coursing through him. Taking a deep, somewhat calming breath had him relaxing enough that he didn't want to rush out of the house and find the fucker.

"Let me show you where you'll be sleeping," he said again. For a moment, he thought she might object, and he felt another flash of fear. It was a strange emotion, one he didn't care for, but his mate brought out a lot of unusual emotions inside him.

He couldn't help but be protective of her, but even if she wasn't his mate, he would have taken care of her, given her situation. He was glad she didn't put up a fight, because he could see the exhaustion on her face, and he was hanging on by a thread himself.

He pushed one of the guest bedroom doors open and turned the light on. It was the smallest room in the cabin, but it was the one right next to his, and if she wasn't going to be sleeping in his room tonight, he wanted her as close as possible to him.

Source Creation Date: July 10, 2025, 8:03 am

“I have a pair of sweats and a tee you can wear tonight, but tomorrow if you’re feeling up to it, we can go into town and get you some clothes.”

Maybe it was presumptuous of him to assume she would just stay with him, but he was fucking serious when he said he wasn’t going to let her go. Finding a mate was a big fucking deal, and he had been graced with having Kenzie walk into his life. That didn’t happen every day to a shifter, and he was grateful fate had given her to him. She may have had a broken past, but he was going to make sure she had a bright future, whether she wanted to believe him or not.

He left her in the room long enough to grab some clothes and headed back to the guestroom. For a moment, all he could do was stare at her as she sat on the edge of the bed. The scent of her tears was profound, and he found himself moving forward and kneeling in front of her. She didn’t pull away when he grabbed her hands and covered them with his.

“You have nothing to be afraid of, not now, Kenzie.” He wanted her to trust him, to open up and let him carry the weight of her burden, but he also knew he was asking a hell of a lot. When she lifted her head and he saw the product of her sorrow, he couldn’t help himself.

Bram leaned forward and kissed her gently on the lips. She moved her head away from him, and her surprise slammed into him. After a suspended moment, she relaxed, and now it was his turn to be surprised as hell.

She didn’t move for several long moments and just stared at him. There was clear shock and uncertainty in her eyes, and it was the latter that made him feel like a

bastard for even trying anything on her. But then he had seen her broken expression, and all he wanted to do was take that away from her and replace it with something softer, sweeter.

“What are you doing?” Her voice was low, filled with curiosity and apprehension.

“I just want to make you feel better, Kenzie.” He leaned in again, but she stopped him with a hand to his chest. “Not like that. I would never take anything from you that you don’t willingly give.”

He kept his eyes locked on hers, trying to convey with his eyes that what he said was the truth. She was a scarred and scared little deer, and even though he could smell the reality of what he knew to be a painful life, he also scented a very strong female, one that could hold her own if given space and encouragement. She was a fighter, his little fighter, and pride filled him that she had survived. “I just want to take away that sad look, Kenzie. Just a kiss. Nothing more, nothing less.”

If she turned him away, slapped his face, and screamed that he had no right to ask her for anything, Bram would understand fully. But Bram could scent that although they had just met, she knew his words, his actions, and everything he did toward her was all with the best of intentions.

He just wanted her safe and sound beside him, and that she was his mate had him wanting to do it at lightning speed, but he could and would be patient with her. After a long moment, she took a deep breath and smiled hesitantly at him.

“You’re nothing like him.” Her words were low and filled with emotion, and before he could stop himself, he cupped her cheek and ran his thumb back and forth over her soft skin. She didn’t lean forward and allow his kiss, but that was okay, because she was letting him have this one joy.

She melted against him and closed her eyes. He may not know the pain she had endured, whatever it was, but he knew the feeling of hopelessness inside, the emotion that ate away at a person until he didn't think there would be anything left.

"I'm so, so sorry, little deer," he whispered, and his heart broke as he saw the lone tear slip down her cheek. When he pulled back and cupped her other cheek in his hand, he was somewhat relieved to scent not just sorrow anymore, but relief too.

"Thank you." She closed her eyes, and her dark, long lashes created crescents across her creamy cheeks.

Brushing his thumbs across her cheeks and gathering her tears, he said, "For what, sweetheart?" He leaned in and kissed each of her closed eyes, and his heart slammed hard against his ribs when he saw her lips tilt in a smile.

"For everything. Protecting me, fighting for me, and now taking me into your home." Kenzie opened her eyes, and he was once again struck by the gorgeous color. "No one has ever showed me so much kindness."

Source Creation Date: July 10, 2025, 8:03 am

Bram wasn't going to remind her that she was his mate. She could deny it, push it away, and try to avoid the truth of the matter, but in the end, it wouldn't make one difference, because she was his.

"I wouldn't have done it any other way, especially when that person is you." He leaned in and kissed her once more. His body was on fire for more, but now was not the time to let his bear have control and do whatever the hell it wanted. She was hurt, and she needed her rest. "The bathroom is just down the hall, second door on the left." He stood and grabbed the clothes he had set on the bed for her. "If you feel like getting cleaned up, that's fine, but don't take a shower, since I just stitched you up." She stared up at him, and he handed her the clothes. "Are you hungry? I can make you something to eat."

She shook her head, and a tendril of hair fell forward. Bram reached out and brushed the blonde lock away from her forehead. Her flesh was butter-soft, and he forced himself to pull his hand away or he would never stop touching her. When she didn't say anything in response, he nodded once and turned to leave her in privacy, but her soft voice stopped him right before he stepped back into the hallway.

"Thank you again, Bram."

He curled his hands into fists and hung his head. Eyes closed and breathing now increased from hearing her say his name, Bram cleared his throat and walked away before he stepped back into that room and did something that would ruin everything before it even got started.¹³ Kenzie watched Bram leave the room and shut the door behind him. For several moments, all she did was sit there and stare at the wall. Looking down at the clothes Bram had given her, tears welled in her eyes. He was a

good male, a very good male, and the longer she stayed with him, the worse things would get.

This was not a time to be selfish and jump into the arms of another shifter. Kenzie needed to be independent and stand on her own two feet, run far from Rook, and lead him away from her bear.

Her bear.

It was easy to think about that when in the comfort of his home, but ultimately, he wasn't hers, not really. She would take his hospitality and spend the night, but in the morning, she would leave the town of Sweet Water and Bram Wylde behind. The bear shifter had turned her world upside down in a matter of hours, and that was not a good thing, at least not at this point in her life.

Kenzie stood and walked over to the door. There was no noise coming from the other side, and when she opened it and looked down the hallway, she saw the lights had been dimmed.

After slipping quietly down the hall and to the bathroom, she leaned against the closed door and closed her eyes. What she wouldn't give for a hot shower to wash the blood, sweat, and stench of Rook off of her.

She didn't want to risk opening up another stitch, so she cleaned up as best as she could in the sink and put on the sweats and T-shirt Bram had given her. The clothing smelled like him, and even though they were three times too big for her, she felt as if Bram were right here with her.

Once she was back in her room and under the covers, she thought she would have fallen right asleep, but every time she closed her eyes, all she felt was worry. She wiped away her tears and tried to realize she was no longer trapped in a nightmare.

“Why didn’t you leave, Kenzie?” she whispered softly in the night and covered her face with her hands. That was the same question she had asked herself over and over again, and quite frankly, she was sick of it. There had been a lot of factors involved, but fear and lack of resources had been the main ones.

What would she do out there in the world alone? A job was a first priority, because without money, she would be living beside a dumpster like she had been doing at ten years old.

Letting her hands fall back on the bed and staring at the ceiling, she didn’t want to think anymore. All Kenzie wanted to do was go to sleep and pray that things looked clearer and brighter in the morning, but then again, she’d always hoped that before she fell asleep, and it had never come true.

Kenzie closed her eyes and silently asked whoever was listening if she could have a peaceful sleep for once in her ruined life.

Source Creation Date: July 10, 2025, 8:03 am

14Kenzie sat up on the edge of the bed and looked over at the clock on the bedside table. It was six in the morning, and after a somewhat restful sleep, nightmare-free, she had woken up with the intent on leaving. She hated just running out on Bram, especially when he had been so kind to her, but it wasn't just about her. She was helping to protect him as well.

When Rook came looking for her, which she knew without a doubt he would, Bram would be caught in the middle of it.

The shirt she had been wearing at the bar was a tattered mess, not something she could wear again, but her jeans were intact, albeit dirty as hell.

After slipping those on and tying the T-shirt in the front enough that it didn't resemble a sack of potatoes on her, she slipped on her shoes and opened the door as silently as possible. A little voice inside her told her she needed to tell Bram she was leaving, if only to thank him once more for his generosity, but she couldn't, because in all honesty, she was a coward and just wanted to slip away without any complications.

Bram was the type of male to get what he wanted, and he'd made it clear what he wanted was her. A shiver worked up her spine at that thought. The sound of a clock ticking in the background didn't drown out the noise of her beating heart. Kenzie felt like she was doing something horribly wrong, and when that thought hit her, she stopped in her tracks.

No, she couldn't just leave, not without at least giving him some kind of explanation why she had to go. Glancing over her shoulder, she saw that the hallway was dark

and all the doors were closed. Which one was his? She would just wait in the kitchen until he woke up and everything could be aired out, the dirty parts as well.

Kenzie rounded the corner and stopped abruptly when she saw Bram sitting at the table in nothing but a pair of track shorts and running shoes. A light sheen of sweat glistened on his ripped chest, a chest that was now healed and only showed raised, red lines from his fight last night. Her own wounds were healing, but with the factors of stress and her continued abuse at the hands of Rook, it would take much longer for her wounds to close.

He wasn't out of breath, and the clear fact that he was already healed after the fierce fight he had been in last night was a testament that he was in optimal health and vitality. Touching her side, all she felt was a slight twinge of discomfort. Her wounds probably wouldn't be healed like his until nightfall, but by tomorrow, the sutures wouldn't be necessary.

A newspaper was spread out before Bram, and he held a glass of milk in his hand. The sight of that milk had a smile forming on her lips.

"I wondered when you were going to wake up." He looked up at her and grinned, flashing his straight, white teeth. "Thought you could sneak out on me?" He was still grinning, and humiliation and shame filled her. "I always get up at four and go for a run through the woods." Leaning back in his chair, he brought his glass to his mouth and drank half the milk.

Who would have ever thought watching a man suck down a glass of milk was sexy as hell? His dark hair was wet from perspiration, and she started her appraisal there and worked her way down. Everything about him was magnificent, but the most monumental thing out of it all was the fact that she felt no fear around him.

There was this calmness that started in the pit of her belly and pushed outward.

Her inner deer had never been so affected, had never felt the need to just sit back and let the human side of Kenzie take control.

“I’d like to make you some breakfast right after I take a quick shower.” Bram stood and lifted his arms above his head to stretch. Dear Lord, her mouth started watering as she took in the full display of his muscles contracting from the movement. “Yeah, Kenzie?” He dropped his arms and moved closer to her.

The scent of his clean, male sweat filled her nose, and she forced herself not to groan like some kind of nympho. What kind of female would he really think she was if she told him all about her past and the way she was feeling toward him?

As she stared into his eyes, she knew those specific questions would be answered soon enough, because she was about to give him the gritty rundown of who she really was. Most likely, he would want to run in the other direction, because no sane man would want to get involved with someone that messed up, mate or not.

Source Creation Date: July 10, 2025, 8:03 am

“That sounds good, Bram.”

He didn’t move, but that was okay, because she loved the feel of his body heat and scent surrounding her.

“Good.” He brought his hand up and ran it over the back of his neck, and Kenzie couldn’t help but watch the way his bicep flexed. “I’ll be right back.”

When the bathroom door shut behind him and Kenzie was seated in one of the dining room chairs, she let her head fall into her hands.

“Get a grip, girl.” One minute, she had been ready to bolt out of here, and the next, she was sitting at his table, waiting for him so she could tell him what a fucked-up situation she had been in. Glancing at the front door, she contemplated just leaving.

The sound of the shower running confirmed she had a good five to ten minutes of a head start, but she pushed that thought away as quickly as it had come.

No, Kenzie had been a coward all her life, and she wasn’t going to ditch the first person she felt connected with and who saved her. Not because of life experiences.

It was time she took something for herself.¹⁵ Bram came back into the kitchen less than ten minutes later, and damn did he look good in a pair of lounge pants and a T-shirt. She went to stand, but he shook his head and placed his hands on her shoulders to gently ease her back in the seat.

“Please, relax and let me fix you something to eat, okay?”

Kenzie looked up at him and nodded. For the next twenty minutes, Bram hovered over the stove. He didn't force a conversation on her, and for that she was thankful. It was cute to see him going back and forth from the fridge to the stove to the sink.

He even hummed to himself on occasion, and she wondered if he was aware of that. When he set a heaping plate in front of her of eggs, bacon, toast, and hash browns, her stomach chose that moment to growl loudly. Her embarrassment intensified when Bram chuckled at hearing the sound.

"Milk, juice, or water? I don't drink coffee, but I can always run into town and grab some if you're going to go through withdrawals."

Kenzie laughed out loud and shook her head. "I hate coffee actually."

He slapped a hand on his chest and took a step back. Worry filled her at his sudden reaction.

"Beautiful, killer body, and my girl isn't a coffee drinker. I hit the mate jackpot." He gave her a wink, sat in the seat across from her, and started tearing into his own plate of food.

All Kenzie kept hearing in her head was Bram calling her "his girl." It felt good to hear him say those two words, but at the same time so very bad.

She could see herself getting attached to him. Hell, she was already feeling lightheaded in his presence and couldn't stop thinking about him in every way possible. When he noticed she wasn't eating and could probably feel her stare, he lifted just his eyes to look at her.

"I know you're hungry." He gestured to the plate of food in front of her. "You need protein to help heal your wounds, and you're gonna hurt a guy's feelings by not

eating what he cooked for you.” With one more wink, he went back to eating.

Kenzie picked up her fork, speared a chunk of scrambled eggs, and brought it to her mouth. He was gorgeous, and he could cook.

They ate in relative silence, but she could feel every time he looked up at her. It was like a physical touch, and she wondered if she was this aware of his every move because they were mates or if it was just because she had been sheltered so much that any kind of kindness and wanted attention made her more conscious of his actions. Once they were done eating, Bram pushed a full glass of orange juice toward her.

“Vitamin C and all that.” The corner of his mouth kicked up, and her heart rate did the same. “So drink it up.” What a pushy alpha bear, but Kenzie smiled nonetheless. Once she finished the juice, she leaned back in her seat, her belly full for the first time in as long as she could remember.

“So, how about we start at the beginning so I can get even more pissed at this asshole?”

Although Bram’s expression was serious and harsh, his soft words were phrased in a way he was trying to ease the situation.

Kenzie looked down at her empty plate and knew she just needed to get this over with. When it was all said and done, he would probably look at her differently, but of course that was to be expected. Who wanted a mate who was both mentally and physically scarred?

Source Creation Date: July 10, 2025, 8:04 am

The best place to start was from the beginning, and so that is exactly what she did.¹⁶ Bram forced himself to give Kenzie the time she needed to tell him what he wanted to know. He knew this had to be hard for her, could smell her emotions as if they were a fresh rainstorm. He took on a relaxed position against the back of his chair, yet he felt anything but. His bear was a manic fucker inside him, pacing and growling, wanting to lock her away and keep her safe while he exacted his vengeance on the panther.

He'd always felt this instability inside him, but being around Kenzie calmed the frantic need to deliver pain and receive it. But knowing what he was about to hear from Kenzie was probably filled with horrors, he felt the calmness dissipate and rage take its place. What he felt right now was like nothing he had ever encountered.

“My parents were mugged and shot right in front of me when I was ten. I ran away after that, because there was no way I wanted another family to raise me. I just couldn't deal with any of that, so I took to the streets and lived like that for only a month before I knew I was going to die right there beside the filthy dumpsters.” Her throat worked when she swallowed.

Her cheeks heated, and her embarrassment smelled like a blooming flower.

She lifted her gaze to his, and his heart clenched at her dejected look. “That was how Rook found me, dirty and hungry but willing and ready to die. He took me into his home, lavished me with parental affection, and made sure I never wanted for anything, but I should have sensed none of that was genuine. I was nothing but a pawn, a tool, a piece of property. He finally showed me who he really was.”

The bear in him started to force his way out, to take control and end all this, but no way in hell was he going to shift in front of Kenzie, not when she was opening herself up to him like she was.

“With each passing day, he started showing me how sadistic he was.” The pain in her eyes as she stared at him was tangible, and he wanted to go to her, pull her into his arms, and kiss her until she never thought of that motherfucker again. “I tried to escape once, but that didn’t end well, so I never tried it again until last night. I was a coward, still am.”

Bram gripped the edge of the table, leaned forward, and let the growl that was poised in his throat out with all the ferocity he felt. The wood beneath his hands cracked and crumbled, but the discomfort wasn’t enough.

A lone tear slipped down her cheek, and he rose to go to her, but she lifted her hand to stop him. “Please, just let me finish.” Wiping away the tear, she held his stare and continued. “I can’t believe I’m telling you all this. I’ve never uttered any of this to a living soul, but then again, he made sure to keep me away from anyone else.” She closed her eyes.

She stood and gripped the edge of her shirt. He wasn’t sure what she was doing, but when she revealed her belly and the jagged scar that ran beside her belly button, sickness took him over.

“This was my punishment for trying to get away.” She lowered her eyes and let her shirt drop back in place. “My other wounds have healed, and the bruises have disappeared. I wanted you to know the truth, because we are—”

“Mates.”

Kenzie lifted her eyes to his, and he said it more slowly, so she knew he meant that

one word more than anything else. And that she knew exactly how important she was to him.

“You’re my mate, and nothing you can say about your past will make me want you any less.” He smelled the subtle scent of one of the reasons she told him all that was because she thought he wouldn’t want her anymore. Another shifter might not have been able to pick up on the slight change in smell, but he was more animal than man, and because of that, he sensed it powerfully.

Bram let go of the table, and a piece of wood fell onto the floor.

“You’re mine, Kenzie, and I’ll say it over and over again until you realize it is the truth.” He moved closer to her until only a foot separated them. “I’ll keep saying it until every fucking person on this planet knows it.” He was on edge again, itching for a fight, and wished he could hold her and make her pain go away. “I can’t really make myself any clearer, Kenzie. All I can tell you is that being my mate is not something I take lightly, and certainly not something I am willing to ignore.” He lifted his hand and cupped her cheek, a guttural groan leaving him when she closed her eyes and leaned into his embrace. “I’m not going to let you go, because I want you too fucking bad, baby, and because you’re mine to protect and cherish.”

Source Creation Date: July 10, 2025, 8:04 am

If he sensed for one moment that his words were too much for her, that his alphaness was going over the line, he would have backed the fuck off, but all he sensed was her inner animal growing soft and giving. She wanted this, and no matter how bad her life had been, she trusted him in the way mates did with each other.

Knowing how she felt toward him, Bram didn't want to deny himself any longer. He leaned in close and stopped just an inch from her mouth. Their eyes were locked, and he waited until he saw her acceptance in her gaze and the slight nod before he pressed his mouth against hers.

He took her lips in a kiss, softly at first, waiting to gauge her reaction. He wanted to show her how gentle he could be. At first, he just caressed her lips with his, but the desire to take more from her was too strong.

When she didn't push him away, he went a bit further. Sliding his tongue along the seam of her lips was a sensory overload as he tasted the flavor of her flesh. She was sweet and addictive, and he couldn't stop, wouldn't even if his life depended on it. Kenzie was hesitant at first but soon opened her mouth and allowed him entry, and Bram took it all.

Slipping into the warm, wet cavern of her mouth had a grunt of pleasure leaving him, and when she moved her tongue along his, he hardened even further. The lounge pants offered little obstruction as he moved closer to her and pressed his cock into the soft swell of her belly.

The scent of her arousal coated him and brought him to new heights, so Bram didn't stop his bear from rising to the surface and experiencing this right along with him.

“I want this so bad, Kenzie.” He broke the kiss and trailed his lips over her cheek and down her neck. “I want you so bad, more than I’ve ever wanted anything or anyone before. I just don’t want to go too fast, push you too far, and have you running from me.”

Her answering moan and the way she gripped his biceps, as if she thought he would leave, told him she wanted this too.

“All you have to do is tell me that this is okay.” Nipping and licking at her throat had Bram’s pulse beating frantically at the tip of his dick. “That I can go further, and I promise I’ll be gentle.” He ran his tongue up the length of her throat and then moved it back down again. “I’ll make it good for you.” He slid his hands down her back and over the full mounds of her ass. “And I’ll make sure I am the only male you think of.”

Curling his fingers into her soft, generous ass, Bram felt his shaft grow even harder. God, he really was a bastard for even wanting this from her right after she told him about her abuse, but he needed to help her wipe away the memories of the panther and replace them with only ones of him. He didn’t do any more than kiss her slowly, waiting for her to give her permission to go further.

“I don’t know how this will end up, but I do know I’ve never felt like this in my life, Bram.” He pulled back and looked down at her. In a soft voice, she said, “I want to forget about him, and I want you to be the male to help me with that.” He stared into her eyes, feeling a gentle part of him rise up, one he’d never felt or experienced before. “I want to give you the one part of me I’ve never given to anyone else... the one part Rook didn’t steal from me.”

The air left him violently at her words.

As he pressed his hips forward, the fresh scent of her pussy called to the male in him. It wasn’t lost on him that her scarred past made her delicate and vulnerable, but

showing her, telling her that he fucking needed her, that she was it for him, and that he would do everything in his power to ensure she knew that, eased the human and bear within him.

That asshole's time was coming, and when he faced off with Bram, because there was no doubt the panther would come after Kenzie, Bram would let his bear out at full-force and finally bring his girl peace.

"Bram." She sighed and let her head fall back, and he continued to lick her like she was the best-tasting treat in the whole fucking world. "I do want this. I do want you, but I can't." She put her hands on his chest, and he dragged his teeth up her neck.

Source Creation Date: July 10, 2025, 8:04 am

Her breathing was haggard and rushed, and he knew that if he pushed her just a bit more, she'd give into him, but that wasn't what he wanted, and that wasn't how he was going to get her under him. It took a lot of strength for him to take a step back, because he badly wanted to be buried deep inside her body, but he and his bear were in agreement that rushing her was not the answer.

Before she could pull fully away from him, he sank to his knees in front of her and held her hips loosely in his hands. He was not letting her go. She was his.¹⁷ Staring up at her showed him that Kenzie wore an expression of shock.

“What are you doing?” she asked. Her throat worked as she swallowed, and he smelled her confusion.

Bram had never gotten on his knees for anyone, let alone a female, but Kenzie was something different, something special.

He grabbed the edge of her shirt. It was one of his and far too big for her body. He couldn't help but smile at the little knot she made out of the edge of the material to make it less baggy. He lifted the hem up, and she stopped his hands by placing hers over his.

“I know I'm asking a lot—fuck, I know I am—but trust me like you've never trusted any other person, and I promise I won't ever disappoint you.”

It took her several seconds before she removed her hands slowly and let them fall to her sides. Bram resumed lifting her shirt up until the scar she revealed earlier was visible.

His vision turned red at the old injury, but instead of showing her his anger and pain that he hadn't been there to protect her, he leaned forward and ran his tongue along the length of it.

She tensed, most likely wondering what the fuck he was doing, but Bram was intent on showing her that there was nothing he didn't like about her. To him, she was perfect in every conceivable way. He kissed her over and over again, keeping his hands on her waist, feeling her smooth, warm skin beneath his palms, and wishing things had been so much different.

He moved his tongue along her belly until she relaxed once again and placed her hands on his shoulders. The scar tissue was raised beneath his tongue, but that just made him lick her more slowly and thoroughly. He vowed to himself, and would soon do the same to her, that once she was naked and in his bed, he would drag his tongue over every inch of her, memorizing her body the way it deserved, the way she deserved.

"I wish I could take it all away." And he did, with every fiber of his being. "I'm sorry he hurt you." He continued kissing her until his lips were numb and she trembled against him. "I'm sorry I wasn't there to make sure you were safe." He moved his hands in slowly so that he was now framing the scar. "I just want you to know you don't have to be afraid of me."

Pulling back and lifting just his eyes to her, he saw the fresh stream of tears falling down her cheeks. But despite her tears, there was no sadness, only a profound understanding that what he said was the truth.

"There is no need to run from me." He stood and took both of her hands in his. "Instead, let's go shopping, because I know girls like to do that shit." He smiled, changing the mood to something lighter, because he wanted—no, he needed—to see her smile. She gave him what he wanted, and his heart thumped against his chest as

her lips curved slightly.

He was lost for his girl, and it hadn't even been twenty-four hours. Mating could be a tricky fucker, but dammit he wouldn't change it for anything, not when he actually felt like a man in her presence and not just a bear walking in a human's body.

Then she said the words that meant more to him than anything else he had ever heard.

“Okay, Bram, I'll trust you.”

Good, because without her trust, they'd have nothing.¹⁸ Bram handed the cashier a wad of cash and took the shopping bags off the counter. When he first told Kenzie they would go shopping, she told him no, that she couldn't accept something like that from him.

She didn't have a job or money, and although it was mighty generous of him, Kenzie just didn't feel right about it. He may be her mate, but she knew nothing about him and certainly couldn't accept something so generous.

Of course, no one told Bram Wylde no, especially a deer shifter who was shit at staying firm to her word. In his defense, he was quite the negotiator. He went as far as telling her if she made him a home-cooked meal tonight, then they would be even. What he didn't know was she had never cooked a day in her life.

Kenzie didn't even know if she could boil water.

“Come on, Bambi.”

He gave her a wink, and she sighed in exasperation. For some reason, he had decided to call her that today out of the blue. It was such a juvenile name, but there was also a little part of her that got all girly and giddy over the fact that she knew he called her that as an endearment.

He wrapped his arm around her shoulders and pulled her close to his body. She still tensed at contact, but with Bram, it wasn't because of uncertainty of what he would do to her, but her own desire slamming right into the center of her body.

He'd been touching her little by little ever since they left his cabin. It seemed he had to always have his hands on her, and every time he touched her, or leaned in and his warm, sweet breath teased the side of her throat when he whispered something into her ear, Kenzie felt herself draw even closer to him.

Finding a mate was on a whole other level from anything else. There was no logic when two mates found each other. Even thinking about her parents after so many painful years still brought a smile to her face. They had always been kissing or whispering things to each other. And their love for one another was as real as Bram standing right in front of her.

Bram tightened his hold on her, and the hairs on the back of Kenzie's neck stood up. Looking over her shoulder, she scanned the street. People walked up and down the sidewalks, talking with one another and looking pleasantly oblivious that a monster

most likely was still visiting their sweet little town. She had been so very hesitant to leave the cabin, knowing Rook and the cougars would still be hiding out.

She hoped they were holed up and licking their wounds, just waiting to leave until they were healed, and not staying hidden until they could come after her. She also wouldn't put it past them to go to extremes in their tactics to get information from others on her whereabouts. Not like anyone would know much anyway. She was nobody with a life a deranged madman created.

"Kenzie, you okay?"

She pulled her attention away from the busy street, not seeing anything that would have put her on alert, and looked back at Bram. He was now looking over her head and their surroundings, and she felt his animal come forward. It was a heady feeling that washed through her and had the essence of her feminine side rising up. The scent of his wilderness was like a blast to her face, and if he hadn't been holding onto her, she would have stumbled back from the intensity of it.

"I'm good." She was paranoid, but rightly so. He scanned the area once more, and when it was clear he was satisfied with his findings, he visibly relaxed and looked down at her.

"I told you I wouldn't let anything happen to you." He said it with so much conviction she had no doubt in him. "You feel me, Kenzie? You're safe with me, and if I have to prove that to you for the rest of my fucking life, then so be it." His blue eyes held hers. "If someone wants you, they will have to come through me to fucking get you, and that won't happen. Yeah?"

A raw, untamed look was on his face, and she nodded. She may trust his bear to protect her deer, but that didn't change the fact that just yesterday she was trapped in Rook's deadly embrace.

They resumed walking along the cobblestone sidewalk, and he wrapped his arm around her waist, mindful of her nearly healed wounds. The town of Sweet Water was exactly what someone would expect to see in a movie where everyone waved as she passed their little shops.

“You hungry?”

Kenzie stopped and looked up at Bram. He looked down at her with a confused expression.

“What?”

All it took was him asking those simple words for her to be at ease once more.

What is it about him that makes me feel... free?

“We ate like a pound of food an hour ago.” For a full minute, he didn’t say anything. It was almost like he didn’t understand what she was saying.

“Yeah?” He said the word slowly, like he was really trying to grasp what she meant. Kenzie started laughing, and he gave her a lopsided grin. “I’m hungry again.” He let go of her hand and patted his stomach, and she laughed again.

“You’re a machine.”

The amusement left his face, and Kenzie held her breath as he leaned in slowly.

“You have no idea, but you will, very, very soon.” He dipped his gaze to her lips, and she watched as his breathing changed from steady to rapid. The haze of desire washed through her, and Kenzie’s body acted on its own, having her lean forward. At that moment, she wasn’t standing in the middle of the sidewalk surrounded by

passersby. It was only her and Bram, her mate, the only male who she felt safe with.

Source Creation Date: July 10, 2025, 8:04 am

Kind of crazy for her to think like that, but it was what it was, and she was sick of questioning everything in her life. She hadn't ruled out leaving Sweet Water, but what was to say she couldn't give herself willingly to Bram?

Kenzie had never been made love to, had never been stroked and caressed and kissed, and she knew Bram was just the bear to show her that there were good males out there still.¹⁹ Kicking her self-doubt and worry to the side for just a small amount of time, she did what she wanted to do, what she ached to do every time Bram was near. Kenzie initiated the kiss.

At the first touch of her lips against his, fire licked along her spine. It was just a kiss, but then again, it was so much more. Rook slipped further and further into the back of her mind, and all she could feel, smell, and hear was Bram.

When he speared his hand in her hair and pulled her more firmly against him, she moaned against his mouth. He was just so possessive, so powerful, and didn't care about anything but getting what he wanted, and what he wanted was her.

It exhilarated her, consumed her, and made her want to forget everything that happened the last eleven years and just be the ten-year-old little girl who'd grown up and still had her parents with her.

She wasn't going to pounce on his large body right in the middle of town, but she was going to let her deer do the leading for once, and right now, it wanted to let this bear have his way with her.

The kiss was everything she remembered from back at his cabin, but it had her

wanting more, and she knew he could give it all to her. Breaking away from him, she was pleased that he looked stunned.

You put that look on his face, Kenzie, her inner deer whispered inside her, and pleasure coursed through her veins.

“Unless you want me to make eggs and bacon for dinner, we might need to make a stop at the store for some ingredients.”

Bram blinked several times, and she couldn’t help but smile at his bewildered expression.

“How can you talk about food after a kiss like that?”

That made her smile. “You’re the one who first brought up food.” She nudged him in his rock-hard chest and liked that she could tease him and feel so at ease by his side. It was refreshing yet scary all in the same breath. He ran a hand over his mouth and looked around. Kenzie let her eyes travel down his body and spotted the impressive bulge that pressed against his fly.

I will not think about that right now. I will not think about that right now.

“Groceries, Bram.” Her smile widened when he genuinely looked lost. “A supermarket? You know, it’s where they sell food, unless you want scrambled eggs again.” Before they left and made their little deal, she had taken a look in his refrigerator. Aside from the basics of milk and juice, there was only a few cartons of eggs, and a bag of potatoes and onions that sat on his counter.

She hadn’t looked in the freezer, although she knew it was probably stocked with plenty of protein. For a man his size, he would certainly need a lot of the latter.

“I have some steaks in the freezer at the cabin.” He skimmed his eyes down her body. “I’m not in the mood for red meat, but I can think of something else that sounds pretty fucking good right about now.” He leaned in closer until she felt his warm breath along her lips. “Am I going too fast for you, Kenzie?”

He sounded genuine, and she knew in her heart, felt it surround her, that he really was. Yes, this whole situation was fast, unexpected, and confusing, but it also felt right. Bram felt right. She shook her head at his question, unable to find the words, because he was so close, so overpowering, that all she wanted to do was get lost in everything that this male was.

He leaned in the rest of the way and ran his tongue along her lips. A shiver wracked her, and for the hundredth time, she asked herself how she had gotten so wrapped up in this male.

“We will finish this later, baby, because I can smell how much you are there with me.” He kissed her once more and took a step back. “Damn, woman, you’re going to be the fucking death of me.” His expression was one of awe, and her heart picked up speed.

Bram was cocky and overly self-assured of his prowess, but he was also confident and knew exactly what to say to make her a puddle at his feet. Before she could respond—not that she could have said anything after his statement anyway—Bram was taking hold of her hand and leading her down the sidewalk.

Source Creation Date: July 10, 2025, 8:04 am

“The grocery store is just right down the street, so we might as well walk.” He looked over his shoulder at her. “Only if that’s good with you.”

Kenzie nodded and smiled up at him. What a considerate male her mate was. They rounded the corner, and the small grocery store came into view.

“We’ll head in, get whatever your heart desires, then head over to the butcher shop.” He lifted their joined hands and pointed to a small shop across the street. When she didn’t answer right away, he continued. “It’s the only place my brothers and I go for steaks.” She wasn’t a very big meat eater, not since she was a deer shifter and all, and when she wrinkled her nose, he laughed. “Baby, you’re mated to a bear shifter. You know, a carnivore.” He winked and leaned down to lay a soft kiss on her forehead. It wasn’t the most intimate display of PDA they performed, not like what they had just done moments before, but it still had her toes curling.

They headed into the store, and Kenzie decided spaghetti and a salad was probably the safest option if she was the cook for tonight. How hard was it to boil water and throw some lettuce in a bowl?

After they grabbed what they needed, and Bram picked up a bottle of red wine, which he insisted was needed, since it was a crime to eat pasta without it, they were walking across the street to the butcher shop. She stayed back while he ordered so much meat her head reeled. The smell of raw meat alone had her stomach clenching. Once he was finished, they headed back to his truck.

There was a group of young men standing right by the alley, and it was clear by their secretive actions they were doing something illegal. She had seen enough back-alley

drug deals living with Rook and being around the people he associated with to know what one looked like.

It seemed even in quaint-appearing towns there was scum that littered it. Bram tightened his hold on her, and just as they were about to take the longer way, one that had them crossing the parking lot and turning left, one of the guys called out.

“Hey, you got a smoke, man?”

Bram tensed and pulled her behind him. She could see around his arm the four guys making their way closer but still staying by the alley for protection. The wind picked up, and she scented that they were wolverine shifters.

Normally, that breed was on a thin wire as it was, easily provoked, and angrier than any other species she thought possible for the small animals inside them.

“No.” That was all Bram said, and she could feel how tense he was, how on alert, and that had her deer feeling the same. These males were off, high on whatever it was they were exchanging among them, and unstable.

“We’re just passing through on our way to Mogador. Thought we’d stop in Bumfuck, Egypt for some brews and a little recreational enjoyment. We got some for sale.” The one who was talking seemed to be the leader. His dark hair was long and greasy, and his clothes hung off his willow-like frame. The other three didn’t look any better. They were high for sure. They wore the same frantic, paranoid expressions.

“No.” Again, that was all Bram said.

“What, you too good for my shit?” That was the thing with junkies; they always thought the worst about everything, and it always concerned them.

“Didn’t say that. We don’t do that shit. I don’t have cigarettes for you, so move along.” The tension that came from these four wolverines was intense. It was still daylight out, yet they clearly didn’t care if anyone saw.

She knew something was about to happen before they made their first move.²⁰ The hair on her arms stood, and her animal rose to the surface. She couldn’t win against one wolverine, let alone four, but she could outrun one, and there was no shame in that.

Bram’s bear rose violently as well, and the growl he emitted would have had any sane person fleeing, but these shifters were high and clearly stupid as hell.

“Bram, please, let’s go. They aren’t worth it.”

One of the wolverines hissed at her comment, which in turn had Bram bristling.

“You should listen to your bitch.”

Bram’s shirt stretched almost to the point of ripping as his bear threatened to escape. He stabbed his finger at the shifters. “You don’t look at her, speak to her, or even fucking think about her.” His voice was distorted, and she knew there was no way she could stop whatever was about to happen. The air crackled with electricity, and Bram pushed her back. She looked around, but there was no one walking by. For that, she was thankful, because she didn’t want any innocent people getting involved. “Step back, baby, but stay close.”

Source Creation Date: July 10, 2025, 8:04 am

The four wolverines laughed, and her heart raced. This was bad. How had it gotten so out of control so quickly? God, this reminded her of the junkies who always seemed to be around Rook. Memories assaulted her, vile and disgusting ones that had her whole body shaking.

Bram sensed her freaking out and reached out to her, but she gave his hand a squeeze and said, "I'm good."

"Looks like your bitch has more brains than you, bear." The leader chuckled, which had the other three doing the same. In a move she thought surprisingly quick for the drug addicts, they attacked all at once.

Bram pushed her back, and she fell on her ass. None of them changed into their animals, and all she could do was watch in horror as three of them swarmed Bram, dragging him into the alley. But she knew her bear, knew he was far stronger than all three of them, and the only reason they were taking him back there was because he allowed them to do so.

The leader started howling with laughter. "Not so tough now." He slammed his fist into Bram's stomach, and he fell against the wall. The other three males started throwing punch after punch, and a low vibrating noise started to surround her. The leader snapped his head toward her when she started to rise. "You're a pretty little thing." He eyed her up and down, his voice discreetly low. Bram was still holding his own with the other three.

The leader crept closer. She could have run, but no way in hell was she going to let some greasy fucker scare her away from her mate.

“Fuck you.” The words flowed freely from her and actually had him stopping, but after a second, he grinned wider. His teeth were yellow and rotting, and her stomach cramped in disgust.

“I can arrange that.”

Kenzie curled her hands into fists, ready to fight, because she was sick of running and being scared, but he never got any closer. Bram roared out, and she knew the windows surrounding them had to have rattled. The leader’s eyes went wide, and he grunted right before he was flung back in the alley.

Bram stood before her, his chest rising and falling violently and his bear right under his skin, his blue eyes flashing to black and then back to blue. A strangled noise came from behind him, and he turned and met the wolverine head-on. She saw the other three addicts lying still on the ground but could still hear their heartbeats. Bram had taken them down in a matter of seconds. God, he was so fierce.

The sound of bones breaking slammed into her ears, gurgling noises surrounded her, and then there was silence. Bram stood over the leader, the wolverine holding his hands up in surrender, his fingers at odd angles from being broken. Blood sprayed across Bram’s chest, but at that moment, she couldn’t see anything but her protective, powerful mate.

“Please, man, please. I didn’t mean n-nothin’ by it,” the wolverine stuttered, and blood slipped down his chin. Bram lifted his hand, his fingers curled inward and clenched tightly.

“I told you not to look at my mate, think about her, or fucking touch her. You dared to think about touching my female, to hurt her?” His voice was bordering on vicious. “Because of that, I’m going to rip your fucking throat out and let you bleed out.” He started to bend toward the wolverine, and a whimper came from the broken male at

his feet.

She had to end this. It had gone too far, and even if the other shifters started it, and Bram was just protecting them and defending himself, this needed to end now.

“Bram.” Her voice was surprisingly strong for the events that had transpired, but he instantly stilled and looked at her. “It’s enough.” His eyes flashed, yet it wasn’t with anger but acceptance and surrender. Her big bear was submitting to her. That was a heady damn feeling.

“Mine.”

If she hadn’t realized that before, she certainly did now. He stalked forward, and all Kenzie could do was stand there. When he was right in front of her, she inhaled deeply. The violence he just delivered should have had her screaming in fear, running away from him, and reminding her of the life she had led.

But none of those emotions came to her. Instead, she softened under his gaze, felt everything that was female about her melt right before her mate. He made sure she was safe, once again, and she knew that falling for this bear was unavoidable.

“You’re mine, Kenzie, and I’ll destroy anything that threatens to take you away.”

Her breath stalled, and all she could do was nod. Yes, she was his, and dammit did it feel good.²¹ The terrain was rough and uneven, but it was perfect for her inner deer, and being out in the open with nature surrounding her was glorious.

Source Creation Date: July 10, 2025, 8:04 am

For longer than she wanted to admit, she had been surrounded by glass, steel, and the effects of modernization as Rook kept her with him, but not having anything restraining her, and smelling all the wonderful scents was sublime. Bram was in front of her, but only by a foot.

It had only been two days since he had taken her back to his home, and the kind of attention and affection he gave her were what she dreamed of while living with Rook. She hadn't thought about the fight he had with the wolverines, and found it easy not to, especially when he was so gentle and soft with her. Maybe she was starting to heal.

She may feel as though she was, but that didn't mean the threat of Rook wasn't still very real. "Are you sure we're safe?" Despite the thick protection the forest gave them, Rook was a hunter and got a thrill from the chase.

She didn't sense anything aside from the cleanness of nature, and Bram was relaxed, which helped her calm as well, but she still asked... for the third time. He stopped and turned to look at her.

"Kenzie, I promise you're safe. This is my home, and I know it better than I know myself sometimes. If there was any kind of threat, I would know, and there wouldn't be any way I'd take you out of the safety of the cabin." He took a step forward and took her hand in his. "I just want to see you smile when you see the waterfall." He gave her hand a squeeze and started leading her again. He had only kissed her that once, but she couldn't stop thinking about it.

He hadn't tried anything else for that matter, but she could still sense his restlessness

to be with her. It was this frantic need to take his mate, to possess her in the way she possessed him.

She didn't fear him, and certainly didn't fear the way he always watched her, as if he truly did want to make sure she was comfortable and safe, whilst holding himself in check. For as much as she knew he wanted her, Bram stayed the perfect gentleman, even if it had only been these couple days. They had only been hiking for about a mile, but soon the scent of fresh water and the sound of the waterfall he had spoken about came at her full-force.

They came to a stop right as the trees thinned out. "Be careful. The ledge is only a few feet away." Bram smiled at her, and the look was contagious. They moved closer, and her breath stalled when she saw how high they had gone up the mountain and the incredible waterfall that lay right in front of them. The water pooled at the basin below and quickly rushed farther down the mountain. It was beautiful with colors of white and blue, and the mist that sprayed up to them, even from their height, was refreshing.

"It's so beautiful."

"It really is."

She turned and looked at Bram. He wasn't watching the falls but instead had his eyes trained on her. "The most beautiful thing I've ever seen." He wasn't talking about the falls but about her. He sounded so enthralled, so weak, that it was such a sharp contrast to the strong, ruthless male she just met.

Kenzie didn't say anything, but honestly, she didn't know how to respond. After a few seconds of Bram just watching her, he pulled her closer to his body, and they stared at the cascading water.

They settled into a relaxed, comfortable silence, and that was fine with Kenzie, because she couldn't remember the last time she felt so content.²² Bram pulled the truck to a stop in front of the cabin, and after grabbing the grocery bags and heading inside, Kenzie excused herself to the bathroom. The time with Bram seemed to pass so quickly.

Already, she had been with him for several days, but even if it had passed quickly, she felt like she had been with him far longer.

This was her second trip into town, and even if she felt safe with Bram, she still didn't let her guard down. She knew Rook was still lingering in Sweet Water, hiding and just waiting for her.

It was nice getting out, seeing the small, intimate town that was so much more than how it presented itself. Shifters and humans alike mingled effortlessly, and she loved the small, personal relationship everyone seemed to have with one another.

Kenzie shut the bathroom door behind her and stepped up to the mirror. Her side didn't hurt as much, but the annoying itch that came with the healing process was starting to bug her.

She should have been healed already, but the stress and fear she still carried, albeit lessened now that she was around Bram, slowed things down.

Source Creation Date: July 10, 2025, 8:04 am

Bram hadn't so much as touched her in the way she wanted him to, and Kenzie found herself immensely disappointed because of it. He had kissed her, but it wasn't nearly as thorough as she ached for. This arousal that grew inside her was becoming almost unbearable, and she knew he was going slow, not wanting to frighten her further.

There wasn't any doubt in her mind he could smell her desire for him, but he was far stronger than she gave him credit for, because he could keep himself in check.

She really shouldn't even be thinking about the lewd things that passed through her mind on a daily basis now, but it was unavoidable. How could she not want him, when he helped her far more than he would ever realize?

Pulling her top off and turning to the side to look at herself in the mirror, Kenzie started peeling away the tape and bandages. The claw marks were now just raised, pink lines, and her body was rejecting the sutures. She really didn't need the dressing anymore, so she tossed it aside and ran her fingers over her flesh.

Twisting to look farther behind her, because one of the marks snaked behind her back, she gasped out as her skin was pulled taut. In the next instant, the bathroom door was pushed open. A squeal of surprise left Kenzie, and she spun around and braced one of her hands on the counter for stability. Bram stood in the doorway, a concerned and wild look on his face.

"What's wrong? You okay?" He scanned her body, and it was after the initial shock of seeing him bust in that Kenzie realized she didn't have a top on and her breasts were only covered by a thin, cotton bra. Fire raced up her neck, and although she wanted Bram with an intensity that startled her, she was embarrassed by her state.

“I heard you cry out in pain. What’s wrong?” He stepped farther into the bathroom and took hold of her arms. He pulled them away from her body and continued to scan her for injuries. Despite the fact that she was only dressed halfway, there was no arousal reflected in his expression, only a deep-seated need to make sure she was okay.

“I’m all right.” At his disbelieving look, she added, “I swear. I just turned a little too quickly, and it pulled at my wound.”

After another couple of seconds looking her over, he finally seemed satisfied and released her. He took a step back. Neither one said anything for so long that Kenzie started to get uncomfortable, especially with her lack of clothing. She grabbed her shirt, but before she could put it on, Bram had a hold of her hands, stopping her from moving.

“What are you doing?” Her words were a breathy mix of confusion and simmering arousal. The way he dipped his gaze down to her chest had her feeling like she wore absolutely nothing in front of him.

“I can’t even tell you what you do to me, what having you near does to my body.” He was still looking at her chest, and her breathing kicked up, causing her breasts to rise and fall at a rapid pace. “It isn’t just about the fact that you light my body up, Kenzie. Just having you near makes me feel so good. It feels so right, baby.” He took a step closer, and the mix of his cologne as well as his natural scent washed through her. “I have to fight my bear every minute not to tear your clothes off, run my tongue over your skin, and make you mine.” He rested his forehead against hers and closed his eyes. At that moment, he looked so vulnerable and nothing like the fierce male she knew he was. “But I know I have to be gentle with you and go slow. You’ve been through so much, so much more than I can even comprehend.” He opened his eyes but didn’t lift his forehead from hers.

“Bram?” Her eyes fluttered closed when he moved his mouth to her neck, and his warm breath teased the skin right below her ear.

“Yeah, baby?” His voice was low, husky, and the scent of his pheromones was a gust of intoxication that had her head spinning. “I’ll be gentle and won’t push you to do anything you don’t want.” The feel of his tongue on her throat had a small mewl leaving her. “I won’t take anything you’re not willing to give.”

Her head was suddenly too heavy for her to hold up, and so she let it fall back, baring her throat for her mate.

“That’s it; surrender to me willingly, and I swear to fucking God, Kenzie, I’ll never make you regret it.”

Kenzie didn’t regret it and wanted to just let go, so she brought her hands up, gripped his massive biceps, and nodded her desire for him to continue. “Bram, I want you, want this, but...” He lifted his head and looked down at her.

Source Creation Date: July 10, 2025, 8:04 am

“Tell me what you want, and it’s yours.” She licked her lips, knowing she really did want this, but for this first time, it had to be her way.

“Will you let me take control?” She didn’t need to elaborate, because by the softening of his expression, she knew he understood. And although she didn’t know what the hell she was doing, for once in her life she wanted that control.

“Anything, baby. Anything I have is yours.”

He brushed his lips against hers, nothing overtly sexual, but almost surrendering, like he was ready to let her take the reins. He dropped his hands and took a step back. For a moment, all they did was stare at each other, but she knew he was waiting for her to make the first move. The shirt he wore was a button-down, so she lifted her hand to his chest and rested her open palm right over his heart.

The steady beat of his heart calmed her. Her hands shook slightly, yet it wasn’t from apprehension but liquid arousal. Kenzie slipped the buttons out, and when the material was hanging open, she smoothed her hands along the hard ridges that were clear through the white undershirt. His chest rose and fell, his breathing increasing with each passing moment.

Pushing the shirt off his shoulders, she started to lift the hem of his tee, seeing the ripped six-pack that was revealed. In one swift move, he lifted his arms over his head, gripped the back of his shirt, and pulled it over his head and tossed it aside.

Kenzie breathed out roughly when she looked at his hard chest. It was wide, golden in color, and so muscular she felt like a small, insignificant female beside him. The

sharp edges of his tattoos that covered his back peeked over his shoulders, and she couldn't keep herself from lifting her hands and running her fingers over the dark ink.

A full-body shiver wracked his body, and he growled low in his throat. She knew it must be hard for him to just stand there, not taking control when she knew he wanted to. Nervousness was a living entity inside her, but she pushed it aside and reached for the belt at his waist. His erection was already tenting his jeans, and it was enormous.

After getting the button undone and his zipper down, she took a deep breath, gripped the edges of the denim, and pushed them down. He wore no underwear, a fact that turned her on even more. His shaft sprang forth like another limb, and all she could do was stare at it.

“You see what you do to me, Kenzie?” His voice was so low, so rough, that her nipples instantly hardened and her pussy swelled. “You have total control of me, little deer.” His eyes were lowered, the blue like neon washing across the bathroom. “Touch me.” Keeping hold of his gaze with her own, she reached out and gripped him. He was far too thick. Her hand couldn't wrap fully around him, and he seemed to throb in her grasp.

“Yeah, Kenzie, that's it.”

Her eyes fluttered closed as the sensations slammed into her. She wanted him, wanted to feel Bram touch every part of her. Power surged through her when she started stroking him, and he couldn't hold his eyes open any longer.

Her chest moved up and down, and the fact that she couldn't seem to get enough oxygen into her lungs had her feeling lightheaded. Taking control wasn't something she was used to, and the fact that Bram had willingly given himself up to her was good enough for her. She wanted him to hold her, kiss her, slide into her body slow and easy. She wanted it all.

Dropping her hands and taking a step back, she watched the different emotions pass across his face. “I want you, Bram...”

She didn’t finish that sentence, didn’t tell him she wanted him to be the one to show her what he wanted, what he knew she would like, and what would make her feel so unbelievably good. A low, animalistic growl left him, and then he had her in his arms, kissing her like it was the last time, or like he just couldn’t get enough.

He moved her backward so her back met the cold tile of the wall and started running his teeth up and down her neck. He moved his other hand down her waist, over her outer thigh, and snaked it around until he could grip her behind the knee.

“Are you sure, Kenzie? You own me, and because of that, you are the only one who can bring me to my knees.” He waited until she nodded and pressed back against him, letting him know that although she knew she couldn’t have been the one in control, that she wanted him to show her how wonderful it could be.

Source Creation Date: July 10, 2025, 8:04 am

When he lifted her leg and brought it flush with his hip, it put her pussy in direct contact with his erection. Bram thrust his hips forward, and she groaned as his cock pressed against her clit. Sparks of pleasure went straight through her body. He did it again and again until lights danced before her eyes. If he kept it up, she would get off from this alone.

“Is this okay, Kenzie?” He kept moving against her, bringing her pleasure higher and higher until she was gasping for air. “Fuck, please tell me this is okay.”

“God, Bram.” Curling her hands farther into his arms, she started moving her hips in time with his, bringing herself closer to her climax that was right at the surface and tempting her with release. She wished her pants weren’t in the way and that she could feel how smooth and hot he was against her bare flesh. “It’s okay, Bram. It is so okay.”

Her head fell against the wall, and a moan spilled from her right when he thrust especially hard against her. He cupped her breasts and ran his palm up and down her nipple, causing the little bud to tighten further.

This was like nothing she’d ever felt before. She wanted the damn bra off, wanted the offending material that blocked her from fully feeling his skin against hers to be torn away.

“Just say the words, baby, and I’ll do it. I’ll do whatever the fuck you want me to do.” He read her so well, scented her emotions so thoroughly that the slightest shift in her had him knowing exactly what she wanted.

“I want it gone, Bram. I want nothing between us.”

“Fuck, Kenzie. I’m about to come just from hearing those words.” In the next instant, he reached behind her and unlatched her bra. The material slid down her arms, and he tossed it aside. When he pulled back and looked at her bare breasts, it was like he was reaching out and touching her. It penetrated her, seeped to her very marrow, and had her only thinking about being with this bear.

“Take me, Bram. Make love to me. Show me how it is between mates.”

You’re going too fast. Things will go terribly wrong if you give yourself to him.

It was as if she had been waiting for this moment all her life, like the pain and horror that had always surrounded her had been nothing but a bad dream.

Being in Bram’s arms was incredible and inspiring, and even if it was only going to be this one time, she wanted it and wouldn’t deny herself this one pleasure.²³ His groan vibrated against her chest the lower he went down. His hot, humid breath teased the peak of one of her breasts, causing the turgid tip to stiffen even more.

Biting her bottom lip until she tasted the tangy flavor of blood, Kenzie waited for Bram to suck a nipple into his mouth. For several long, agonizing seconds, all she felt was his warm breath teasing over her.

“Bram, you’re torturing me.” Slipping her hands over his arms and spearing her fingers into his hair, she tried to pull him closer to her chest. It was like trying to move a stone wall.

“Aww, baby, that’s the last thing I want to do,” he said but still had yet to move. “I just don’t want to push you, and I’m trying to go slow, even though this is the hardest thing I’ve ever had to do.”

She tightened her fingers in his hair.

“Bram, I won’t break. I feel stronger with you, having you by my side. I just want you.”

He gave one last groan before covering her left nipple with his hot, wet mouth and sucked long and hard. The blood rushed to the surface and caused it to swell under his ministrations. For several agonizingly pleasure-filled minutes, all he did was suck on her breasts. He alternated between them, drawing the tissue out with his teeth and then dragging his tongue over the slight sting he caused.

Kenzie was vaguely aware of the sounds coming from her, ones that should have made her embarrassed, but ones that she couldn’t even comprehend, because the ecstasy was far too intense. Her panties were soaked, and her pulse beat in her clit. He smelled her arousal and proved as much when he slid his palm down her belly, unbuttoned the button of her jeans with expert fingers, and pushed his hand into her panties. At the first touch of his fingers in her slick cleft, Kenzie cried out.

“It feels so good, Bram.” The words had meant to be thought, not said, but she was glad she hadn’t censored how he made her feel, because she didn’t want anything between them. God, she’d never felt anything like this. Pleasure. Consuming pleasure. That’s what this was. This is what it meant to feel... incredible.

Source Creation Date: July 10, 2025, 8:04 am

“Yeah, it really fucking does, baby.” He continued to stroke her slowly. “You’re so fucking wet for me, Kenzie.” He pushed a thick finger into her pussy and started pulling it back out and in again slowly. “It’s all for me, baby. Tell me you’re this wet for me, that I’m the one that made this pussy juicy,” he murmured against her chest at the same time he pressed his thumb to her clit and started working the bundle of nerves back and forth.

“Bram...” His name fell from her lips like a plea. She wanted him desperately. She was like a fiend, this need unlike she’d ever felt.

Kenzie let go of his hair and moved her hands between their bodies. If he wasn’t going to get rid of the offending material, then she would take things into her own hands. Bram let out a hoarse growl, grabbed her ass like he thought she meant to run from him, and hauled her up his body. Kenzie instinctively wrapped her legs around his waist and pressed herself on his dick.

Hissing out a curse, Bram took her mouth in a hungry kiss for long, drugging seconds. Breaking away long enough that he could stride out of the bathroom and down the hall, all Kenzie could do was hang on, close her eyes, and inhale everything that was him.

He shouldered a door open, and when they were inside, she knew instantly it was his room. It smelled like him: wild, citrusy, and untamed. The sun streamed through the slightly parted blinds and gave her an unobstructed view of his massive bed.

Aside from end tables on each side of the bed, a large flat-screen television hanging on the wall across from that, and a leather recliner that sat beside the window, it was

bare. His lips found her pulse right below her ear again and sucked on her skin lightly.

“Shit, baby, tell me to go slow. I need you to say the words.”

Taking hold of chunks of his hair in her hands, she brought his mouth to hers and kissed him. For the first time in her life she was being kissed.

Their tongues pressed to one another, and when he retreated, she followed into his mouth. It was strange taking control, and in all honesty, she wasn't sure if she liked it, but Bram was dominating in the best of ways seconds later, and she sighed against his mouth. It was perfect and like nothing she had ever experienced.

“I'm not going to say that.”

A gasp left her when she felt his canines lengthen against her collarbone. He dragged them across the slightly protruding bones, back and forth, over and over again as if he couldn't get enough of them.

“I don't want slow. I don't want easy. I want you to take me like you would your mate.” Before she could even take a breath, her back met the mattress, and Bram was tearing her jeans and panties off. Fabric rending pierced her lust-fogged mind, but everything else faded in the distance when he placed his hands on her knees. He pried her legs apart and slowly trailed his palms down her inner thighs. Closer and closer, he came to the area of her body that ached the most for him.

“Look at me, Kenzie.”

Forcing herself up on her elbows so she could see what Bram was doing between her legs was harder than she thought. Her limbs felt like pudding, and a jittery sensation coursed through her veins. Bram lifted just his eyes to her, and she held her breath.

“I want you to watch your mate eat your pussy and love every fucking minute of it.” A high settled into her, and her lips parted as he slowly lowered his head to her pussy, never once taking his eyes off her.

This was going to be an experience that would forever change her, but she knew it was for the best.²⁴Fuck. Her pussy smelled like ambrosia and was the hottest fucking thing he had ever seen. When his mouth was only an inch from the soft, supple lips of her pussy, he broke eye contact with her and looked down at her cunt. “Christ, Kenzie.” She was pink and glistening from her arousal for him. How in the hell did a bastard like him get so damn lucky? He was still in amazement.

Her clit was swollen and red and just begging for him. Latching his mouth over the engorged bud, Bram sucked on her like a starving man. She tasted so good, so fresh that he grew thirsty for more.

“I’m so very hungry for you, baby.” He licked her so many times he couldn’t feel his tongue, but he didn’t stop, couldn’t. She made these needy little sounds, ones that drove him absolutely fucking crazy with lust. Moving his hands down her thighs, he stopped when he framed her pretty pussy.

Source Creation Date: July 10, 2025, 8:04 am

Taking his thumbs and spreading her labia apart, he lifted just his eyes and made sure she was still doing okay, that he wasn't scaring the shit out of her with his almost brutal behavior.

Her eyes were closed, lips parted, and her large, perfectly sloped breasts were heaving from her increased respirations. Fuck yeah, she was still there with him. He attacked her cunt with his lips and tongue.

“You taste so fucking good, Kenzie. So. Fucking. Good.” Running his tongue up and down her slit, she became so juicy for him he couldn't help but growl against her swollen, soaked flesh.

“Bram. Oh God, Bram. I'm so close.” Her little hands bunched in the sheets, pulling at the material, and she thrashed her head back and forth.

“Yeah, baby, I want you to fucking come all over my face. Give it all to me, Kenzie. I want all of it.” Sucking furiously on her clit again, he felt her body start to coil tight. He placed a hand on her rounded belly, and loved how she was all womanly curves. Holding her still, he took his other hand and pushed two fingers into her pussy.

He was slow, not being too rough, despite the fact that his bear was right there, wanting to take her like a bear took its mate. Her cry of ecstasy left her on a long wail, and Bram groaned but didn't stop eating her out.

“That's it, Kenzie. God, baby, that is so fucking it.” Her orgasm tightened her body and had her lifting her hips and grinding her cunt against his face.

“It’s just—” Her gasp cut her words off, but he didn’t stop making love to her with his mouth. “I’ve never experienced this before.”

He knew nothing would ever compare to being with Kenzie. The wet, slurping noises of his mouth between her legs had his cock throbbing. Bram started pressing his hips into the mattress, trying to alleviate the pressure. His balls were going to explode if he didn’t get his cock inside her and fuck her like he had never fucked another female before.

“Bram.” His name came out in a long moan, and that was his breaking point. Dragging his tongue down her cleft, he slipped his hands under her ass, lifted her slightly, and continued his downward path. He licked at the puckered hole of her bottom with just the tip of his tongue, allowing her to grow used to what he was doing.

When she started panting again, he used more force, licking her hard and then sucking on her flesh. Her pussy juices had slid down the crack of her ass, and he devoured her.

She tasted sweet and musky, and it drove him fucking wild with lust. With one more lick up the crease of her bottom, he pulled away. He kept her legs spread open with his hands on her inner thighs and stared down at her pussy, his pussy, as she finally let herself be fully free for him.

“Tell me who your mate is, Kenzie.” Looking into her eyes, a burst of pleasure filled him at the hazy, ecstasy-filled expression that covered her face. Her chest rose and fell from her post-orgasm euphoria, and it had the alpha male in him roaring out in victory. He was the one who put that look on her face, and pride filled him.

“You are, Bram. God, you so are.”

His pulse throbbed in his cock, but he wanted her to have control for her first time. Bram took her waist in his hands, slid them behind her so he had a good grasp on her, and flipped them so she was on top. Her legs were parted on either side of him, and the feel of the wetness that coated her pussy slipped along his length. She panted, their mouths only an inch apart, and the need to kiss her was overpowering.

“I want you to give yourself to me, at your own pace and speed.” Letting his hands travel up and down her back, he felt her gentle tremble beneath his touch. “It will take time and trust, and I know I’ll need to earn that from you, but right here, right now, is about us. You already trust me on some level to be so vulnerable with me, but I want it all, Kenzie, and I won’t stop until I have it.”

She nodded slowly, and he couldn’t help but smile. His little deer was taking those first few steps with him. It would be a long road, but they would get through it together. No one said finding a mate was easy, and Charlie and Ford were proof of that. “I’ve never been with a female without protection, but I don’t want anything between us, Kenzie. Can you give yourself to me, baby?” A heartbeat passed before she spoke.

“I just want to feel you, Bram.”

Bram didn't stop the smile that split his face. “Now, baby, take me like you'd take your mate.” He used her own words against her and grinned when they made her blush. She reached between them, lifted slightly up, and positioned the tip of his dick at her entrance. He had to grit his teeth as her slender fingers wrapped around his cock and forced himself not to thrust into her at the first feel of her wet heat against him.

Their eyes locked, and she slowly started to move down his length. God, she was perfect, and despite this being her first time, she gave him her all.

A deep groan left him, and her breath hitched. She worked herself on him, and Bram clenched his hands against her hips to keep from taking control.

He'd never surrendered to another person, but this was his girl, and he'd do anything to make her happy and to make sure she never questioned the lengths he would go for her, even if it was letting her top him.

Kenzie started moving up and down on his cock, and a light sheen of sweat covered her body. Her movements were slow and somewhat unsure, but Bram just held onto her waist and let her get used to him.

“Hold onto me, mate.”

Her breath hitched when she slid all the way down on him, and his jaw ached from how hard he was clenching it. Kenzie wound her arm around his neck and brought

her mouth to his.

For a moment, he lost it and found himself thrusting up. He slid in the last inch, and a strangled sound left both of them. God, this was... perfection.²⁵“I can’t,” she breathed out, and he knew what she was trying to say, but he wanted to hear her say it. Kenzie pulled back and looked into his face. “I trust you completely, Bram.” His bear broke free, took the front seat in all of this, and Bram couldn’t stop him.

In a quick move, he had her on her back, with his pelvis wedged snugly between her legs. He speared his hands in her hair.

“Your bear, Bram.” She moaned out the words, and he knew it wasn’t a fear-filled accusation but a startled, surprised observation. “God, yes.”

Tilting her head back and baring her throat was a surrender all in itself, and she would never know what it did to him. Running his now elongated canines up her neck, he loved that a shiver worked through her.

She held him tight and lifted her hips, grinding herself on him. He was still inside her tight, wet heat, and it was euphoria. Curling his hands in the sheets, he started moving inside her. Sweat trailed down his hairline, and his skin felt too tight.

Her pussy smelled so fucking good, and all he wanted to do was bury his face in the sweet spot once more, but his dick was a greedy bastard and pulsed inside her, needing him to continue pulling out and pushing back inside.

Bram had to close his eyes and brace himself or he feared he’d be too rough with his need for her. His mate was strong in her own right, but still fragile. Taking her slow and easy was what needed to be done right now. Bram would show her how much he and his bear really wanted her: animalistic, rough, and not holding anything back.

He let his eyes linger at the base of her throat where her pulse beat fast and strong, and followed the line between her breasts, down her belly, and stopped at the top of her pussy. Her clit protruded out, begging for attention.

Kenzie was scorching hot, and he immediately felt like he was burning alive. With his cock lodged in his mate's body, Bram placed his hands on either side of her head. Their sweat-slicked stomachs touched, and he pushed another inch into her.

"Bram." She gasped out his name. "I feel so stretched, so full." A rumble left him when her tight little body clenched around him.

Slowly and with measured movements, he continued to move in and out of her. Her inner muscles tightened around him, causing his balls to draw up tight with his impending orgasm. He went agonizingly slowly, and when his balls rubbed against her slick skin, they both moaned out.

For several long moments, Bram didn't move, couldn't for how good it felt. He wouldn't last long, not when she slid her hands up his side and around to his back. Her nails dug into his skin, and she wrapped her legs around his waist.

Staring right into his eyes, she said, "Make love to me, Bram. Show me that I'm yours."

That was all he needed to hear. Right now, this was about him and her connecting like no two people had been connected before. Lifting up just enough that his arms were locked straight and his chest no longer touched hers, Bram pulled out of her wet heat and pushed back in.

Source Creation Date: July 10, 2025, 8:04 am

“Slow is good, Bram, so good, but don’t hold back, please.” She arched her back, and her breasts rose up from the motion. Bram’s eyes were trained on the sight of her nipples hardening even further, and he gave her exactly what she asked for.

He sat back on his knees, encircled her waist with his hands, and fucked her like he meant it, and damn did he mean it. The sloppy, wet sound of his cock tunneling into her cunt was an auditory orgasm all on its own, and he worked his hips faster and harder.

He bottomed out in her every time he pushed back inside, and when he pulled out, he positioned himself so his length dragged across her swollen clit. He couldn’t help but look at her scar, and while still pumping into her, he bent down and licked the healed wound. She pulled at his hair, and the slight sting of pain felt so fucking good. He pulled away, wanting her to know that there was nothing about her he didn’t desire.

“I-I’m going to come again.” She moved her hands to his back once more and pierced his flesh with her nails. The sensations were all-consuming pleasure and had his orgasm washing through him. Her muscles milked him so strongly that he threw his head back and roared out his climax.

“Fuck, baby. Fuck. It’s so damn good.” His body jerked against hers as he emptied himself inside her willing body. His orgasm went on and on, and the fact that he was filling her with his cum, claiming her and saturating her with his scent had the bear in him clawing to get free and mark the supple flesh of her neck. “You’re mine, Kenzie.” His voice was distorted, his bear not relenting in claiming her. “Kenzie, Christ, Kenzie, I need to mark you, baby.” He continued to thrust into her shallowly, sensing her climax still claiming her. He didn’t want this to end, didn’t want to pull

out of her body. “I need you to tell me you want it, that it’s what you want as well.” She stared up at him with wide, pleasure-filled eyes. “Ask me for it.”

The saccharine scent of her increased desire filled his nostrils, and he closed his eyes and growled low in his throat. “I know it’s frightening. Fuck, but I know it is. But we’re in this together.” He cupped the side of her face.

She didn’t hesitate when she said, “Yes, Bram, make me yours.”

His canines lengthened even more, and his muscles grew. Despite just coming, he was hard as stone and felt her answering wetness. Leaning over her, he first ran the tip of his nose up the length of her throat, inhaling deeply and taking her delicious aroma into his body. He was hers as much as she was his.

“I only want to be yours, Bram.”

“You’re only mine, baby, and I’ll fucking kill anyone who thinks otherwise.” He started thrusting into her again, fast and hard, and his second orgasm raced to the surface. He had never felt so uninhibited with a female and knew it would always be this way with her. Always. Letting his teeth scrape along her flesh, he felt her skin give beneath him and then tasted the tangy, metallic flavor of her blood coating his tongue.

He ran his tongue along the wounds he created, his mark, letting his essence coast over the open area, further cementing the fact that she was his. When both of them were sated, he gave her neck one last lick and pulled out of her. Kenzie moaned, and he grinned as she reached for him, loving that his little deer wanted more.

“Give me one minute, baby.” Kissing her on the lips before he got off the bed, he headed into the bathroom, grabbed a warm, wet washrag, and went back to her. Gently cleaning her between her legs, he noticed she was already on the verge of

sleep.

After setting the rag aside, Bram let his hands glide over her smooth flesh. “You are so gorgeous, Kenzie.”

She hummed in response. Bram didn’t deny himself anything when it came to her, and so he leaned forward and started running his tongue around the delicate bone of her ankle. She was pliant beneath him, not fighting his urge to taste all of her.

He continued his upward path along her curved calf, over her knee, and continued onward until he was moving his tongue over her firm thigh. He repeated the action to the other leg, making sure to pay the same amount of attention to it. He licked a path over her hipbones, around her belly button, and continued over her ribs and to her breasts.

He sucked on her nipples for far longer than necessary, but that was more because he liked the feel of her under his tongue. Finally, forcing himself to continue memorizing her body with his mouth, he trailed his mouth up her throat and claimed her lips. For long seconds, all they did was kiss deeply, swirling their tongues together and mimicking the sexual act they had just done.

Source Creation Date: July 10, 2025, 8:04 am

He gathered her into his arms and sensed her slip into a deep sleep. “I’m never letting you go, Kenzie.”

With that, he wrapped his body around hers, and let himself close his eyes. He knew this would be the most restful sleep he had ever had, since his mate was safely protected beside him. “You’re mine, Kenzie.”

She sat up in bed, her heart racing, sweat covering her body, and her hands shaking. The dream was the same, intense and powerful, always about the control Rook wanted over her.

Kenzie looked to her side and saw Bram sleeping deeply. Thank God she hadn’t woken him up. She silently slipped out of his bed and padded into the bathroom. Once the door was shut, she turned the light on and looked at herself in the mirror. Dark circles ringed her eyes, and perspiration had her hair sticking to her forehead.

She’d been with Bram for several days now, and this was the first nightmare she’d had of Rook. Kenzie should be thankful over that, but the thought of waking him up because she screamed out, and then having to explain why she had done that, was something she didn’t want to do.

“Get a grip, Kenzie.” She turned the faucet on and rinsed her face off. This was the beginning of the rest of her life... right? A little over a week had already passed, and Kenzie actually felt safe. She hadn’t had another nightmare, but that didn’t mean it wasn’t always on her mind. Her dreams weren’t dreams at all, but memories of Rook’s treatment of her. One day at a time. That was all she could tell herself and not break down in the process.

Being with Bram, secluded in his cabin, was like nothing she had ever experienced. He was caring, attentive, and had her crying out in pleasure, not pain, every single night. How had she ever thought she could leave him? He was the only person she had ever felt like this with, and she had actually let the foolish thought of leaving it all behind consume her for a short time.

In just the short time she had been with him, she knew there was nothing he wouldn't do to make sure she was protected. They went on walks through the thick woods that surrounded his cabin, and he had even taken her to a small creek that was only a mile from his home. Everything was so serene, peaceful, and Kenzie never thought there was anything like this in the world.

Kenzie stood over the sink in the kitchen and stared at him through the window. He was shirtless, and the loose-fitting jeans he wore hung low on his hips. That incredibly defined V of muscle was outlined to perfection and only seemed highlighted by the perspiration that covered his chest. He was cutting wood, and he lifted the axe above his head and brought it back down, splintering the wood in one swing.

He did this for another five minutes, and all Kenzie could do was watch this very big male, her very big bear, using all his power and taking his aggression out on each log of wood. She was supposed to be making sandwiches for lunch, but once she had seen him working outside, it had been impossible to drag her gaze away from him.

It had only been three days since she had given herself to Bram, and it was like the bear couldn't keep his hands off her. It wasn't just about sex though. They had spent countless hours just talking about random things, and it was those conversations that drew her to Bram even more.

She found that with each passing hour, Rook moved further and further into the recesses of her mind. It was shocking, because she didn't think she'd ever get to that

part in her life, especially so quickly, but having Bram beside her helped speed things along.

She wasn't a fool to think she would ever fully get rid of Rook, especially when it seemed he still had her mind captive, but she was now seeing a brighter future, one in which she wasn't constantly thinking about the abuse he inflicted on her.

Even the very small things she learned about Bram made her feel more connected to him. At thirty-three, he was one-third of a family-owned construction company, which wasn't surprising given his ripped physique; but in-between those intimate talks, there was a lot of touching, kissing, and licking. Every part of her felt taken by him, and even more so every time he licked her body like he wanted to memorize her with his mouth.

Bram tossed the last log away and grabbed the towel that hung on a nearby tree branch. Kenzie finally forced herself back to making lunch.

There was this magnetism between them that she couldn't control, and quite frankly she didn't want to. She loved being owned by him, loved that he couldn't keep his hands off her. His concerns for her were nothing like the obsessed ramblings of Rook. Bram came from something sweeter and gentler. He didn't push her to do anything she didn't want to do, and even after only a few days, she couldn't see herself leaving him. He was her mate in every sense of the word, and their relationship, at whatever stage it was in, was explosive and uncontrollable.

Source Creation Date: July 10, 2025, 8:04 am

But even knowing all this, there was a part of her that feared for him, and she knew until Rook was brought down, he would never give her any peace. He hadn't come for her yet, but she knew him well enough that he was biding his time, plotting out exactly how he was going to punish her for everything wrong that had ever happened.

His presence was a very real entity, and a part of that evil resided within her. After eleven years of being with him, his darkness had seeped into her, and no matter how much she tried to dispel it, there was never a way to get rid of it.

The backdoor opened, and the scent of clean male sweat filled her nose. It was such an arousing aroma. Focusing on the tomato she was currently cutting had her mind elsewhere, and she didn't sense Bram until he wrapped his arms around her waist and brought her back against his sweaty chest.

"Hey, Bambi." He trailed his lips down her neck, and she tilted her head to the side to allow him better access. Although she still wasn't sure about his little nickname, she loved everything that came out of his mouth. The rough, almost growly timbre of his voice always had the same effect on her: wet, swollen, and ready for his big body on top of hers. "I'm all sweaty. Want to jump in the shower with me?" He moved his hands up her belly and cupped her breasts. "I wash your back, you wash mine?" She felt him smile against her throat and chuckled.

"If I join you, we won't end up eating lunch."

"Mmm." He hummed against her and pressed his stiffening cock against her lower back. "I'm only hungry for one thing, and it doesn't have tomatoes on it." Kenzie smiled, but her amusement vanished when Bram let go of one of her breasts and

moved his hand down her middle until he reached the top of her pants. “I could slip my hand down your jeans and fuck your pussy with my fingers, and you’d beg for more, wouldn’t you?”

Although she knew he was aware of that truth, she’d give him anything he wanted, even her voluntary surrender.²⁷ Kenzie let her head fall back on his hard chest and closed her eyes. “You know I would.” She was a fiend for him, and she knew that wouldn’t end. He flicked the button of her jeans open and slid her zipper down.

Resting her hand on the counter, she let the sensations of his fingers trailing over the small strip of flesh right below the hem of her shirt wash through her. Right when he was about to push her panties aside and deliver on his promise, there was a knock on the door. Immediately, she tensed.

“It’s okay, baby. My brothers have a way of coming at the worst possible time.” He kissed her neck once more before pulling away from her. Kenzie turned around and saw the massive erection tenting his jeans.

“That might get their attention.” She smiled when he groaned.

“Tell me about it. I’m the one who has to walk around with this fucking thing in the way, and all I can think about is bending you over the table, pulling down those obstructive jeans, and—”

The sound of more knocking cut him off. He growled, and she smiled, zipping and buttoning her jeans.

Kenzie stayed back when she heard a deep male voice waft through the living room. Her heart started to pound, and she grabbed a hand towel off the counter and twisted it in her hands. Bram rounded the corner, and a second later, two men older than Bram but closely resembling him followed him in.

“Kenzie, these are my older brothers, Charlie and Ford.” Bram’s brothers smiled. “Guys, this is my girl, Kenzie.” She felt her cheeks heat at the attention. “My mate.” There was so much pride in Bram’s voice she looked at him sharply. He was grinning ear-to-ear and seemed to be beaming.

“Damn, brother.” Charlie slapped Bram on the back and took a step toward her. The deer inside her grew skittish at the approaching male, but Bram moved between her and Charlie, effectively blocking her from view.

“She’s not all about the touching and hugs, Charlie. Besides, I’m not all about sharing my girl, even if it is just a hug from my older brother.” She let out a deep breath and let her forehead rest against his back. Had her facial expressions been that transparent? Over the years, she learned to hide how she felt from Rook, because letting him know what was going on in her head would only end up with her in pain.

“No worries. I don’t blame you, ‘cause I’m the same way with Ary.”

Bram stepped to the side so she could fully see Charlie and Ford, but Bram immediately wrapped his arm around her waist and pulled her to the comfort of his body. Ford stayed to the side, watching her almost curiously. She wanted to stand on her own two feet one day, without having to feel like she needed someone to give her safety.

Source Creation Date: July 10, 2025, 8:04 am

That was the dream she was aiming for, but then again, there was a part of her that liked the feelings Bram evoked inside her by his protectiveness. He sensed her unease and wanted to help rid her of that discomfort. And each day, she was falling harder and faster for him.

“Well, not to be an ass, but I didn’t come over for a social call.” Charlie sat at the dining room table, but it seemed Ford was content leaning against the wall. “I tried calling, but you didn’t answer, and it’s kind of urgent.”

“What’s up?” Bram kissed her on the temple and moved to sit beside his brother. Kenzie turned back around and finished cutting the toppings of the sandwiches, trying to tune out the three men and give them some privacy.

“We have a foundation issue on the Hampton project. Looks like the ground wasn’t leveled properly by Markus.”

“Well, shit.”

Kenzie glanced over her shoulder, not sure what they were talking about, but feeling out of place as they started going into more technical detail about their construction business. Besides, it was hard to tune out three fully grown male bears when they were just a few feet from her. She quickly put several sandwiches together and placed them among the men.

“I’ll leave you guys.”

“You don’t have to leave, Kenzie.”

She smiled over at Charlie but lifted her hand. “That’s all right.”

What did they expect her to do, sit there and stare dumbly? She would feel more comfortable folding her laundry anyway. She quickly headed down the hallway and into Bram’s room. Bram had refused to let her sleep in the guestroom since they became intimate, and that had been fine until she had that one nightmare.

Now, she was worried every night before she fell asleep that she would wake him up. Sitting on the edge of his bed, seeing the clothes he had bought her in town, and smelling their combined scents fill the room had Kenzie wishing things had been so different.

The bedroom door opened, and she turned around and saw Bram enter the room. He shut the door behind him, smiled at her, and sat beside her on the bed.

“I’m sorry about that. I haven’t had time to talk to my brothers about us.” He lifted his brows, and she laughed lightly at what he was implying. “I didn’t know they would just show up.” He brushed her hair off her shoulder and kissed her cheek. It was such a sweet, almost adolescent act, but she loved it nonetheless.

“Listen, baby, I have to go into town to fix this shit some newbie fucked up. How about you tag along, and afterward, I’ll take you to this little Italian restaurant right outside Sweet Water?” He nuzzled her neck, and she giggled when his day-old scruff tickled her skin. “It’ll take me a few hours to get this squared away, but you can hang out in the trailer on the site.”

“A little Italian restaurant, you say?”

“Oh yeah, Bambi.” He licked the shell of her ear, and she sighed in bliss. “They have amazing linguini.”

“It sounds like a date, our official first date.”

His deep chuckle sent sparks to her core. “Our first, but not our last. Why don’t you put on that pretty little black dress we picked up in town, you know, the one that dips low in the back and shows me those sexy little dimples right above your ass?”

Goose bumps covered her arms and legs. His question wasn’t all that sexual, but the way he phrased it was filled with eroticism. With one more kiss to her shoulder, he stood.

“I thought you told me you only want me wearing that at the house? Thought you’d get too jealous?” She smiled broadly, loving that she could tease him.

“Yeah, maybe you’re right. Wear a pair of my sweats and a sweater. No, wear a couple of them, in fact.” She nudged his shoulder and grinned wider. “You get ready and meet me in the living room in ten, okay, baby?”

She watched him walk out the door. God, she was so gone for that bear.²⁸ They had arrived at the construction site an hour ago, and the time seemed to be dragging. It was most likely from the fact that she couldn’t stop thinking about Bram taking her to dinner, on her first real date.

Rook had never taken her outside of his home, not unless he was on the run, and he had always insisted that other males were eyeing what was his. Rook’s jealousy had taken over a lot of his life, and hers, and because of his dominating and controlling ways, she had been isolated and depressed, never thinking she was good enough.

The sound of the men working outside had moved to the back of the building they were constructing. Kenzie couldn’t lie and say she wasn’t a little bit pleased they had moved their foul language, crude humor, and ear-piercing construction equipment being used. Bram had come to check on her a few different times, but she assured

him she was fine with the three-year-old People magazine.

Source Creation Date: July 10, 2025, 8:04 am

Kenzie could look into Bram's eyes and see the worry that she would leave him. She had woken up a few times in the middle of the night to see him staring at the ceiling wide awake.

When she questioned him, he hadn't lied or held anything back. He had been honest with her about his fears. Right here was where she was meant to be.

She heard the sound of the door opening behind her, and her smile grew. "I told you I'd be okay, Bram. You don't have to keep checking on me, although if you want to keep me company—"

The chair she was in was spun around violently, and she stared wide-eyed at Rook. Marek and Tank were nowhere to be seen, and that brought a fresh wave of fear inside her. Was Bram okay? What about the other men?

"Well, well, well." Rook let his eyes travel down her body and lifted his eyes to hers again. "It looks like it took less than two weeks for you to give yourself to the bear."

She saw no wounds on him, verifying that he had been hiding out long enough so he could heal. He was just waiting for the right moment to get her alone, and here she was, right out in the open yet closed off from others. She went to stand, but Rook's sharp voice stopped her.

"You're going to sit right there and do exactly what I say. Do you understand?" He placed his palms flat on the table and leaned in so his face was right in front of hers. "You've been a very bad girl, Kenzie, and caused me a lot of pain." His eyes searched her face, and she was paralyzed under his stare. "You've become tainted by

that fucking bear. His scent is all over you.” He looked at her throat. “And his fucking mark is on your neck.” In a voice menacingly low, Rook said, “If I can’t have you, no one can.” He reached behind her, grabbed a chunk of hair, and pulled her head back. A cry left her, and she gripped his hand, hoping to ease some of the pain, but only finding more agony. “Get the fuck up.”

He yanked her up by her hair before she could do as he said. Eyes watering and heart plummeting that she was back in this situation, Kenzie was pulled roughly toward him. Rook brought her close to him, and she instantly repelled against his touch. He smelled nothing like Bram’s addictive scent. Instead, Rook smelled like death and decay, pain and degradation.

“Did you actually think I wouldn’t come for you?” He didn’t give her a chance to answer as he held her head back so she was forced to look at him. “No, you knew I’d come, and you knew I wouldn’t let you get away again.”²⁹ Bram yelled at Zac, who was hauling a thick piece of lumber over to the foundation. Luckily, there had been an easy enough solution to fix the problem, but now it was just a matter of getting all the shit straight before they could resume with the construction of the Hampton building.

He watched a few more of the guys level things off before he turned to Charlie and Ford, and said, “I’m gonna head out early, since everything is good to go. I am taking Kenzie to that Italian restaurant right outside town.”

Ford grinned, and Charlie slapped him on the back.

“I am still stunned to shit that you found yourself a mate, brother.” Ford crossed his arms over his chest and looked pleased with his statement. Bram scowled at the middle brother, which only made Charlie and Ford laugh harder.

He knew his brothers meant well. They had their mates, a little ocelot and a red fox

shifter, and Charlie's mate was even expecting a baby.

He didn't tell them about her past, because he knew even though he loved his brothers and didn't keep anything from them, that Kenzie's story wasn't his to tell.

"Yeah, yeah. Just go to your mate." Ford stretched his back and grinned. "I'm heading out too. I'm taking Talia out of town, maybe to Colorado Springs or Steamboat for the weekend. After the whole Mina fiasco, I just want some alone time with her, ya feel me?"

Charlie made an agreeing grunt. "I'll hang back and make sure this shit actually gets done. Ary's been having a bad case of every hour sickness and was finally sleeping well when I left."

"Every hour sickness?" Ford asked almost absently as he gathered up his things to leave.

"She has morning sickness all the time, not just in the morning. I don't know what fucker decided to peg it as morning sickness, because it sure as hell comes and goes at all hours of the day. Hence the every hour sickness."

Page 41

Source Creation Date: July 10, 2025, 8:04 am

Bram looked over at Ford, who was still grinning.

“What in the hell is so funny about my mate being sick?” There was a bite to Charlie’s words.

“Chill the fuck out. I’m not smiling because Ary is sick, but because I can’t wait for Talia to get there.”

Charlie snorted and leaned against a worktable placed outside at the site. “You say that now, but it’s a whole different story when your mate is dry heaving because her stomach is empty, and you have to hold her hair back because there isn’t anything else you can do.”

Before he could listen to what would soon be a full-out argument between his older brothers, Bram waved goodbye and headed back to the trailer. It was right when it came into view that he knew something was wrong.

It wasn’t because the door swung open or the fact that he sensed Kenzie wasn’t inside. It was the fresh scent of her blood that filled the air, and the closer he got, the stronger it filled his nose. He rushed to the trailer and ripped the door from its hinges. Searching the interior wildly, he already knew she wasn’t in there.

Throwing his head back and letting his bear come out full-force without shifting, Bram roared out loud enough to shake the trailer. He rushed outside and inhaled deeply. The wind blew from the south, and because of that, he hadn’t scented the metallic tang of her blood that tinged the air until it was too late. Seconds later, Charlie and Ford were rushing over to him, their expressions on alert as they scanned

the area.

“What the fuck is going on?”

“What’s wrong?” his brothers asked him in unison, but Bram couldn’t speak, couldn’t think about anything aside from the fact that he knew that motherfucker Rook had gotten his girl. He could smell the fucking panther stinking up the air.

He would have to tell his brothers what was going on, because he needed their help. He could track her down from the scent of her blood, but he would need the back up from two of the hardest bears in Sweet Water. No doubt, Rook had been waiting for this moment when Kenzie was alone, and he had basically given his mate to the psychotic shifter.

“Fuck.” He ran a hand through his hair and scanned the area. His whole body shook, and he was having a hard time keeping his bear in control. He wanted nothing more than to let his animal free so his senses would be more attuned to finding Kenzie, but he needed to explain everything to his brothers so they knew what the fuck they were dealing with. “I have to find her.”

His whole body shook with so much force his teeth rattled together. His muscles tightened, expanded, and the promise of his bear coming forth was only seconds away. He needed to do something instead of standing there, but just as he took a step to head into the woods and let his animal fully out, Charlie gripped his forearm and brought his face close to his.

“You need to calm the fuck down, take a deep breath, and tell us what the hell is going on so we can fix this and get your mate back.”

Charlie could read him so well, and even though he didn’t mention anything about Kenzie being taken, no doubt they could feel his emotions as if they were their own.

Looking between Charlie and Ford, Bram felt his brothers' bears starting to rise to the surface. They sensed the danger and tension that thickened the air.

“Tell us what the hell is going on, brother, and we can start to make it right.” Ford slapped him on the back, his expression tense and serious. “Just take a deep breath and tell us.”

He didn't have time for this, so as quickly as he could, Bram told them about Rook and Kenzie, their history, and the fight at the bar. When he was finished, his brothers were shaking as badly as he was.

“Lead the way, Bram. We got your back.”

Bram took off toward the woods, toward the thick scent of her blood, and he didn't stop his bear from emerging. His animal broke free and charged forward at full speed.

Charlie and Ford were in their animal forms too, and as the three of them charged forward, Bram knew one hell of a fight was about to occur, but that thought excited him and had his blood pumping faster and harder.

It wasn't lost on Bram that Rook was probably setting a trap, getting him alone so he could finish what they started at the bar. But that was exactly what he was hoping for, because by the end of the night, he was going to rip the fucker's throat clean out and bathe in his blood.

Source Creation Date: July 10, 2025, 8:04 am

30Rook took his time dragging her through the forest, and when she started to trip over her feet, he would just tighten his hand around her arm until her blood flow was cut off and she was forced to keep up. He'd hit her several times before hauling her out of the trailer, and blood slowly trickled from her split lip.

Her left eye was starting to close, and a horrendous headache filled her head. Marek and Tank were only a few steps behind her, and she knew that all of this was a setup to get Bram to follow them. Rook was all about the revenge.

She stumbled again and fell to her knees. Surprisingly, Rook let go of her arm and took a step away from her.

“I can smell the foul stench of that fucking bear all over you, Kenzie.”

She curled her hands in the ground, felt dirt and dried leaves push under her nails, and tried to think of a way out of this. She could fight all she wanted, but it wouldn't erase the fact that Rook was far stronger than she was. Escape was out of the question, especially with the cougars who stood behind her and Rook in front.

“I want him to watch as I make you finally mine right before I take your life.” He got down on his haunches and forced her to look at him by gripping her chin with his index finger and thumb. He repeated himself, as if she didn't know exactly his intent. “If I can't have you, no one will, especially some testosterone-filled bear that thinks you're his mate.”

Gritting her teeth and feeling her anger rise as she stared into his heartless face, Kenzie said, “He'll come, and when he does, he'll make your death slow and

painful.”

His face contorted into something out of a nightmare, and he backhanded her hard enough that her head kicked to the side and her body followed suit. Something sharp dug into her side, and she moved her hand between her body and the ground, felt the large stick that was grinding into her ribs, and wrapped her hand around it.

It was a substantial girth, and if Rook thought to take her down, she was going to make sure he felt pain before he did it. For far too long, she had been the victim, but being with Bram had shown her she was a strong person. No longer would she let Rook control her or intimidate her. Death was most likely her outcome, but she would fight until the very end.

She lifted her eyes and saw Marek and Tank watching her with stoic expressions on their faces. A hit to the face wasn't really their style, not when they enjoyed breaking fingers one by one and crushing kneecaps with sledgehammers. It was twisted stuff one would see in a movie, but this wasn't fiction; it was her reality.

Rook gripped her forearm in another bruising hold and pulled her up so her upper body was suspended in the air. His free hand went to the button and zipper of his pressed slacks, and he undid them with a sadistic grin on his face.

Not wasting any more time, because she honestly didn't know how much she had left, she tightened her hold on the stick and brought it up with as much force as she could muster. It wasn't the best weapon, but it was all she had. The edge of the stick was splintered and sharp, and when it made contact with Rook's cheek, it sliced the flesh open. He let go of her and howled in pain.

He cupped his cheek and let out a string of profanities. Kenzie braced herself for his next action, because she knew it would be in the form of pain. He lifted his free hand to stare at his hand. Blood slipped from between Rook's fingers from where he had

been holding his face, and when he saw the product of her own violence, his face turned a nasty shade of red that could be seen even in the dusty haze of promised night.

He shifted before her eyes, morphing into a creature she would forever fear. After his bones snapped and realigned, and his muscles stretched and reshaped, the sleek black animal paced in front of her. With his dark coat, she couldn't see the wound that still marred his face, but the scent of his vile blood filled her nose. The feline growl he let out and the way his muscles seemed to vibrate below the surface of his fur let her know she had pushed him too far. Good.

“Well come on, you bastard. I've been waiting for this release since I was eighteen.”

His hiss was low and menacing. She was pushing him, but she wanted him to snap completely, so maybe then he would make her death swift and painless.

Source Creation Date: July 10, 2025, 8:04 am

“I hate everything about you. I love Bram, and I want you to die knowing that to me, you were nothing but a nightmare.”

He crouched on his haunches, and she knew it wouldn't take much more to have him attack. She went in for the verbal kill.

“And when he takes me, it is like nothing I have ever felt. I will only ever be his, and his scent and mark will never vanish, not even in death.” She closed her eyes and waited for the inevitable. Flashes of images played through her mind, ones of her mother and father tucking her in as a child, kissing her goodnight, and telling her everything would be okay.

Bram was next to consume her thoughts, and she didn't stop the smile or elation that filled her. They may have only had that short time together, but he showed her a lot in that time, and that with the right person, everything would be okay. And to her, that person was Bram Wylde.

She was going to be with her parents now, but she would never forget Bram touching her, kissing her, and running his tongue over her body. It had been intimate and sexual, but there had also been love.

“I love you, Bram.” She sensed it then, but hadn't known what to make of it. As the end was near, she wished she would have told him that they hadn't been moving too fast, that she did love him and didn't want to fight what was happening between them.

The sound of a fierce and body-vibrating roar echoed off the trees. Kenzie opened her

eyes.

There, just in the distance, she could see Bram running at them full-force. His bear was huge and thickly muscled, but it was the bared teeth and rage that came off him that made every living thing rush in the other direction.

Marek and Tank shifted into their cougars and started forward, but that was when she saw two more bears swiftly following Bram. The three of them let out ear-splintering growls that actually had Marek and Tank faltering. They may be sadistic bastards, but she could tell they were rethinking if this was such a good idea.

It didn't take a genius to know a bear could defeat a cougar, but the two of them were arrogant in thinking they were invincible. When there were three fully grown ten-foot bears coming at them at full speed, she sensed their realization that they were fucked. She expected Rook to go after the bears, but her attention and focus were on Bram, so she didn't sense Rook coming toward her until searing pain raced up her arm.

She screamed as Rook dug his fangs deeper into her arm. He pulled away, her blood dripping down his sharp, white teeth, and lunged right for her throat. But the pain and death never came, because right as Rook's teeth grazed her flesh and she felt her skin being sliced open, he was ripped away by Bram. The other two bears were busy fighting with the cougars and holding their own.

All Kenzie could do was watch the violence unfold in front of her. To her right was the sound of felines hissing and snapping and bears taking them down. Right in front of her, Bram and Rook bit into each other's bodies and tore chunks of flesh away.

The mixture of all of their blood being spilled filled the air, washing away the fresh scent of the wilderness that surrounded them. When Rook lunged for Bram, wrapped his big front legs around the bear's middle, and took him down, she wanted to rush to him and pry the demented bastard off. But Kenzie wasn't a fool. Getting in the

middle of them fighting would only be a dangerous distraction to Bram.

Rook couldn't keep Bram down for long though, because in a swift move normally reserved for animals not as big and muscular as her bear, Bram had Rook pinned below him. The panther snapped and hissed, but it was no use. Bram was bigger, stronger, and the anger that radiated off him dimmed Rook's until it was insubstantial.

For several seconds, Bram just stared at Rook. He turned his massive head toward her, and they held stares for several moments. There were no more sounds of fighting from the two cougars and bears, but the smell of Marek and Tank's deaths filled her nostrils. Bram seemed to speak to her without words, but she understood him all the same.

He'd come for her, like she knew he would, but Kenzie had seen herself lifeless at Rook's feet when Bram arrived. She should have never had any doubt in her bear, in her mate.

She just wanted this over with so she could move on, not worry about what her life held, and be with the male she loved more than anything else.

Source Creation Date: July 10, 2025, 8:04 am

All she did was nod once, but that was clearly all Bram needed.³¹ In a popping flash, Bram turned back into his human form. He stared menacingly at Rook and bared his teeth. “Fight me like a fucking man, unless you’re a coward.”

Rook hissed, but the challenge was too much for him. He shifted back to a human, and the two males fought each other for supremacy. But of course Bram came out the victor, and always would.

“You’ve hurt my mate, the female I love. For that, I’m not going to make your death fast.” Bram’s voice was deadly soft, but even pitched low, the violence radiated right below the surface. “You’ll die knowing that from this day forward, you will no longer have any control over her, and that she will be happy... with me.” He bared his teeth, which had Rook trying in vain to get out from under him. “Don’t you know a bear always protects what’s his.” It wasn’t phrased as a question. He might have wanted to fight like a man, but this motherfucker needed to die at the hands of his bear. His animal wanted that victory. He let his inner beast out to finish this.

He swiped his claws out and tore into Rook’s human flesh. The skin parted in a disgusting, macabre display, but Bram was an animal right now and continued to attack and attack. Rook was no match for the bear, especially in his human form. Blood coated Rook’s chest, and in one final move, Bram bared his teeth and went for his throat, ripping flesh and breaking bone.

A massive arc of blood sprayed from the now gaping hole in his throat, and although Kenzie should look away, she couldn’t drag her eyes away from the sight of Rook dying, the monster that had made her life hell for far too long. She needed this, needed to see him take his last breath. Rook turned his head toward her, and the life

in his eyes dimmed.

He tried to say something, but it was gurgled, and blood spilled from his parted lips. Bram roared and slammed his paw into the side of Rook's head so hard she heard something crack. Rook deserved this fate and so much more.

Bram moved off Rook's lifeless corpse and shifted out of his bear form. He stood before her naked, bloody, and wounded, but he was the most gorgeous male she had ever seen. She was on her knees, staring up at the only person who meant anything to her. The other two bears made deep noises, and he looked over his shoulder, tilted his chin up, and said, "Thanks, brothers, but I got it from here."

They turned and left, and then it was just them and the sense of freedom that filled her. She felt this monstrous weight being lifted off her chest, and it was all because Bram had walked into her life and vowed to keep her safe. He had done that and so much more. Before she could rise, he was there lifting her into his battered arms.

"I can walk, Bram. You're hurt."

He shook his head and held her tighter, mindful of her injured arm.

"No, baby, I'm good." He kissed her on the lips gently and then on the temple. "You're alive, and I have you in my arms. All the pain in the world wouldn't have me putting you down." He looked at the deep teeth marks on her arm, and his jaw clenched. "I'm sorry I wasn't here sooner."

Cupping his cheek, she urged him to look at her.

"I'm alive and in your arms. All the pain in the world couldn't dim the fact that I have never been happier or felt safer." His eyes became glossy, and she shook her head. "No tears from me or you. He wasn't worth it, and he won't be a wedge in

anyone's life any longer."

Bram nodded, tightened his hold on her, and started moving away from the three dead bodies.

"What about them?" She buried her head in his neck, having no doubt he would know she was talking about the panther and two cougars.

"My brothers and I know people who can clean up messes like this. Besides, I doubt they'll be missed by anyone." That was the truth, because Rook and the cougars had only enemies and people who were scared of them. "Come on, baby, let's go home." He held her so tight she knew he would never let her go.

Home. Kenzie had never thought she would know what that word meant, but as Bram whispered endearments and soothing words against her temple, she knew he would always make her feel like she was at home, with him. Epilogue Five years later Bram wrapped his arms around her waist and pulled her back against his chest. Kenzie let her bouquet of red roses drop to the chair beside her, closed her eyes, and fully leaned back against him. He placed his hand on her thigh and gripped her dress, slowly bringing the material up her legs.

Source Creation Date: July 10, 2025, 8:04 am

As he slipped his hand toward her inner thigh, Kenzie let out a moan when the very tips of his fingers brushed along the bare folds of her pussy.

“Why, Mrs. Wylde, you naughty, naughty girl.” He nipped at her shoulder and growled when she thrust her ass back against his hardening shaft. “You aren’t wearing any panties.”

“Mr. Wylde, you seem excited to see me.” A gasp of delight left her when Bram spun her around and pressed her against the windows overlooking Sweet Water Lake.

She was dizzy from the sudden movement, and an icy chill that seeped into her through the cold window did nothing to tame the heated arousal coursing through her. The mountains were the backdrop, and a flurry of snow was a cascade of white right on the other side of the glass.

“Baby, you have no fucking idea how excited I am to see you.” He thrust his erection against her again and again until she was pressing forward, needing more than his little tease of movement.

A lot had happened in the past five years, so much so that Kenzie had a new life, one that had no bad memories—or nightmares. Bram had been the one to help her heal. Coming so close to death five years ago by the hands of the male she had been isolated with had opened her eyes to the fact that fear was only something that could hold her if she allowed it.

“I love you, Bram.” She turned so she was facing him and wrapped her arms around his neck. Kenzie smiled up at him right before she snuggled in closer to him.

“And I love you too, Mrs. Wylde.” He smoothed his hand up and down her back. “That sounds so fucking good to say, baby.” Even years after their marriage, he still said that and still made her feel like this was her honeymoon. She knew that would never change.

“I love it when you say that too.” She closed her eyes and let the sound of his strong, steady heartbeat fill her. “How do you think they will react when we tell them?” Looking up, she watched in awe as his mouth curved into a huge grin.

“I think they’ll be excited, but not nearly as excited as I am.” He placed a big hand on her slightly rounded belly. After five years of having time for themselves, they decided it was time to have a baby. But to their excitement and shock, Kenzie became pregnant with twins. She carried a little boy, a bear shifter, and a little girl, a deer shifter.

She might only be a couple months pregnant, but Bram had already told her no way in hell boys would be coming near his baby girl. He grinned broadly and kissed her on the tip of her nose. He pulled her close, and Kenzie rested her head on his chest again.

They were celebrating Christmas at their cabin this year, and Kenzie was so happy that their home would be filled with the laughter of little children, and they would be surrounded by the people they loved. She had grown to think of Charlie and Ford as her brothers, and Ary and Talia as her sisters.

They were close, spent a lot of time together, and she knew they would always be there for her, just like she would be there for them.

There was a knock on the door, and moments later, deep male voices, female laughter, and children giggling and crying filled her house. That had her smiling, because even through all the chaos was immense love. Ary walked in first with

Charlie right behind her. Cole was only five, but already he had his face buried in some kind of electronic device. Their little girl, Madeline, looked so tiny sleeping in Charlie's big arms.

"She has been a hellion all day and finally fell asleep in the car." Ary looked over her shoulder at her three-year-old little girl.

"I'm going to put her in your room, Kenzie." Charlie smiled at her, and she nodded. Several more voices filtered through the foyer, and then in walked Ford, Talia, and their little girl, Amelia. Their fiery little daughter took after her mother, even down to her red hair and light-blue eyes.

Cole saw his cousin and ran up to her, showing her whatever game he was playing. Her face lit up, and she ran to Ford. "Daddy, I hope Santa brings me one of those."

"Brings you one of what, baby girl?" He got down on his haunches and put a lock of his daughter's red hair behind her ear.

"Cole has this cool game on his iPad."

Kenzie left the father and daughter when there was a knock on the door. The noise was almost deafening, but it was wonderful. She opened the door and smiled when she saw Luke, Talia's cougar shifter brother.

Source Creation Date: July 10, 2025, 8:04 am

The doctor looked good, especially after everything he had gone through years before. Even after his fiancée betrayed him, he still hadn't found a female of his own, but Kenzie knew that when he did find that special woman, she would be one of the luckiest females around.

“Hi, sweetheart.” Anytime they had holiday family gatherings, Luke always came. After everything happened with his ex-fiancée, Mina, Luke had resigned from the practice he worked at with his father, moved to Sweet Water, and opened up his own physician's office. Not only did he help everyone in their small town, but a lot of the time, he did it for free.

To know he'd been screwed over by that bitch Mina and had still risen above it to move on with his life and help others less fortunate than himself always managed to bring tears to Kenzie's eyes. He was such a good guy and totally deserved a happily ever after. She just hoped he got it sooner rather than later.

She stepped aside, and he walked in. His arms were weighed down with packages of wrapped gifts, and she couldn't help but laugh.

“You spoil these kids.”

He shrugged but didn't stop his grin. “What can I say? I like to spend my money on them, and they like it too.”

Kenzie laughed harder. They hugged each other and then went into the dining room where everyone was already gathering around the table.

The children complained that they were hungry, and the brothers spoke about a new contract they would be starting in the spring. Kenzie stared at each of them, happiness filling her. Bram saw her, got up and walked over to her. He wrapped his big arms around her and buried his face in her neck, inhaling deeply.

“So, what’s this news you wanted to share?” Charlie asked through a mouthful of Chex Mix.

Bram turned around, kept one arm wrapped around her shoulders, and placed another on her belly. Kenzie stared at all the people she considered her family then looked up at the male she loved more than anything else in the world.

As bad as her life had been before she met Bram, she wouldn’t have changed it for the world, because without it all, she never would have been put in his life.

Everything really did happen for a reason. The End.