



Between the Bear's Sheets (Wylde Brothers 2)

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Category: Romance, Horror

Description: The Wylde Bears, 2

Talia Landon, a red fox shifter with a weight complex, knew she was in trouble when she saw Ford Wylde for the first time. The alpha bear shifter was the type of male she should stay away from. It was clear he was far too experienced in sex, but what was supposed to be a one-night stand turns into a mating with a Wylde bear.

Ford wasn't going to give up Talia, not after he marked her as his mate. But when Ford's ex-girlfriend, Mina, comes back to Sweet Water after ten years, he knows he has to be honest about his relationship with Talia. Things get sticky when Mina shows an interest in him again, but Ford makes it known that Talia is his, and nothing and no one was going to get in the way of him claiming his female.

Be Warned: rimming, spanking

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Prologue

Ten years ago

Ford had been disconnected for far too long, his inner animal—his bear—knowing from the beginning she wasn't his mate.

But loneliness had people seeking warmth and a connection.

Had they even had that together? Maybe not.

But he wanted a change. Ford didn't feel things he should in a relationship. They were two separate people now, the connection gone... if it had even been there at all, if he were being honest.

"You heading out?" Ford asked, but he wasn't even granted a response.

Silence. It was always silence. His thoughts drifted to better times, happier ones that didn't have him questioning everything and having the gut feeling that Mina wasn't honest with him.

They'd had that cliched, young relationship, and he always hoped he'd feel something more for her. But she'd been there to help ease his loneliness. He used her in that way, and he was a bastard for it.

It wasn't unusual for a shifter to be with a human, and maybe he'd been so sick of feeling that hollowness that he'd just given over to the need to feel... something.

But if he were being honest, he questioned what they were doing together from the beginning.

Mina came out of the bathroom dressed and grabbed her purse off the floor. “I gotta run, Ford.” She said it without even looking at him. Her makeup was freshly applied, and he caught the scent of the perfume she just spritzed on.

It pissed him off even more, not because she was leaving, and not because she was apathetic. Hell, he was right there too. He was pissed because she couldn’t even look him in the eye.

He wasn’t a fool, not when his inner animal smelled her desire. And the fact that she knew he had those attuned senses and didn’t even try to hide it or act like she cared had him feel... nothing.

I feel nothing.

This needed to be done, a Band-Aid pulled off fast. “Mina, we need to talk.” This conversation was a long time coming. Without looking at him, she adjusted her skirt and made an annoyed sound in the back of her throat. When she finally glanced up at him, he saw clear indifference.

“About what? I kind of need to get out of here, Ford. Can we talk tomorrow?” Her tone was annoyed. She went back to straightening her outfit. “I mean, I came over so we could hang out, but I could tell you weren’t here, not in your mind. It was a waste of time.”

Yeah, it really had been. He’d been trying to see if there was something there, a spark, a hint of a flame. But there hadn’t been a damn thing.

He felt the urge to shift into his bear, to go outside and find something to fucking hit,

preferably a big-ass male who could give as well as he could take. “I know you’re not here, Mina, not really.” She stared at him in the eyes then, maybe surprised he was calling her out. “I know you have other males. I can smell them on you.”

And I don’t even care. How fucked up is that?

She didn’t say anything for long moments, and his annoyance was growing, his patience waning. He felt his claws unsheathe as his emotions took control, as he hated himself for wasting his time on someone other than his mate.

“Ford.” She breathed out heavily, impatiently. The pained expression she gave him appeared sympathetic, but he could fucking smell how bored she really was.

“Mina, I can’t do this. I should have never done this with you.” He ran a hand over his face, feeling like a failure. He should have waited, should have held out hope that he’d find his mate, the one female meant to be his. He opened his eyes and stared at her. “I’m sorry I wasted both of our time. I want you to be happy, and I do care about you... just not like that. I’m sorry.” He was a bastard, and he’d live with this guilt for the rest of his life.

“Ford,” she said softly.

“I just don’t understand why you didn’t just end it if you weren’t feeling it either.”

She was silent for a minute then asked, “Why didn’t you?”

He slowly shook his head. “I don’t know, maybe hope? Maybe I hoped something could grow out of... nothing.” There was that word again.

“I didn’t mean for this to turn out to be nothing, Ford. I really didn’t. I guess I liked having you around, my big bear who would protect me and make me feel safe. I used

you, and I'm sorry for that too." Her tongue poked out as she wet her bottom lip, and even though the words sounded sincere, he could tell there was a lot more she was going to say. "I met Kevin at the office, and we hit it off, fell in love almost instantly." She cleared her throat, acting like she was uncomfortable.

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He could smell the fact that she wasn't. It was like fucking paint drying.

"It wasn't like I was trying to deceive you."

So much time and energy wasted.

"Six months."

He didn't need to ask what she meant, because he knew. She'd been in love with the other man for six months.

He nodded slowly, not sure what to say. "Okay."

"You're not upset?" She seemed genuinely surprised by this, even... upset that he wasn't freaking the fuck out.

"No, I'm not upset." And he really wasn't. He watched the way her eyes narrowed at that. "I wish you would have told me before cheating on me, but it is what it is."

Shit, who was he right now? Shouldn't he be pissed? Shouldn't he feel his bear acting out at the fact that the woman he'd been with was fucking another guy?

He should have, but he felt ice in his heart.

"I think it's time you left, Mina. I think it's time we both moved on to what will really make us happy."

Her eyes went wide. “So it’s just like that?”

He shrugged. “I guess so.”

He needed to get out of the house, to run free and tear some shit up, not because of this or her, but because he hated himself.

I should have waited.

I should have waited until a woman sparked my cold, dead heart to life, lit my blood on fire, and made me feel like there was something worth living for.

He wanted to hurt something or someone as much as he was hurting, as much as he hated himself, but instead of letting his bear free at that moment to cause some serious destruction, he did something he’d never done in his twenty-five years of living.

He cried for what he might never have.

Honest-to-God love.

1

Present day

Ford slammed back another shot of bourbon and stared at the counter, his vision starting to blur. He was getting drunk—again—and welcomed it.

He slammed his hand on the counter and gestured for another shot. He was drunker than fuck, but that was how he liked it. Here he was, getting shit-faced once again over his fucking hang-ups. He groaned as he thought about his ex. She called him,

almost gloating about her engagement and upcoming wedding. He wasn't even pissed about it. That's not what was fucking things up for him.

Her contacting him rehashed all the shit he felt about himself.

He hadn't spoken to her in ten long years, so why the hell she thought she had the right—or that he'd even care—to call him up and tell him she was getting married was beyond him. But then again, look at what that call had done?

He knew his brothers thought he was upset because she was getting married. He'd never told them about the breakup or what happened. He'd never told them how he hated himself for not waiting for a mate.

He closed his eyes and breathed out slowly.

He hated to know what a shrink would say about how he was dealing with his inner issues and personal turmoil, that holding onto something for so long was because he probably had some deeper-rooted problems, but fuck it all.

He was a masochist and a sadist all rolled into one, a damn magician and expert at making people see something that wasn't there. He didn't let his brothers see this side of him, didn't allow the ugliness that consumed him to seep out to the only two people he loved. He could fool the best of them, put on a fake-as-hell smile, laugh, and act like he enjoyed the life he was living. But in the end, when he was alone staring at the ceiling, it all came back like a powerful punch to his chest.

He finished off another drink, paid his tab, and called a cab. The best thing for him to do was get the fuck home.

It was a ten-minute cab ride to his place, and thankfully he didn't pass out on the way there. After paying the man and forcing his feet to move to his front door, he all but

fell inside. Sleep sounded perfect, but the stench of the bar clung to him, and he made his way into the bathroom for a shower.

After turning on the water and making sure it was hot enough to melt skin, Ford got undressed and stared at himself in the mirror. He hadn't shaved in a few days, and he ran his hand over the dark stubble that lined his jaw and cheeks. He was a fucking mess, with his blood shot eyes, dark circles, and pinched-ass expression.

Turning away from his reflection, he pulled the shower curtain aside and stepped into the steam-filled enclosure. The instant the hot droplets splashed against his skin, he clenched his teeth. Yeah, it was scalding and hurt like a motherfucker, but that was what he needed right now.

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For an hour, he stayed in that shower, and it was only when the water turned icy and not at all satisfying that he finally allowed himself to get out.

Although he hated himself, he wouldn't change how he felt. It kept him moving, and that self-loathing was a pretty good punishment, if he were being honest.

2

Talia Landon stared at her brother's fiancée and had to grit her teeth or she would have made some nasty response. Why Luke had chosen some high-maintenance bitch of a female to marry was beyond her.

For the past two years, Talia had watched Luke dote on Mina Sheldon in a sickening display of affection. It wasn't even about her being a human and them being red fox shifters, but more so that Mina was an uptight asshole.

At every turn, she bossed Luke around, made him run ridiculous errands, and just had this air about her that screamed high-priced whore. Talia hated her, had ever since Luke brought her to their parents' house for their Sunday family dinner.

"I told you I wanted the white lace accents." Mina tossed the fabric aside and turned to stare at herself in the full-length mirror before her. She opened up her tube of cherry-red lipstick and applied a generous amount to her overly plump lips. Ever since they announced they were getting married—a new level of hell for Talia to live through—Mina had been in Bridezilla mode. Nothing was ever right, and it was Talia's brother who suffered her wrath.

It made no difference though, because even when Talia brought up her concerns to Luke, he had gotten so upset and offended that he shut her out until she had been the one who felt guilty for even bringing it up. It wasn't that she wanted to hurt her brother, but how anyone in their right mind would want to be saddled with a woman who bitched nonstop was beyond her.

But whatever, if Luke wanted to subject himself to that kind of abuse, who was she to get in the way? Talia realized that if her older brother wanted to live his life with a banshee and didn't want to see reason, then he could suffer in his own personal hell. And there was no doubt Mina would deliver on that.

He was an adult, knew his choices would affect him in the long run, and would have to deal with the consequences. At least Talia was pretty sure they wouldn't have children, at least not for a good long while, because that would require Mina to actually gain some weight. God forbid her wraithlike appearance actually looked healthy, or that she went bigger than a size two.

Talia looked back at Mina, with her perfect hair, and her perfect body, and everything else that was just too damn perfect to be real. But what made this day even more of a nightmare was the four equally gorgeous and fake women who gathered around Mina.

Their catty laughter, hushed whispers behind their hand-covered mouths, and the aristocratic air around them made this day especially lovely, just like getting her teeth cut out with a rusty razorblade.

There was no doubt one of the main reasons Mina was with her brother was because he was a renowned surgeon, and she loved to spend his money, hence the Prada pumps and Tiffany earrings that dotted her earlobes. Mumbling more to herself than anyone else, Talia stepped outside the small boutique in Sweet Water, Colorado. The breeze was warm and smelled fresh. It wasn't like the smog-filled air she was

familiar with.

Originally from California, she had been excited to come to Colorado, even if the reason behind it was less than pleasant. When Luke told them the wedding would be held at Mina's parents' in Sweet Water, no one had showed their concern that their home and the rest of their family were in LA.

So, instead of voicing their opinions on how it made a hell of a lot more sense to have the wedding in California, since the majority of the guests lived there, everyone had packed up their shit and headed over to the boonies.

Talia wouldn't lie and say Mina's parents' estate wasn't gorgeous, because it was. But then there was the irritation that came when Talia usually thought about her brother's fiancée.

She needed a stiff drink, but it was only ten in the morning, so it seemed a cup of coffee would be her only option unless she wanted to look like some kind of lush. She certainly didn't want to start some kind of small-town gossip about the new drunk stumbling around. Lord forbid Mina get mixed in by association.

Looking left then right, she finally remembered passing a bistro/coffee shop when they had come into town for Mina's dress fitting. Heading down the sidewalk that was still cobblestone, she rounded the corner and came across the small café. The little bell above the door jangled when she opened the door, alerting everyone to her entrance.

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The scent of coffee beans and fresh pastries filled her senses, and she couldn't help but fall in love with the small town a little more, despite the fact that Mina was from here. It certainly wasn't like LA with cars packed back-to-back, the overly tanned residents walking around, and the posh shops lining the streets.

For the hundredth time since she had come to Sweet Water, Talia wondered how a quaint and gorgeous little town could produce such a vile and obnoxious creature as Mina.

An upbeat song played overhead, and the sound of laughter and hushed voices filled the small interior. After ordering the biggest latte they made, she took a step back, and people-watched while she waited for her order. A human couple sat close together at a table. The man held both of the woman's hands, and they stared lovingly at each other.

There was a coyote shifter sitting alone in the corner, his laptop in front of him, and his black-framed glasses perched high on his nose.

A snow leopard shifter held a crying baby on her hip and tried to calm the child. All Talia could do was smile at each of them. What she wouldn't give for something like that: normalcy and blissful chaos. As it was, she had immersed herself in her studies over the past six years. Finally acquiring her master's degree in education, she was ready to start her life.

It wasn't as if she had much time during school to date, but it also didn't help that her bright, wild red hair and pale-blue eyes, compliments of her mother's red fox genes, made her appear slightly off in the appearance category. So basically that meant she

hadn't exactly had guys beating down her door to take her out, but that was all right, because it gave her the time to focus on her schoolwork. Her looks tended to steer men away, as if she was some kind of freak.

She also wasn't the tiniest thing, not with a figure pushing size eighteen and a height of only five-foot-five. She felt like an Oompa Loompa on the best of days. Damn Luke for taking after their father's cougar genes. With his blond hair, dark eyes, and muscular, six-foot-two frame, he was quite a catch, and not to mention wealthy and intelligent. He was every female's dream guy, and here she was, his fat, ginger sister.

When her order was up, she took the steaming oversized latte and started making her way toward the front door. A beeping noise from her purse alerted her to a text, most likely from Mina asking where in the hell she was. Reaching into her purse and digging around for her phone, she slammed right into a wall, or at least that was what it felt like.

The jarring motion of her suddenly coming to a halt had her arm slamming back into her chest and her latte spilling down the front of her white blouse. Of course the lid popped off, and the scorching liquid splashed against her skin, causing her to cry out in pain and surprise. She instantly gripped the material of her shirt and pulled it away from her body.

"Oh shit. Are you okay?" The deep voice had chills instantly popping out along her flesh, even though pain like no other spread across her chest. Looking up and seeing a wide, ridiculously chiseled chest hidden behind thin white cotton, Talia continued her ascent until she was looking into bright blue eyes and dark-brown hair shaved close to his head.

The light coloring of his eyes mixed with the twin dark slashes of his eyebrows made for a striking combination. The scent of male bear filled her nose, and she was surprised that her reaction to him was so immediate.

He took hold of her upper arm, and the next thing she knew, the noise from the café vanished, her shirt was ripped open, and he had a cold rag pressed to her chest. All of this seemed to happen in a matter of seconds, and it took her a moment to realize what in the hell was going on.

Relief was instant, but then realization that her shirt no longer covered her and that this strange, gorgeous man could no doubt see her breasts and fat rolls had her pushing his hands away and taking several steps back, clenching the edges of her coffee-stained shirt together.

She bumped into a stack of boxes, which of course had them crashing all around her. Heat flooded her face, and she looked everywhere but at the gorgeous bear shifter who was just a few feet from her. He had taken her into the café's storage room apparently. The scent of coffee beans was strong, but it didn't deter the fact that she made a complete ass out of herself in front of this man.

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He moved closer to her, but she held her hand up to stop him. “No, I’m okay, really.” She was humiliated, and it felt like fire was licking across her face and chest. Although this stranger was being so friendly to her, she just wished the ground would open up and swallow her whole.

“Are you sure you’re okay? It looks like you got burned pretty good.” She looked up at him, and for just a second she forgot about the situation she was in and got lost in how rugged and handsome he was. “I mean, fuck, I feel like a total asshole for not paying attention back there.”

The wilderness that came from him was stronger than any male shifter she had come in contact with. It was untamed and powerful and had something inside her melting instantly. Her feelings were unwarranted, bizarre, and made her feel off-balance. Here she was, standing in front of him and checking out his bulging biceps, muscular abdomen, and overall prowess in the back of some damn coffee shop. She was pathetic, and horny. Dammit.

He pointed to her chest, and she gripped the edges of her soaked, latte-stained blouse together tighter. Her face heated impossibly more, and she looked down at the ground. “It was totally my fault. I should have watched where I was going. Listen, thanks again for... everything.” Ugh, Talia. She made a move to walk past him, but he stepped in her way and blocked her path. Talia tilted her head back and stared into his eyes, confused on what the hell he was doing.

Damn, but he was a huge male, one who actually made her feel small and feminine. For several long seconds, he did nothing but stare at her, this perplexed look on his face, like she was some kind of science experiment.

No doubt he was actually seeing her, what with her red hair that was probably frizzy as hell and her crazy-ass blue eyes. This awkward kind of silence stretched between them, and she cleared her throat and shifted on her feet.

She wanted out of there, now, but stranger than this whole situation was the magnetism she felt toward this guy.

“Ford.”

Talia blinked a few times at his random word. “Excuse me?” Were they talking about automobile companies now?

His lips twitched as if he was amused, and she swore her panties dropped just a little bit. “Ford. My name is Ford Wylde.” Even his name was sexy. When she didn’t respond, one of his eyebrows cocked up. “And you are?”

God, how long had she been standing there just staring at him?

“Uh.” She looked around almost hesitantly. “Talia Landon.” The way he watched her had her heart jumping in her chest.

“Talia.” It was just her name, but holy damn the way he said it, all smooth and caressing like, made her think of all kinds of filthy things she wanted to do with him.

Whoa, where in the hell are these thoughts coming from? But just as quickly as he said her name, she watched as a mask slid over his face, locking down his emotions. Okay.

Something flickered behind his eyes, and the lust that was reflected back at her couldn’t be construed as anything else. He dipped his gaze to her chest, and she looked down. Her nipples were clearly outlined through the material, thanks to her

latte seeping through her white blouse and white bra.

Well, that would teach her to wear white after Labor Day. God, could this day get any shittier? Mumbling something unintelligible, she thanked him once again, headed back out of the café, and didn't look back, although she could feel his stare on her, and that just made her move quicker.

Once back at the boutique, she realized she couldn't go walking around in her current state and would need a new shirt and bra.

Not only that, Mina would most likely shit bricks at her appearance, not because she cared how Talia looked, but because it would make her look bad associating with her.

Well, to hell with her, and if Mina wanted to give her a snarky-ass comment, Talia would be ready for it. She was already embarrassed and fuming after looking like a fool in front of the hotter-than-life bear, and she was raring to let off some steam.

To her relief and disappointment, Mina didn't seem to be in the mood to cut her down, which meant Talia didn't have the opportunity to give it back to her.

Mina gave her one thorough glance, pinched her nose in disgust, and shook her head. "I'm not going to even ask." She flicked her hand toward the dressing rooms. "I need you to try on a few gowns. Hopefully they fit, because they don't make any bigger sizes for what I want you to wear."

Talia opened her mouth to say something in return, to tell the too skinny human bitch to fuck off, but the sales attendant was ushering the budding bride-to-be into a dressing room before Talia could say one word.

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“Miss, do you need something else to wear?” Another sales attendant, a little slip of a girl, smiled up at her. She was a rabbit shifter and most likely of the arctic variety, given her almost-white blonde hair and eerie blue eyes.

Sighing heavily, Talia looked down at herself and nodded. She brought the edges of her shirt tighter against her body, which was a bad idea, since it accentuated her drenched breasts. “Yeah, that would be good.”

The attendant smiled at her and led her toward the back of the shop. “We have a few articles of clothing that have small defects and can’t be sold.” Talia stayed in the doorway as the young woman went to a rack of clothes and started rifling through them. She looked at them for another minute before picking out a sky-blue cardigan set. “This will match your eyes perfectly and make them pop.” Her grin was broad, and Talia felt herself relaxing. How refreshing to actually have someone so friendly help her with picking out clothes. “There is a small stitching error right here.” She pointed to the area in reference, but Talia couldn’t see it. “Because of that, we can’t sell these. You’re more than welcome to them and can change in the bathroom. It’s right over there.” She pointed to a small door to the left.

“Great, thank you.” She took the cardigan set. “How much do I owe you?”

The girl waved off her question. “Nothing. Like I said, we can’t sell these and were just going to donate them at the end of the week anyway. Besides, it looks like you need something now, and there is no point in you spending an arm and a leg on a shirt here when I can just as easily help you out.”

“Well, thank you again.” Talia gave her one more grateful smile. The attendant went

back onto the sales floor. Once Talia was dressed and back out where Mina was gazing at herself appreciatively in the full-length mirror, she didn't miss the scowl directed her way from the bride-to-be.

“Why aren't you trying on the dresses?” She turned around and placed her hands on her hips. The wedding dress she had on was one of the many Mina's family had specifically flown in from Europe for her to try on. The dress itself was a gorgeous mermaid cut, but Mina made it look like trash. Instead of responding with a smartass comment, Talia turned and headed into the dressing room and stared at the gowns that she was to try on.

They all looked the same: bland neutral colors, off-the-shoulder straps, and knee-length hems. Talia didn't want this wedding to happen, but she knew that wasn't a possibility, so having it over with as soon as possible was her next choice. After trying on the first one, which was far too tight, she tossed it to the side and slipped on the second one. It was a bit better, but now her boobs were about to pop out and flash some unsuspecting person.

The last one was a gauzy material she feared would cling to all the parts she preferred to be left hidden. Once it was on, she was pleasantly surprised it was loose enough to be modest, but sexy enough to accentuate her features.

Turning around in the mirror a few times, she knew this was the one she would pick. That was the only plus side to this wedding: Mina letting the bridesmaids pick the style of dress they wanted to wear. They may have all had to be the same color, but they had three different designs to choose from. Of course she would still need the final approval from Her Majesty.

Talia left the dressing room and stopped when she saw Mina in a Cinderella type wedding gown. It was so puffy three full-grown shifter males could have hidden beneath it. Mina caught Talia's reflection in the mirror and turned around. She eyed

her for several long seconds before speaking.

“Not bad, although I was pretty sure you’d pick that one, since it is the least form-fitting.”

“Excuse me?” Talia’s blood boiled. Oh hell no. She had enough of Mina’s attitude. Talia opened her mouth, ready to tell the bitch off, but Luke decided to come in at that moment. “Luke!” Mina’s screeching voice had Talia’s ears ringing. “You aren’t supposed to see me in the wedding dress before the wedding. It’s bad luck.”

Talia didn’t point out that Mina still had three other dresses to try on.

“Sorry. I just wanted to let you know me and a bunch of the guys are going to a shifter bar tonight.” Surprisingly, Mina didn’t argue, although her focus was back on her reflection. She turned to the left and then the right, smoothing her hands over the chiffon in the process. Just as Luke turned to leave, Talia rushed up to him and grabbed his arm.

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“Mind if I tag along?” She needed out of this place and out of Mina’s company, or she was going to strangle the bitch. Her brother looked shocked and then hesitant at her inquiry, but when he glanced over his shoulder at Mina, heard her nasty remarks to her friends on how the fabric of the dress didn’t fit her the way she wanted it to, she knew he would cave.

It wasn’t like he didn’t know how his future wife was; it was just the point that he actually stuck around with her despite all of it. It may not be cool for his little sister to tag along when it was clear he wanted to hang out with his friends, but he wasn’t going to turn her down, not when she saw the sympathy on his face and she was laying on the pouty lips extra thick.

“Really?” he asked. At her nod, he smiled and then lifted his eyes to stare at Mina, which ultimately had that smile fading. “She being that bad today, huh?”

Talia wanted to tell him Mina was bad every freaking day, but she pursed her lips and forced herself to nod instead of spewing out what a cunt Mina was.

“I don’t know how much fun you’ll have hanging out with me and the guys, but if you really want to come, I’ll pick you up at eight. The guys want to head over to a popular shifter bar in town. I think it’s called Something Shifty.”

Clever. She snorted at the ridiculous name of the bar. “I’ll absolutely be ready by then. Thanks, Luke.”

He chuckled her under the chin, went up to Mina, and gave her a disgustingly passionate kiss then left the boutique. At least now she had something to look

forward to, even if it was hanging out with a group of loud, obnoxious shapeshifters.

She could always get drunk enough that their obvious and pathetic flirting with the females wouldn't bother her. Her brother may be a renowned doctor in California, but some of his friends were still stuck in the college party days. Besides, anything was better than hanging out with Bridezilla.

3

Ford exhaled, exhaustion claiming him. It had been another day busting his ass on the construction site. He'd come into work earlier than everyone else and stayed later than most. Sweat covered him, his hands had been bloody, and his body was sorer than fuck, but he welcomed it all.

Now, here he was, watching Bram flirt so hard with some human waitress that she'd be gripping her ankles for him before the night was over with.

All Ford could think about was the sexy little red fox shifter who he met earlier that day. And that was something he had been trying to purge from his mind all day—hence the reason he worked his balls off today.

He didn't want to be so strongly attracted to someone, least of all an innocent-eyed little fox who stared up at him with her arousal pouring off her in waves. There had never been a woman who had affected him so powerfully with just one look, but when he looked into her pale-blue eyes, something in him had awoken. A little part of him had broken through the darkness that filled every recess of his body.

Those emotions were foreign to him and made him increasingly twitchy and uncomfortable. So he had done what he did best. He turned their charming yet slightly embarrassing encounter into something sexual.

He checked her out blatantly, staring at her tits and not bothering to hide the fact. Then she had gotten even more embarrassed, and aroused, and it had taken everything inside him not to push her up against the wall and take her right there.

Thank fuck she left when she did, because he had been two seconds away from following through on those primal desires.

Her image was ingrained in his head, and not just because he had been able to see every inch of her luscious breasts. It was her deep-red hair and icy-blue eyes that turned him on like no other had. Her curvy, all-female body was made for a man to get lost in.

But he was broken, his self-hatred a living entity inside him. He couldn't care less what others thought of him, or if he was wearing some high-class shit. He worked hard, kicked back with his brothers and crew after a long day, and got drunk more days than he cared to admit.

He didn't deserve to be happy. But then he had seen Talia, and everything inside him calmed. The darkness in him actually receded, and a sliver of light shone through, all because she looked up at him. Fuck, he was acting like a pussy. He was too old for this shit, too old to think he could change after being this way for so long.

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His relationship with Mina had been artificial, and it was actually a blessing things turned out the way they did. He'd done a lot of thinking, realized what he wanted out of life, and had finally come to the conclusion he was better off living the way he had been: not forming lasting bonds with people, working his ass off, and sticking to himself.

Living that way had served him fine, and he didn't plan on changing anytime soon.

Despite Bram's successful flirtations, he looked like shit, what with his black eye, split lip, and claw marks that were showing right under the collar of his shirt. Despite his appearance, he always got pussy, but Ford suspected the females liked the dangerous and beaten look. It called to them on some kind of primal female level.

Rubbing a hand over his short hair, Ford was fucking exhausted. He gestured for the bartender to bring him another beer. But then a flash of wine-colored hair caught his attention. Talia walked in behind a male and had two others following closely.

The sight of her with a male had his bear rising up. Someone else touching her, knowing what she tasted like, felt like, had rage washing through him.

Despite the stench of spilled, sour beer, sweat, and sex, he picked up the intoxicating aroma of lavender with a hint of citrus. Ford inhaled deeply, closed his eyes, and felt his dick harden so fucking fast it pressed incessantly against the fly of his jeans.

A heady sensation passed through him, one that had nothing to do with the liquor he drank, and all to do with how bad he fucking wanted between her thighs.

He let his gaze travel up and down her body in a quick sweep but then lingered on the parts of her that called to his bear. She had a waist that was made for him to wrap his hands around. The shirt she wore was some kind of sweater set and far too many layers for his liking, but that didn't matter, because he had the image of her rose-colored nipples ingrained in his brain.

Even now, all he could see was her coffee-stained blouse and bra. He had been able to see her full breasts, which had his hands itching to touch them. The fact that she was all he could think about should have bothered him. But it didn't.

It energized him.

He had to find out who she was, what she felt like under his hands, tasted like under his tongue. He knew her name, and saying it over and over again in his head was like an auditory orgasm.

Talia Landon. Talia Landon. Talia Landon.

It was feminine and sexual and a name he wanted to say while buried deep inside her pussy.

"Ford, man, I think I'm heading out soon." Bram stepped in front of his line of sight, and Ford let out a low growl. "Really, dude?" Bram cocked a brow, looked over his shoulder at where Talia sat with the three assholes, and glanced back at Ford with an amused expression.

He was acting dumb, and growling over some female he didn't even know was something a male would do only for his own female.

Talia Landon was definitely not his, so he needed to control his shit.

“Somethin’ you like, brother?”

“Fuck off, Bram.” Ford picked up his beer and took a drink it, never taking his focus off his brother, although he wanted to watch Talia. Bram grinned broadly.

There was this prickling on the back of Ford’s neck. He straightened in his seat and looked over Bram’s shoulder. Talia was glancing in his direction, and when her eyes landed on his, he swore he could hear the increase in her pulse.

His dick was hard as hell, and all he wanted to do was walk up to her and take her mouth in a kiss that would leave her weak and just as fucking turned on as he was. And then he wanted to lick every inch of her until she would never forget how his touch felt.

What in the fuck is wrong with you?

These thoughts were dangerous. Ford wanted to ease this ache he had for the sexy-as-sin red fox shifter, and he was going to accomplish this tonight.

“See ya,” he said and waved Bram off without a glance. Ford kept his gaze on Talia.

The male who had been walking in front of her threw his arm around her shoulders and leaned in to say something in her ear. He was a big fucker, tall and heavily muscled, and far too close to her. Ford found himself curling his hands into tight fists, straightening, and taking a step closer.

He closed his eyes and inhaled deeply, filtered out the vile aromas that surrounded him, and focused on Talia’s and the male’s scents. He snapped his eyes open and felt the tension inside him start to ease.

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Talia and the male shared the same blood, and the fact that the man was related to her had the wild, edgy bear inside him calming.

What the fuck was wrong with him?

4

Ford was pleased that she was trying but failing to keep her eyes off him. He could smell her curiosity and arousal, and he knew it was directed at him by the fact that her cheeks turned a pretty shade of pink the longer she stared at him.

The blond male sitting beside her looked fierce as he said something to her.

She broke eye contact with Ford and started arguing with him. After a minute, he shook his head and stood, the other two males following suit. The guys left her at the table alone, a big mistake for more than one reason, but lucky for him, because he wasn't wasting another moment to start up whatever this was that simmered between them.

Pushing away from the bar, he made his way through the gyrating bodies and stopped in front of her. He felt feral inside, ready to haul her up and claim her in front of everyone. The bear inside him clawed to get out, to take supremacy over the situation. Ford fought the fucker back, because no way in hell was the asshole getting Talia.

She was his, and even if he and his bear were of the same entity, he was the alpha, not the other way around. Her pulse quickened, and the scent of her arousal and

nervousness fueled his own lust. His cock pulsed behind his jeans, begging to be released.

Why his presence put her on edge was a mystery to him, but the fact that she desired him as much as he did her had him wanting nothing else but to take her to his place right the fuck now.

That thought had him stilling. Take her back to his place? He wanted to take Talia to his place, wanted her in his bed, smelling of him with his dick buried deep inside her. The feeling of his bear wanting anything to do with a female was odd to him, because never had his inner animal wanted to come out and show its dominance.

His bear always stayed in the back, letting Ford take the reins and control the situation. On this occasion, it seemed his bear wanted Ford to take the backseat while he dominated this little red fox, and damn was he going to take her good and hard.

He didn't want to frighten her, so he schooled his features and took the seat beside her. The way she shifted in her seat, and the increased potency of her arousal, told him Talia was already primed for him, even if she was nervous as hell.

Maybe he should have gone easy with her, not rushed things or tried to get her under him so quickly. But fuck it, he wanted this, needed this, and for the first time in his life, he wanted a female more than he wanted his next breath.

Was there something else between him and Talia, something more elemental, and that was why he had such a strong desire to have her? Or maybe he was just thinking too fucking hard.

He couldn't help it though, not with his arousal and testosterone coursing through his veins like two damn freight trains coming at each other, just getting ready to crash together. She squirmed in her seat again, and the smell of her innocent lust slammed

into him and caused his dick to stiffen even further. If he got any harder, his damn cock would bust right through his jeans.

“Talía.” He leaned in an inch and inhaled deeply. He was on autopilot now, unable to stop himself from making it pretty fucking clear what he wanted. His bear growled deep inside at her intoxicating aroma. “Those males shouldn’t have left you alone.” He cast a glance at the shifters at the bar, and even though he knew one of them was related to her, he couldn’t help but wonder if she was with one of the other two males.

That had his claws starting to unsheathe as his animal came to the forefront. He’d fight for her, draw blood, and do some major fucking damage to claim her as his. “If you were mine, I wouldn’t let you out of my sight. That only gives others the impression they can come sniffing around what isn’t theirs, and that leads to broken bones and bloody bodies.”

Her eyes widened, and he knew he was going too fast, saying feral things, and he was going to run her off before anything happened between them. “E-Excuse me?” she stuttered a little, and he found himself leaning closer to her, needing to have her heat and scent surrounding him.

She looked over her shoulder, and Ford followed her line of sight. The three males were engaged with other females.

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“I don’t have a male.” Her cheeks turned even redder, and the rush of heat that came from her enveloped him. Ford swore he grew a little drunker from it.

“No male?” He placed his forearms on the table and leaned in so close to her he could have counted each individual eyelash. Her chest rose and fell, and the outline of her nipples was now visible through her sweater set. Letting his eyes travel up from her chest, over her slender, pale neck, and to her mouth, he watched in rapt awe as she dragged her tongue along first her bottom lip and then her top.

The glossy residue along her plump lips had his shaft jerking in response.

“N-No. I don’t have a male.” Ford couldn’t help but stare at the way the tops of her breasts gently peeked over her sweater. They were large, far more than a handful, and so fucking delectable he wanted his hands on them and his mouth sucking on her nipples. The scent of angry males nearing had Ford stiffening and moving closer to Talia.

She looked to the males she’d come in with as they stopped at the table. The male stared down at him with a predatory gaze on his face. Nothing was said as he and the other male stared each other down.

Ford had to give him props for taking care of the female, but he didn’t know Ford very well, nor the fact that he wasn’t about to fucking back down.

“Hey, get the hell out of here.”

Ford smirked at the big blond fucker. If he wasn’t so damn horny for his little fox, he

would have found this situation humorous, but as it stood, he was growing increasingly annoyed.

No one fucking talked to him that way. Ford stood and fully faced the male and the three shifters behind him. The falcon shifters eyed him curiously. Before Ford could say anything that would most likely start something unfortunate, Talia stood and addressed the male.

“Luke, this is Ford. I bumped into him earlier today at a little café.” Ford and Luke stared at each other for several more seconds. “Anyway, he was just about to buy me a drink.” Ford looked down at her and smirked. He thought it was endearing that she thought to protect him.

Instead of showing these males that he was an alpha and wasn’t intimidated by a cougar or a couple bird shifters, he spoke directly to her. “Yeah, a drink sounds good. What do you want, Talia?”

The way her name flowed from his lips sounded really fucking good, but what would have sounded even better was Talia screaming out his name as he was balls-deep inside her.

“How about I go up there with you and see what they have?” She was still protecting him. Ford found himself with a full-blown grin, now that this little slip of a fox thought she was helping him out. Well, he’d let her rescue him, and then later he’d show her exactly what a bear was capable of.

5

Talia made a move to walk by the male, but Luke stopped her and said something low in her ear while keeping his eyes locked on Ford. He couldn’t blame Luke for his worry, but Ford also knew the male could sense he meant Talia no harm.

Now, there was no doubt Luke could sense how badly he wanted Talia, but that wasn't something he was going to be ashamed of or hide.

Before anything else could be said, Talia grabbed his hand and started walking toward the bar, and he let her, because he wasn't going to allow things to escalate, not unless they started shit with him. When she was leaning against the counter, she let go of his hand and faced him.

“Are you freaking insane?”

He cocked his brow at her question and didn't hide the genuine smile that formed on his lips. When was the last time he felt amused? “Am I?”

She pointed at her brother and his friends. “Three against one. You have to be crazy if you think you could have taken all of them on, and I could sense that's where it was going.” She breathed out roughly, and a tendril of wavy red hair puffed out in response. “I swear it was like a He-Man showdown right in front of me.”

Ford stared at her, blinking a few times and processing her words to make sure he heard her right over the loud music. She looked so damn worried it was heartwarming. When he realized she was serious, he threw his head back and laughed loud and long, and fuck did it feel good, refreshing.

Another sliver of darkness broke away, and light shone through. Whatever it was about her had everything he had become being moved, transformed, and shaped into something that used to fill him. Several people at the bar turned and looked at him curiously.

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“Baby, not to seem cocky or anything, but I’m pretty sure I can take on a cougar and a couple falcon shifters.” She didn’t respond right away, and despite the fact that he could sense her emotions, he wished he could have been able to know what she was thinking.

Her mouth parted, but before she could say anything, he turned and ordered a couple drinks. What was crazy as fuck was he had ordered a beer for himself and one of those frilly girly drinks for her, and he never did shit like that. He waited for Zarry, a weasel shifter and the current bartender for the night, to fill his order.

He took those precious minutes to just stare at her, to enjoy the sight of her luminescent skin with a light, almost invisible sprinkling of freckles along the bridge of her nose, her lush, light-pink lips, and the all-around natural beauty she exuded.

Something clicked into place the longer he stared at her, a realization that put everything else on the backburner in his mind.

What if this attraction he had for Talia, this connection that was like a rope pulling him closer and closer to her, meant she was his mate? She bit her lower lip, and the sight of her small white teeth worrying the plump flesh had desire growing higher inside him, but also had a touch of fear mixing with his desire.

He couldn’t handle this if that was what was going on, if he had actually found his mate after thirty-five years on this planet. He wasn’t wired anymore to accept a female for his own again. When he had, shit had gone bad, and he didn’t want to have to relive that.

His fear could be holding him back from something explosive and mind-blowing, but it was also that fear that protected him from a lot of shit.

Fuck.

“Why don’t you seem worried about what could have just happened?” The fact that she was still thinking about a fictitious threat was slightly amusing. Zarry set his order on the counter before him, and Ford picked up her daiquiri and handed it to her. It had a damn pink umbrella and a slice of strawberry sticking out of it, and that sight had him grinning.

He didn’t want to talk about the other males or what she thought was about to happen. All Ford wanted to talk about was him and her. All he wanted to hear was the melodic sound of her voice as she told him all about herself.

God dammit, he was falling incredibly hard and fast for this girl, and he hadn’t even known her for a full fucking day. “Will you sit with me and talk?”

She looked hesitant and glanced at her brother.

Ford looked in that direction as well and saw Luke watching them with narrowed eyes. The protectiveness that came from her brother made him feel a semblance of calm, knowing she had someone fierce enough to watch over her. “I swear all I want to do is talk.” He held up both hands in surrender. Look at him, practically begging a female for attention, but then again, Talia wasn’t just some female. She was his, at least for tonight. “There is an empty table in the corner. It’s away from everyone and a bit quieter, I’m sure.”

She looked from him to her brother again then back to him.

“I swear your brother can still see us, and if I try something, I’ll give you a free,

unrestricted shot at my balls.”

That had her smiling, and Ford realized he wanted to see her do that over and over again. It lit up her damn face and warmed his cold, broken heart. He didn’t want to make her feel uncomfortable or like she had to go with him, but fuck he wanted to get her alone, even if it was in a secluded corner of a crowded bar.

He didn’t think she’d go, not with the way she kept worrying her bottom lip and glancing at her brother. Hell, he knew indecision as well as the next person, but he prayed like hell she’d give him a chance. It had taken ten fucking years to find someone who made him give a damn about something, and hell, this moment right now was so fucking important.

“Okay. Let me just let Luke know.” His once battered heart started to beat wildly at her acceptance. Palms sweaty and anticipation wracking his body, Ford turned to go with her to speak to her brother, but she held up her hand, stopping him. There hadn’t been anything that could stop him or his bear when he wanted something, but Talia, his little fox, could stop him in his tracks and successfully bring him to his knees if she deemed it so. “Just wait here. I don’t want any more testosterone being thrown around.”

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She smiled, and although he sure as hell wanted to argue with her and didn't want to leave her side, he knew he would've sounded like some overprotective asshole, and they had just met. If that's what she wanted, then he'd hang back and be a good boy, although all he could think about was her being his good girl.

She moved away from him, and his bear paced inside him to follow her. The damn animal didn't want her walking away from him anymore than his human side did. Bringing his bottle to his lips and taking a long pull, he watched her talk with her brother, who apparently didn't like what she was saying by his instant frown and fast-moving mouth.

She pointed to the corner table where they would sit, but Luke shook his head adamantly. Talia placed her hands on her hips, and it looked like she was giving her brother a tongue lashing, which had Ford grinning. His female was a feisty little thing.

No, quit thinking like that. Having a female for more than one night is bad news, dangerous to both of you. Even if he knew it was a bad idea, he kicked those thoughts in the ass, because he wasn't about to let the first female to awaken him slip past his fingers.

Ford watched them closely, and after Talia was finished ripping her brother a new asshole it seemed, he finally nodded. His eyes caught Ford's, and the cougar shifter narrowed his. Yeah, Ford knew he was watching, and that was fucking fine, but by the end of the night, he was taking his girl home and fucking her so thoroughly she couldn't even think of not staying with him.

This might be the very worst idea he had ever had, but it also felt like the best fucking idea.

She came back over to him, and as much as he wanted to place his hand on the small of her back at the very least, he curled his hand around his beer bottle and led her to an empty table.

Oh, he wanted his hands on her, wanted to feel her lush curves and roundness, but he would work up to that, make her comfortable with him, and then have his way when she melted from his touches.

They sat down, and it was clear she was still uncomfortable. Usually, he didn't have to fight hard for a female, but Talia, with her unusual but gorgeous blue eyes, made him feel like an inexperienced teenager. He actually felt tongue-tied around her, and that would just not do.

Shaking off his own nervousness, he braced both forearms on the table and leaned in. He wanted her, and he needed to be the dominant alpha he always had been. There was no time for him to be a pussy.

6

“So, Talia Landon, what brings you to Sweet Water?”

Ford was so close to her that Talia smelled the intoxicating aroma of his cologne and the beer he was drinking. As strange as it was, the dual scents complemented each other to the point her arousal spiked, and she had to clench her thighs together.

What was worse was the fact that she knew damn well he could smell how wet she was and what he did to her body.

Her reaction to him was not something she was used to. Never had she met a man, human or shifter, who made her feel so... free.

All around them, there was a plethora of scents, ones viler than others but there nonetheless. The smell of sex somewhere nearby alerted her that there were people out who didn't care where they fucked. They were so worked up by each other they just couldn't wait to be alone and had to relieve that ache.

This was one of those times she actually wished she was more wanton and took what she wanted, and what she wanted was the bear shifter right in front of her.

Licking her lips, she could only think about one thing, and that had nothing to do with her brother's wedding or the bitch who would soon be her sister-in-law. Dirty and lewd images of her limbs entwined with Ford's played through her mind, and her whole body flushed from the sensations coursing through her.

His nostrils flared, and she knew she wasn't hiding her reaction to him or the fact that her thoughts were so sexual in nature she was working herself up to the point she hurt with need between her thighs. His eyelids dipped low, and he leaned in another fraction, bringing them only inches away from one another.

"M-My brother is getting married." A change of subject, something that was bound to make her arousal shrivel to nothing, seemed like a perfect plan.

His eyes were on her lips as she spoke, and that knowledge had her well-thought plan on talking about something so uninteresting that sex wasn't even a glimmer between them seem to vanish far too quickly.

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“There seem to be a lot of weddings going on. At least, that’s what the salesclerk at the boutique told me.”

“Mmmhmm,” he said, his focus on her mouth still. But then something covered his face, and he leaned back and lifted his bottle to his mouth, downed the rest of his beer, and motioned for the waitress to bring another round. Whatever she just said put this wedge between them, and now his whole demeanor was closed.

She should have been happy her lust had been successfully doused, but now she just felt empty and cold.

The awkwardness she felt initially came back full force, and she contemplated going back to where her brother sat. The longer the silence between them dragged on, the more she just wanted to leave.

He wouldn’t look at her, and it was clear he was going through some kind of internal struggle.

“Uh, listen, maybe I should just head back over to my brother’s table.” She went to stand, but he gently placed his hand on top of hers.

“No, please stay. I’m sorry if I got weird just then. It’s just talk of weddings and shit tends to bring the funk on.” He offered her a smile, but it seemed somewhat forced.

God, what if he was married or engaged or something like that? He must have read her facial expressions and figured out what she was thinking, because he chuckled and said, “No, I’m not married, nor was I at one time, and I am not about to get

married.”

He watched her over the rim. For several long seconds, they stared at each other, and she wondered what had been done to him that just speaking about weddings would throw him off. He inhaled deeply and seemed to be struggling with an internal debate.

“Someone from my past is getting married, and I have a lot of....” He chuckled humorlessly.

Oh. She assumed it was about a woman, but she wasn’t about to ask.

His posture was relaxed as he threw one of his thick, muscular arms over the back of the chair and kicked one of his legs out straight. She didn’t know anything about this man aside from his name, that he was a bear shifter, and that she wanted him desperately. A switch in conversation was what they needed.

“So what do you do for a living?”

The waitress came by and set down two fresh beers.

“You mean aside from running into pretty little red foxes and causing them to spill scalding coffee all over themselves?” The corner of his mouth lifted in a smirk, and she couldn’t help but laugh. “I work with my brothers in a family-owned construction business. Maybe you’ve heard of Wylde Construction?”

So he did hard, manual labor? That explained his muscular body.

She nodded. “Yeah, I actually remember seeing the signs in front of the construction sites on my way into town.” She finished off her drink, which was turning watery. Ford pushed over a fresh beer, and she smiled in gratitude. She wasn’t much of an umbrella drink kind of girl anyway.

“So, where are you from, and what do you do?”

She took a long pull from the beer and liked the hoppy flavor that covered her tongue. “I’m from California and just graduated with my master’s in education. Although looking for a teaching position in LA is like finding a needle in a haystack.” Holy hell, did she just make that analogy? Her cheeks warmed, and Ford smiled, which made her flesh burn hotter. “In reality, I’m jobless.” Talia didn’t mention she was living off her trust that her parents set up for her.

At twenty-four years old, she envisioned something more for her life. The past six years had been filled with school and not much of anything else. Now that she was finally done, she felt almost lost. There had been this optimistic side of her that saw her getting a teaching job right after graduation, but the reality was a lot sadder than that.

Most places wanted experience, but how in the hell could she get experience if she didn’t have a job? She hated the bigger cities and longed to settle down somewhere small, such as an intimate town like Sweet Water.

“That’s an incredible accomplishment. Congratulations.”

She felt herself blush at his compliment.

Yeah, she might have a degree, but what was the point of owning that piece of paper if she had nothing to show for it in the long run? “Thank you, but it certainly isn’t owning your own construction company. I’m sure you’re the go-to builders in your town.”

He smirked and shrugged. “It has its pros and cons, believe me. Working with family can be a pain in the ass at times.”

She nodded and smiled. Her father and brother worked together, and there had been plenty of times she heard them arguing about patient cases and what the other would do in the situation.

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“Yeah, I know what you mean, although not personally. My brother is a physician, as is my father. They share a practice, and I can’t count the number of times they’ve argued over things concerning the office.” Looking up at him, she swallowed the lump that suddenly formed in her throat at the look he gave her.

His expression was relaxed, but she felt the heat come from it, one of raw, animalistic sexuality. Gone was the awkwardness that had risen from talks of weddings, and back in its place was heady arousal. A ripple passed over him, as strange as that was, and for a split second, she saw the wild bear he harbored inside. He slowly leaned in, and Talia found herself frozen to the spot.

They were inches from each other once again, breathing the same air and passing each other’s body heat back and forth. Talia pulled her bottom lip between her teeth, a nervous habit she had done all her life. She noticed Ford’s eyes lower to watch the act, and she instantly let go.

Her bottom lip popped out, and blood rushed to the abused area. His pupils dilated, and the pheromones that came off him saturated her. There was no denying the bear shifter in front of her wanted her just as badly as she wanted him.

“Talia...” He said her name deep and low, and the way his lips formed the word had her thinking of him moving his mouth all over her body while he fucked her good and hard. He inhaled deeply, and the black of his pupils swallowed the blue of his irises. “I can smell how wet your pussy is.” He slowly lifted his eyes to hers and leaned in another inch. “Tell me how wet you are for me, Talia.”

Holy shit, did he just say that to her? Yes, yes, he did, and to her surprise, she wasn’t

offended, but so damn turned on she was shocked she hadn't burst into flames right then and there.

7

Talia's chest rose and fell from the force of trying to suck enough air into her lungs. He moved in yet another inch, and everything faded in the distance until all she sensed, smelled, and saw was Ford. This whole situation was crazy, and her reaction to him was crazier yet.

"All you have to do is tell me you want me as much as I want you." His breath was warm and smelled hoppy from his beer. "This doesn't make sense, but it doesn't have to for it to be right, yeah?" Her eyes fluttered as his warm breath brushed tendrils of her hair across her cheek. An intoxicating sensation filled her, and it had nothing to do with the alcohol she had. "And I want you, Talia. I want you under me, covered in sweat, screaming my name, and knowing it is me who is fucking you until you scream."

Oh God. His words alone, so wicked, filthy, and erotic, could've made her orgasm.

She had never done something reckless, had never wanted to, but when she opened her eyes and stared into Ford's bright-blue irises, all she could think about was spending one night with him, because she knew that was all it would be.

For some strange reason, she was fine with that, because as shallow and even slutty as it seemed, she didn't care. Why should she feel shame for wanting to explore the sexuality that slammed into her, wrapped its talons into her, and refused to let go until she surrendered completely?

In the morning, she could go on with her life, but if she didn't at least experience something that stole her breath, made every part of her tingle, and had her inhibitions

vanishing, she would forever regret it. That was a fact. Could she actually go through with it, though?

“All you have to do is ask me to take you home, baby.” His voice was low and laced with lust. “I need to hear you say those words.” His gaze was on her lips again, and his chest rose and fell with such force she grew dizzy from the lack of oxygen.

She was an adult, but Luke was also her older brother and always very protective of her. Getting him to be okay with her leaving with Ford, a male she had only known for less than a day, was going to be hard as hell. He would talk her out of it, which may have been the smart thing to do, but it certainly wasn't what she wanted.

She would be gone by next weekend, so the awkward run-ins wouldn't be an issue when it came to one-night stands, although she had no experience with that type of hook-up.

Quit overanalyzing everything. Just do it, Talia.

“Take me home, Ford.” The words were a fast, breathy whisper, and as soon as they spilled from her mouth, her eyes widened. No taking it back now. The low growl that left him had shivers working through her. It was purely animal and very possessive.

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God, was she hearing him right, smelling correctly the emotions rolling off him, and knowing he truly wanted her in a possessive, territorial way?

Everything next happened so quickly that she couldn't get her bearings. He downed the rest of his beer, took her hand, and stood. He was hauling her through the bar and only stopped when they reached her brother.

The energy that coursed from Ford and Luke was tangible, and for a moment, she feared all hell would break loose.

"What?" Luke looked between them, and what was going on finally clicked into place. He stood slowly, and a flicker of anger passed across his face. "Everything okay, Talia?" Luke asked her but kept his stare on Ford. "I'm about ready to head out, okay." Her brother said it, but Talia knew it wasn't phrased as a question or courtesy information on what his plans were. He was telling her what he was doing, and in the end what she would be doing as well.

"Everything is fine. I just wanted to let you know I'm leaving... with Ford." Her heart thundered behind her ribs as she waited for her brother to respond.

Luke's expression went thunderous as he looked between her and Ford. "I hope you don't mean what the fuck I think you mean." When she didn't answer, his face started to turn red. "You don't even know him, Talia." He crossed his arms over his chest and stared down at her. "You're not going anywhere with him."

"She knows me well enough." Ford took a step closer to her, and the way he positioned himself had him slightly in front of her.

She had to intervene before there was an all-out shifter brawl going on. She didn't want to verify what her brother already knew, because hell, it was no one's business. Talia wasn't a child and wouldn't be bullied by Luke. The fact that her brother would know anything that had to do with her sexual life had a major ick factor settling inside her.

Moving out from behind Ford, because really, that was ridiculous he felt the need to somehow shield her from her brother, she looked Luke in the eyes and said, "Luke, I understand your worry, but I am an adult and you aren't Dad. Besides, we are just going somewhere quiet to talk." It was a boldfaced lie, and she was actually pretty proud of herself for not flinching when she said it.

Talia had never been very good at twisting the truth, and even if Luke knew she was lying, which he did, going by the look he gave her, she wasn't about to admit she was going home with Ford to do the opposite of talk.

Her brother clamped his jaw and ground his teeth. For several long moments, no one said anything. His two friends, William and Lincoln, squirmed behind him, obviously thinking a fight was about to break loose.

"Luke, I'm going to go whether you like it or not, but I'd like for you not to act like a lunatic." He didn't move, just continued to grind his teeth. "I told you I'm leaving as a courtesy, not for permission. Please understand I'm smart enough to make intelligent decisions when it concerns my safety." Of course this was the first time Talia was going home with a man she didn't fully know, but then again, she trusted her instincts, and they weren't sending off warning bells.

After a prolonged moment, Luke sighed heavily in defeat. She looked at Ford, anxious to get out of this situation, but instead of leading her away, he was reaching into his wallet and handing Luke a business card. "Here is my business card. It has my full name, phone numbers, and address." This whole situation was starting to go

from sexually electrified to awkwardly professional. “You can ask anyone here about me. They know me and my brothers.”

Luke opened his mouth to say something, but Talia grabbed Ford’s hand, waved to Luke, and hauled ass out of the bar. That conversation had gone on far too long as it was. Once outside, she let go of his hand and looked up at him.

“What?” He smirked, and she had the urge to scowl at him, but instead she smiled back.

“What the hell was that about?”

He looked over his shoulder at the front door then back at her. “What do you mean, Talia?” From his smile, he knew damn well what she was talking about.

“Ford—”

He held up his hand, and she snapped her mouth shut, wondering what he was doing. He gripped her around the waist and spun her around until she felt the hard, cold brick of the building meet her back. Ford pressed his chest against hers and claimed her mouth with his.

At the first touch of his tongue sliding against hers in an almost brutal way, she instantly felt marked by him, claimed in the most elemental of ways by his dominance and severity. It was an act of possession, one of wild, uninhibited lust, and it was everything she wanted and needed.

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He broke away, his mouth wet and slightly swollen from the force of his kiss, and stared into her eyes.

“Say it again.”

She licked her lips, tasted his flavor coating them, and nearly moaned. “What?” That lone word was low, but he heard her nonetheless. His cock was hard and pressed against her belly. It was like a living entity, and she knew she had never felt anything as large as what was between Ford Wylde’s legs.

“Say my name again.” Ford lowered his face to hers until his lips brushed lightly against Talia’s. “When you say my name, it makes me think of my cock buried deep inside you.” He dragged his tongue along her bottom lip then whispered, “It makes me think of you screaming my name as you come all over me.”

Oh. My. God. He was going to have her climaxing from his filthy words alone. He kissed her again, hard and fast and so very alpha that her toes curled and her heart raced. The noises from the bar filtered around them, but he had them strategically placed so they were situated against the side of the building where the shadows wrapped around them and no prying eyes could see.

Ford Wylde gave himself to her, but it wasn’t soft and romantic, but hard and demanding, and wanting everything she was. Filth and drunks surrounded them, but right here, right now, it was just the two of them, and nothing else mattered. He ground himself against her belly, and even through the rough denim of his jeans, she felt him swell even further.

“When I get you under me, I’m going to explore every inch of your body with my tongue. There isn’t going to be any part of your flesh that I don’t memorize.”

Her pussy was so unbelievably wet, and her pulse beat in her clit. She couldn’t lie and not say she didn’t like being pressed against the side of a building with his dirty words filtering around her, but what she wanted the most was to actually have him deliver on all these promises. He gave her one last deep, penetrating kiss and grabbed her hand.

They made their way briskly to his truck, and after he helped her in and was seated in the driver side, they headed down the road. They didn’t speak, but the heat and electricity that filled the interior wrapped around her in an intimate, scalding way.

Twenty minutes later and they were pulling onto a small dirt road. Another five minutes after that and she was starting to have some serious doubts on what she was doing.

There was no doubt she wanted him, but this was starting to seem like a very dumb move on her part, especially as darkness clawed at the truck like an old friend, and they drove even deeper into the heavily lined forest.

Yes, she might have made a mistake.

8

“You’re thinking too hard.” Talia looked over at Ford, and he grinned but didn’t take his eyes off the road. “I promise you have nothing to worry about. Your animal trusts me, yeah?” He pulled the truck in front of a modest-sized cabin and turned off the engine.

He shifted his body so he partially faced her and waited for her to respond.

Thick trees surrounded the cabin, and even though the sun had already set, she could see the beautiful craftsmanship. “Give your brother a call and tell him you made it safe and sound... although I doubt he’d really like hearing that.” He gave her a very wolfish grin, and she felt her unease disappear

Yes, her fox trusted him implicitly, and she trusted her fox. She may have some natural doubts, but she had her animal instincts, and they were telling her that Ford Wylde was not dangerous—well, not to her anyway.

She gave her brother a quick call, which only had him cursing and telling her he should have made her stay put. After assuring him she was fine and then quickly getting off the phone, she glanced at Ford through the corner of her eye. He was watching her, but she couldn’t gauge what he was thinking by his expression.

“Come on, little fox.” Ford climbed out of the truck and made quick work at rounding the front of the truck and coming to the passenger side. He pulled the door open, and before she could get out, Ford had his hands around her waist and was hauling her out of the truck.

Her bear shifter pulled her right up against his body and with purposeful movements let her body slide along his until her feet hit the ground.

She wasn’t small by any means, but when she was next to Ford, feeling all his bulging muscles press against her softness, she felt tiny and feminine. He was strong, virile, masculine, and fierce. He was everything she envisioned in a male, and she was about to have him.

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With her panties unbearably wet and rubbing with every move she made, Talia shifted on her feet, trying to ease the ache. He took her face in his hands, and without anything being said, he kissed her senseless.

For long, drugging seconds, all he did was move his tongue along hers, making her drunk from his flavor until she didn't know where he ended and she began.

Breaking the kiss then grabbing her hand, he led them up the three steps it took to reach the porch. He pushed the door open, and as soon as she stepped inside, he had her in his arms, his hands on her ass, and was striding down a hallway. It was like he couldn't get enough of her mouth, because his lips were right back on hers, taking them like he owned them, like he owned her.

He spun her around until he had her pressed against the wall. Talia felt like she was back at the bar, being possessed by him. The feel of the tips of his fingers skimming along where her shirt had ridden up sent shivers throughout her whole body.

She could feel his nails lengthen into claws, pressing into her bare skin with the threat of breaking her flesh. Her nipples were hard as hell and felt as though they would tear right through her shirt. Seconds later, the sound of her shirt being ripped pierced the sexual haze of him taking her mouth, and then the tattered remains fell to the ground around her.

He set her on the ground, and before she could even blink, he had her pants unbuttoned, unzipped, and pushed down her thighs. Talia stared down at him as he kneeled before her and pulled her pants from her body, tossing them aside.

She stood there in her bra and panties, not caring that she was overweight, because this male caressed every part of her like he couldn't get enough.

“God, I could touch every inch of you, and I would never get enough.” His mouth was on her thigh, and he was dragging his tongue up her leg, over her rounded belly, between her thighs, and to her neck. She was liquid beneath his touch, but ready for so much more. He moved his tongue along the base of her throat and licked and nipped at her pulse point. She was sick of talking and sick of petting. She wanted him to fuck her until she couldn't walk, until all she could feel was him still inside her even when he wasn't.

He gripped the back of her thighs, right under the crease of her ass, and lifted as if she weighed nothing. Wrapping her legs around his waist and running the tip of her nose up the side of his neck, she inhaled deeply and groaned at the scent of him.

He smelled like the trees and wilderness that surrounded them, like the wild animal that resided inside him. Her red fox could tell his bear was right below the surface, ready to take her like there was nothing he wanted to do more at the moment.

The room was dark, and when he bumped into something and made a grunting noise, she couldn't help but laugh. The rough scrape of his stubble along her cheek had her laughter dying and her eyes rolling in the back of her head. The slight discomfort spurred her pleasure, and she wanted more.

“I want it rough, Ford. I want to feel you on every part of my body.” A gasp left her when she felt his canines scrape along her shoulder. He growled, a true bear-like sound that had her tightening her thighs around his waist. His dick was hard between her thighs, hot and thick, and she wanted it inside her now.

“Fuck, Talia. What are you doing to me?” He sounded pained as he murmured against her neck. Was he having second thoughts? The feel of his jean-clad erection

pressed between her thighs told her he was right there with her, but he sounded as though he was unsure. “I want this, but this is all new to me.”

She gripped the sides of his face and lifted his head up. The room was shrouded in shadows, but she could see a lot of emotions passing across his face. The prominent one was this darkness that seemed to take over him, tightening his body and having a flash of self-hatred taking control.

Her fox could sense it, and her human could as well, and that meant he wasn't trying to conceal it... or he couldn't control it.

“I just want to feel you tonight.” Talia didn't want to say the next part, but knew she had to make him realize his fears of her wanting more, whether she actually did or didn't, were unfounded. Just looking at him told her he wasn't the type of guy to have something meaningful, not when he was clearly so hurt by his past. “I just want you to touch me. I'm not asking for anything more.” The sound that came from him was rugged, but she knew he wouldn't deny either of them what was inevitable.

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“Shit.” The clouds of his inner turmoil passed along his face like a raging storm. She was set on the bed and watched with unleashed anticipation and arousal as he all but tore his own clothing from his body, tossed them aside, and grabbed a condom. His cock was huge, long, and thick.

Even in the darkness, she could see the tip dotted with a bead of pre-cum. The fact that he was just as frantic for this as she was had a powerful surge of energy moving through her.

He sheathed his massive erection, and for several long moments, all he did was stare at her, spread out on his bed like some kind of offering. She knew what she looked like: her thighs spread out, her pussy on display, and her breasts thrust out.

“Hell, Talia. I am going to take you so fucking hard.” He was staring between her thighs and ran his hand over his mouth like he was about to lose it. “Get on your belly, baby.”

Her heart was thumping so damn hard it was almost impossible to hear him. When she was on her belly, Ford gripped her ankles, yanked her roughly to the edge of the bed, and gripped her inner thighs right before he thrust them open. The tips of her toes touched the ground, and then he was ripping her panties from her body.

She couldn’t breathe, couldn’t think as he slapped his palms on the mounds of her ass so hard the sting traveled up her back.

“God, your fucking ass was made for my cock.” His words were so rough, so hoarse, that it was like he was more bear than man at this moment. He lifted his hand, and she

only had a split second to realize what he was doing before he did it. He slapped her ass again, and again, and again, until the blood rushed violently to the surface.

Ford alternated between her cheeks and soon started working his erotic spanking down the back of her thighs. Never had Talia experienced this, but she couldn't lie and say it didn't make her wetter than anything before. The spankings seemed to go on and on, and Ford's low, husky whispers seemed to fuel him on even more. "Your skin is so fucking hot and red from my hands." His lips replaced where he had just spanked her ass, and his tongue moved along her deliciously abused flesh as if washing the sting away.

Cool air toyed along the crease of her ass when he spread her cheeks open, and her heart stuttered in her chest when that chilled air was replaced with his warm, humid breath. Oh God, what was he going to do?

She didn't have time to question further, because Ford's tongue was moving along the slit of her pussy, over the opening of her body, and between the globes of her ass. At the first flick of his tongue and mouth over that tight hole, she stiffened.

"Shh, baby. I'm gonna make it feel so fucking good for you. Just surrender this part of yourself to me. Trust me." He flattened his tongue and licked her again. "Just trust me to make you feel good."

She relaxed against the mattress and forced herself to just feel what he was doing, and not think about the idea of where his mouth was. This seemed taboo and unnatural, but then she just closed her eyes and let the rhythmic flicking and lapping motion of him against the area of her body no man had ever touched wash through.

When she finally let go, surrendered to him, and let herself enjoy what Ford was doing, a sense of euphoria filled her.

“Yeah, that’s fucking it. Let go, Talia.” He curled his fingers into her ass, his claws digging into her flesh and causing a surge of pain to mix with the pleasure.

He moved away from her far too soon, but before Talia could moan in her disappointment, Ford’s chest was pressed against her back, and his mouth was kissing a trail over her shoulder blades. The thick length of him pressed against the ridiculously soaked area between her thighs, and she spread her legs open wider, hoping he would take the hint and ease this torture.

When he curled his hips forward, his shaft parted her labia. A strangled groan left him but was muffled against her back. He slowly started to thrust his hips forward, and although there was no penetration, the motion of his cock rocking against her pussy had her clit swelling and the promise of orgasm swiftly approaching.

Everything was done so precisely, so masterfully, that it was a fluid movement of his hips moving against hers. Slow, steady thrusting had her gushing in need for him, wanting him inside her body already.

The tip of his dick bumped her clit over and over again until the promise of climaxing was right there. He didn’t stop though, and instead moved harder, quicker, and then she was exploding so powerfully her vision clouded with pleasure.

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The gasping, strangled noises that filled the room were coming from her, but she couldn't find humiliation in them.

Ford grunted, cursed something foul, and then right before her pleasure diminished, he was flipping her on her back, gripping her wrists in one of his hands, and thrusting them above her head. The muscles of his biceps bulged and stood in stark contrast.

At that moment, as he stared down at her with an intense and wicked look on his face, she felt totally bared and vulnerable under him.

Spreading his knees wider apart caused her thighs to open even farther. With his free hand, he took hold of the root of his dick, aligned it at the opening of her pussy, and, never breaking eye contact, shoved his cock hard and deep into her in one thrust.

Mouth parting, eyes widening, and the sense of being completely filled had euphoria washing through her. She wasn't a virgin, but she sure as hell felt like one.

The pleasure/pain of having Ford buried inside her was the most overpowering sensation Talia had ever felt.

"Fuck, baby." He groaned and closed his eyes. Hips jerking and pushing him impossibly farther into her pussy, a cry of ecstasy left her. She felt another massive orgasm building inside her despite the one she had just seconds before. She curled her fingers into the palm of her hands, wishing she could hold onto him and dig her nails into his flesh. "I've never felt anything so tight, or hot, or so damn good." Sweat started to bead along his brow, and he grunted when she clenched her inner muscles around him.

He started to slowly pull out of her pussy. Right before he slipped completely out, Ford shoved back in, hard. Crying out from the agony and ecstasy the act caused, she knew he had ruined her. In just two short strokes, she would never be the same and would always compare every other sexual experience with this one moment.

She realized the fucked-up nature of that, but when a male like Ford took control, and Lord was he taking control of her, nothing was ever the same.

He started to thrust inside her, filling her up and leaving her empty. Over and over, he did this, bringing her to the edge of climax then denying her the end result. Talia wasn't above begging for him to give it to her, to ease her suffering, but he was a sadist intent on torturing her with pleasure, and she was happy to claim the title of masochist.

“God, I’m going to fuck you so good, Talia.”

Shit, wasn't he doing that already? He started slamming into her and retreating. In and out. In and out. He let go of her wrists and grabbed her hips to keep her stationary, and then Ford delivered on his promise to fuck her good.

The root of his shaft rubbed along her clit every time he slammed back into her, sending her closer and closer to coming, but as if he knew what was about to happen and just when she would break over the edge, he slowed, and the pleasure waned.

It was a never-ending crescendo of torture, and she wanted it to end in the worst way. Talia wanted to feel his dick swell even further inside her, filling every available inch of her pussy until there was no part of her he wasn't touching.

She thrashed her head back and forth, braced her feet on the mattress, and lifted up to drive him deeper in her pussy. He growled deep in his throat and pushed back until he was sitting on his haunches.

He placed his hands on her inner thighs and curled his fingers into her flesh until she felt the pain that would no doubt leave bruises. She wanted it though, wanted his mark of ownership on her. That realization was shocking and intense.

“Harder, Ford. God, fuck me harder.” The words spilled from her, and she was surprised by her own wantonness. The low rumble that came from his chest was so powerful, so loud, that the vibrations slammed into her core and had her clenching around him.

He started pummeling into her with so much force she couldn’t breathe, couldn’t grasp the severity of his ministrations, and couldn’t handle the thought of only doing this once. She forced her eyes to stay open and watch in rapt awe as Ford stared at where his cock was sliding in and out of her pussy.

“Your cunt is so pink, wet, and stretched so tightly around my dick.” Sweat glistened off his body and slid down the hard planes of his muscular abdomen. She wanted to sit up and run her tongue along each individual droplet until the flavor of him was embedded inside her.

He pressed his thumb against her clit, and she exploded instantly. Biting her lip and tasting blood when her teeth sliced into the tender flesh, she relished the flash of pain. He continued to rub the nub back and forth until she pleaded with him to stop, told him it was too much, too sensitive.

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In a move quicker than she could have ever anticipated, Ford had her flipped over on her belly again, a pillow shoved under her hips, and had her ass popped out in the air. He palmed her ass, murmured how good she had tasted, and that he would never have enough.

But his touch was gone, and before she could miss the feel of him, he had his cock shoved back inside her pussy.

His hands on her hips were painful as he pulled out and pushed back in, but she met him thrust for thrust. Her inner fox bristled in excitement, and her claws unsheathed and tore into the mattress, shredding the sheets and having stuffing puff out around her in a frenzied rush. The noises both of them made were guttural, animalistic, and raw.

They were honest and true and full of so much wild emotion that she could see her fox emerging and letting this bear claim her. As strange as a coupling like that sounded, it also seemed so perfect and right.

“Christ, Red.” The fact that Ford called her the nickname she had heard only her closest loved ones say to her spread warmth in her chest. “I’m going to come, baby. Fuck, I’m going to come so fucking hard.” It was just those erotic words that set off yet another orgasm inside her, the third one in such a short time that it seemed unreal.

Her inner muscles tightened involuntarily and caused a loud, glass-breaking roar to leave him.

He slammed into her three times, and when he bottomed out in her and came long

and hard, she felt the world tilt. Talia actually felt him swell further inside her, felt the pulsing of him emptying his balls into her body, and buried her face in the sheets as she cried out in ecstasy.

It was an experience she had never felt before, one she would never forget.

The sheets smelled like him, and she clenched around him again, her body heating all over again even though she climaxed so hard. What was it about him that made her feel so off-balance? The heavy weight of his chest pressing against her back had the air leaving her.

He got up from the bed and was gone for a few minutes, but she was too lethargic to move.

When he returned, he wrapped his thick arm around her waist and hauled her against his sweaty chest.

“You’re not going anywhere, baby.” He kissed the top of her head, and the act seemed far more intimate than what they had just done. “That was.... Holy fuck, I don’t even know how to explain it. I have never felt anything like that in my life.” The way he said the words seemed to mean something much deeper, but she didn’t question him or contemplate it.

She would enjoy what time she had with him, because she too had never felt anything like what they just shared.

It wasn’t just about two people having sex. Her animal had risen to the surface for the first time since she started having sex, and she had felt his bear right there as well. The touch of his claws on her skin, so close to breaking the surface of her flesh, had felt like a cataclysm of sensations.

The scent of the predator that Ford had been primal and carnal, feral and savage. He tightened his hold on her, and even though they had just gotten done having mind-blowing sex, he was still semi-hard.

Being embraced by him had Talia feeling safe, protected, and had her drifting off in the warm, powerful embrace of this bear.

9

Ford lifted a piece of lumber over his shoulder and carried it over to the two-story home Wylde Construction was currently building. The development consisted of twenty-four houses in a three-block radius, and they had three homes left to finish.

It was hot, nearing ninety degrees, and all he could think about was Talia.

It had been three days since he dropped her off at some boutique in town, per her request, and he couldn't get the little red fox out of his head. The night he spent with her had been raw and like nothing he had ever felt.

The darkness that had been so much a part of him for the last ten years had vanished the moment he touched her, kissed her, and buried himself deep inside her.

He couldn't just have one night with her, not when she made him feel alive and wanting more out of life. He wanted her and only her, and that revelation was a blow to the carefully erected wall he had built around himself. How had he fallen so hard for someone in just a short amount of time?

His reaction to what was only supposed to be a one-night stand was not like him at all. Working constantly until he was exhausted hadn't helped either. Although he wanted her, he was also scared shitless of what he was feeling. His bear was constantly on the prowl inside him, growling and wanting to emerge and hunt her

down like a predator finding its prey.

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Why he had this infatuation with a female who would be leaving Sweet Water was beyond him, and why did it hurt so damn bad at the thought of her going away? He thought back to his big brother Charlie and wondered if this was how he felt when he found Ary.

He hadn't spoken to his brothers about this, but maybe he should. Maybe then he could make sense of why he felt so unbalanced. He thought fucking her that one time would ease this pressure inside him, but it turned out it made him just want her that much more.

He was a fiend when it came to Talia, and she was the only drug that could quench his insatiable addiction.

He set the lumber against the side of the building and went back for more. Sometimes, he stayed behind the scenes and worked with the architects on the blueprints, but the majority of the time, he did manual labor, trying to wear his body and mind out so much he just passed out.

But in just the three days since he met Talia, he needed more than just manual labor to help ease the frantic feeling inside him.

No amount of working tired him. In fact, he seemed even more wound up after a hard day's work. It was as if he couldn't control his bear, like the fucker wanted out to do whatever the hell it wanted to.

"Hey, you okay, Ford?" Bram jogged up next to him. They both picked up a load of lumber and made their way back to the frame.

“Yeah, I’m good.” He could sense Bram’s stare but didn’t bother looking over at his youngest brother. After setting the wood down next to the first load and wiping the sweat from his face, he finally looked at Bram. His brother sported a nasty-looking black eye and a busted lip. “I should be asking you if you’re okay.”

Bram grimaced but waved off Ford’s question.

“Nah, I’m good. Aside from the fact that I got drunk and then decided to fight.”

Ford lifted his eyebrow and stared at Bram. “Is this one of those underground ones or just a random bar brawl?”

“Random drunken fight at Slater’s, but what the fuck ever. The guy was asking for a beat-down anyway when he thought he had bigger balls than me and decided to call me a pussy in front of his girl.”

They headed back over for another round of lumber. It was no secret that Bram fought... a lot. The youngest Wylde bear had a nasty temper, but it was more because his bear controlled him more than his human side. The underground shifter fights weren’t a secret in Sweet Water, but no one, the law included, fucked with them.

Besides, Ford hated to think how his brother would be faring if he didn’t fight and let off all those fucking animalistic tendencies he carried around inside himself.

It wasn’t uncommon for shifters to get into underground cage fighting. Letting their inner animals out to do some temporary destruction helped to ease the built-up adrenalin, testosterone, and overall wildness that resided in all male shifters.

Blood was shed, bones were broken, and fur flew. It was a spectacle that got all the males in the surrounding area rowdy for the bloody sport.

“You want to get drunk tonight, maybe pick up some chicks?” Bram wiped his brow and shielded his eyes with his forearm from the sun. “I need to get laid, that or I need to find a fight, and as you can see—” He pointed to his face. “—the last time I got drunk and in a fight, it sucked big balls. I’d rather fuck.”

“I don’t think you need to fuck either with your face looking beat to hell.”

Bram scoffed. “You should see the motherfucker who started it all. I bet his ass don’t come around me ever again.” Bram cracked his knuckles and rolled his neck on his shoulders. “In fact, just talking about that shit is getting me pissed all over again.” Ford could sense Bram’s bear rising up and knew a change of subject needed to be introduced or his little brother would end up destroying something.

“So yeah, you up for going out with me or what?” Bram ran his hand over his sweat-soaked hair, clearly waiting for Ford to answer. Banging some random chick had his dick shriveling up. All he could think about was the image of Talia’s voluptuous body, of her big breasts shaking from the force of fucking her, and of her lips parted and her breathy moans spilling out.

He had never had a female who left such a lasting impression on him, and never had he wanted a second chance with them.

She was an oddity to him, but something he wanted to explore more deeply. This little redhead changed everything in the course of a few hours. Fuck, this wasn’t good, and he needed to cleanse her from his mind, because obsessing about her like this was bordering on fucked-up.

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“I don’t want a random fuck, but I could use a stiff drink.”

Fortunately, Bram didn’t question him on his lack of female company, and instead slapped him on the back in approval.

Maybe getting drunk would do him some good, but the more he thought about it, the more a good fight sounded like an ideal energy reliever.

10

Dylan circled Ford, his muscles bulging as they prepared to shift.

After they had gotten off work, they headed over to Slater’s, the small hole-in-the-wall bar that held the underground shifter cage fighting in their basement.

Now, here was Ford, standing in the dank basement with a dripping pipe running above him, the scent of mildew filling the musty, damp air, and the muted noise of the music above them.

Ford pulled his T-shirt over his head and tossed it to Bram, who stood on the sidelines waiting his turn to throw some punches. Dylan, the lion shifter, cracked his neck and then his knuckles. He grinned at Ford.

There was enough alcohol moving through his veins that even if the lion shifter got a hit on him, he would be too numb to feel it.

He had drowned himself in liquor once again, hoping to rid himself of these feelings

for Talia, because frankly, they were almost too much for his shattered mind and heart to take in. Of course, all of that alcohol only managed to make him want her even more.

“I’m gonna fuck you up, bear.” Dylan ripped his shirt off, took his jeans off, and took a step toward Ford.

Ford was ready for this. He had Talia on his mind, and that was what needed to change, because he needed to get rid of all this fucking energy she caused within him.

He let the shift take over, felt his bear move through his body until his muscles stretched, his bones broke and realigned, and his bear pushed his human to the side.

He stood to his full ten-foot height and stared down at the now shifted Dylan. The lion paced back and forth, and even though Ford was now in full bear mode, he still felt the effects of the alcohol rolling through his system. He knew he could easily take a lion, no doubt about it, but he wanted to feel pain.

Ford needed his mind off other things, ones that had him wanting to keep a certain foxy female by his side. Those were ideas he certainly didn’t want to play with, and so the best way to deal with it was fight like there was no tomorrow.

They charged forward and met in the center. Teeth tore into flesh, claws ripped into muscles, and blood sprayed out like a geyser coating the dull gray cement floor a brilliant red. Dylan dug his claws into Ford’s belly, and he let out a roar of pain and relief. Ford had fought on a few different occasions over the last ten years, needing that pain to numb his mind.

He couldn’t explain this feeling inside him, but it was as if he was coming unhinged and about to combust.

And it was all because of this one female. It didn't make any sense, and all he could think about was Charlie and his now pregnant mate.

His brother had been so unstable when he met Ary, and Ford had a suspicion he might be going through the same situation as his older brother. Could it be that his bear recognized Talia as his mate?

Dylan bit his shoulder, and Ford swiped his paw out, throwing the lion to his side. He might have wanted to feel pain, but his thoughts were making him vulnerable and look like a pussy who couldn't handle himself against a lion. Tilting his head back and roaring, he charged Dylan.

The crowd that surrounded them was loud and rowdy, calling out for more violence, wanting to see them tear each other apart. It was exhilarating and painful, and to Ford's disappointment didn't lessen his thoughts when they concerned Talia. He let his confusion, anger, arousal, and every other emotion he felt for Talia wash through him and defeat the lion.

When it was all said and done and Dylan limped off to lick his wounds, Ford looked around, needing another contender. Bram stepped up, placed his hand on Ford, which only had his bear rounding on his youngest brother and growling. Bram held up both hands. Ford forced his bear into submission.

He was being uncontrollable and needed to calm the fuck down. He took a deep breath and changed back into his human form. It was the same bone-snapping, muscle-tearing sensation.

Bram handed Ford his shirt and pants, and he quickly put them on, covering his now bloody and torn flesh. "Fuck, man, you were intense out there."

The crowd was still going wild as a tiger and panther shifter took the center stage.

Ford was done for right now, ready to pass out and get his bearings. He wanted to talk to Charlie, see if what he was feeling was his confirmation on Talia being his mate, even though he was pretty damn sure that was what in the hell was going on.

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Running a hand through his hair, which was wet with sweat and blood, he let out a heavy sigh. Yeah, he was pretty fucking sure he had just found his mate, and even if there was a part of him that feared what came with that, he knew his bear wouldn't let her go.

Hell, his human wouldn't let her go either, but the thought of claiming another female was like him stepping off the end of the world and hoping his feet would touch land.

He never thought he would find his mate. The question he had for himself was: was he going to fight his bear and let the darkness that had been so much a part of himself for so long take him deeper to despair, or give in and let himself experience love again?

Fuck, that was the million-dollar question.

11

Passing out was not on the list of what he wanted to do. He needed some advice, and his older brother was the smartest male he knew. Charlie would help him sort this shit out, even if Ford had never been completely honest with what had gone down with Mina.

They left Slater's, and he made a call to Charlie.

After talking to him briefly, they headed over to their older brother's cabin. Ford needed a shower and sleep, but he was more worried about getting the confusion out of his head.

Now, an hour later, they sat around Charlie's dining room table, a bottle of whiskey sitting in the center of the table and shot glasses in front of them.

Ford and Bram sure as hell didn't need any more alcohol, but what the fuck, maybe some liquid courage would make him confess this easier. Charlie and Bram stared at him, both with a little bit of anticipation on their faces of what he would say.

It was late as fuck, and Ary was sleeping upstairs. Ford felt guilty for coming to Charlie's at this hour, but he needed his brother's interpretation on what the hell was going on. So that was what he did, just spilled everything.

The reason he and Mina broke up, the darkness that consumed him for so fucking long, and then everything he felt when he met Talia.

For ten years, he'd kept that shit with Mina buried deep inside, but then this little red fox had come around and all hell had broken loose inside him. After all of that, his brothers just sat there staring at him with mixed emotions.

"Everything feels so fucked up inside me." Ford took a sip of his whiskey, not really wanting to throw that shit back to further numb what he felt. He waited not so patiently to hear what his brothers had to say, specifically Charlie, since he knew his older brother had felt this edginess inside him as well.

Bram and Charlie stared at him, and although Bram looked somewhat shocked, Charlie appeared thoughtful.

"Shit, man, I didn't know the Mina situation had gone down like that." Bram scrubbed a hand over his jaw. "You should have told us. We would have helped you through it."

Ford knew this, but he had been a coward and kept everything inside and to himself.

He looked at Charlie. "I'm really sorry about Mina and the fucked-up shit she did, Ford." Charlie looked thoughtful and concerned. "Bram's right; you should have told us. We would have helped you get through it and made sure that ugly darkness didn't consume you. Shit, I feel like an accessory to all the crap that happened with you. Before I met Ary, I pushed you guys to be wild, not settle down, and live life how you wanted and without looking back, but that shit backfired." Charlie looked at Ford and then at Bram. Ford knew his older brother was addressing Bram's need to fight constantly.

"I can say that I felt like you, to a point, when I found Ary. You and your bear have found your mate." Charlie's grim look turned into one of brotherly love. "Don't run from it, but embrace the feelings going through you. You have found your mate, Ford, and that is one of the greatest gifts of all."

Ford was no good for a female, for a mate. He had done a whole lot of shitty stuff in his life, things he wasn't proud of, and things he just wanted to forget.

"Well, shit." Bram ran a hand through his hair and looked between them. "Looks like I'll be the lone man out." He leaned back and linked his hands behind his head. "That's all right with me, 'cause I'm not looking to settle down anyway. I kind of like having a choice on who I fuck."

Leave it to Bram to try to put a little humor into their tense, serious conversation. Charlie snorted and poured them another round of shots.

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“All I can say, Ford, is don’t fight it. Get rid of that hatred you have buried deep inside. Let your bear roam free and experience it with you, and just be glad you found your female. There are a whole lot of shifters who spend their lives trying to find what you stumbled upon. I tried fighting it with Ary, and it didn’t help. In fact, it made me want her all the more. I felt unstable and on edge. All I wanted to do was claim her, and there was a point when I worried I would be too rough with her and that my bear would take over too aggressively.” Ford took in his brother’s words. “Now, I look back, and I can’t see my life without her, and I am damn glad she wants me. The baby will be here in a few months, and all I keep thinking about is I’m one lucky bastard to have her accept me.”

They threw back their shots, and Ford leaned back. He knew deep down he couldn’t and wouldn’t fight the need to be with Talia, but there was that uncertainty he always carried, and he hated that ten years later he was still holding onto these unnecessary emotions.

“You need to forget about Mina and how she ruined you, and focus on the future, Ford.”

He looked at Bram.

“I can’t wait until you find your mate, Bram. Man, I’m going to give you such a hard time ‘cause I already know you’ll be crawling on your hands and knees to please her.” Charlie’s words had Ford laughing, even though he wasn’t feeling very amused at the moment. He thought about Talia and everything Charlie said.

“Charlie?” The sound of a very tired Ary pierced the air. Charlie was out of his seat

and by Ary as she came walking into the kitchen. She wore a T-shirt and a pair of pajama bottoms. The swell of her belly was evident, and Ford found himself smiling at the prospect of being an uncle. It still stunned him that Charlie was going to be a father.

He'd never thought his eldest brother would settle down, but when it came to Ary, he was protective and extremely territorial. Ford could see Charlie's bear rise to the surface every time his mate was near, and Ford knew he was the same way with Talia.

He felt the need to be with her, protect her from any assholes who wanted to fuck with her, and make sure she always felt safe.

Charlie stood and walked toward his mate, and Ford watched with a pang in his chest as Charlie embraced Ary.

Feeling like he was intruding on their personal moment, Ford stood and motioned Bram to follow. They said their goodbyes, and when they were in the truck and headed down the road, Ford knew he wouldn't deny him or his bear what they really wanted, and that was his little redhead, Talia Landon.

Fuck his demons and hang-ups, and fuck Mina for making him feel for all these years that he wasn't worthy of claiming his mate.

12

Talia gritted her teeth for the fifth time in the last ten minutes. Mina, with her haughty attitude, was busy scolding the barista on the fact that they didn't top her cappuccino with nutmeg.

She turned away from the human who thought she was so much better than everyone

else and looked around the coffee shop. It was hard not to think about the first time she stepped in here.

She had been humiliated over her coffee spill, but then she had met Ford and fallen instantly in lust. She had thought maybe being with him sexually might have eased her arousal for him, but it had the opposite effect.

Here she was in a constant state of desire, unable to get the image of him over her out of her mind, thrusting deep and hard and sending her over the edge multiple times.

Her clit throbbed, her nipples beaded, and she cursed her body for having this kind of reaction to a man she had a one-night stand with, and that was what it had been.

They hadn't exchanged numbers, and he hadn't asked to see her again, so she needed to get it through her head that there wasn't going to be another time with Ford Wylde, as crappy as that was.

"God, I swear these people are still as incompetent as ever in this town." Mina took a sip of her cappuccino and made a face. "It certainly isn't from Marco's, but it's going to have to do." They sat at one of the small tables, and Mina pulled out a very thick leather book. If not for Luke asking her to go with Mina today, she would have been somewhere else, somewhere that didn't feel like that seventh level of hell. "Okay, so I know Kimberly should have been setting this up, but I have her working on something more important, and I figure you really aren't doing anything anyway."

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Talia gritted her teeth and counted backward from ten. “Excuse me—” Before she could finally tell Mina a piece of her mind, the bitch cut her off with a wave of her hand.

“Okay, so here it is.” Mina flipped through the book until she got to the page that had HONEYMOON sprawled in big black letters. “So, I need you make out an itinerary for the honeymoon. I want to make sure we don’t miss anything once we arrive in France.” Apparently, Kimberly, Mina’s second-in-command, who was nearly as bad as Talia’s soon to be bitch-in-law, was far too superior to do the grunt work.

She looked at the book and then back at Mina. Was this bitch for real? “You want me to make a list of all the things you plan on sightseeing while in France?” It appeared Talia was the lowest on the totem pole and therefore got to do the shit jobs. And who in the hell needed someone else to plan out their sightseeing?

“Well, I mean I know your schedule is pretty much free, what with you out of college and not working.” The pleasantly condescending tone that Mina gave her, coupled with the smile that had “bitch” written all over it, had Talia snapping. Oh hell no.

“Oh. My. God.” Mina’s breathy, almost dreamy words had Talia closing her mouth. Mina’s gaze was over Talia’s shoulder, and curiosity had her looking at what had seemingly changed Mina to a love-struck teenager. At first, all she saw was a younger human male kissing a young woman, but when those two moved to the side, her heart stopped.

Ford and another man who looked strikingly similar to him stepped into the café.

Of course he looked exactly the same, so damn sexy and his alpha bear pouring from him. He was speaking to the man he had come in with, but she watched in rapt awe as he stopped, lifted his head, and inhaled deeply.

Everything else faded as his gaze scanned the coffee shop before finally settling on her. For a long moment, all they did was stare at each other, and Talia's intense arousal rose up like a raging wildfire.

There was a flash of heat behind his bright-blue eyes, and she knew his lust was just as strong as hers. It didn't seem like only three days ago that he dropped her off, because everything rushed back, and she found herself back in his room with his sweat-slicked body over hers and his dick buried deep inside her.

Blinking a few times to clear her mind, she took in his face, one that was cut and bruised, and yet she hadn't even noticed right away.

He moved his gaze away from hers, and a dark expression crossed his face as he focused on something over her head. The man beside him shifted on his feet and leaned in to murmur something to Ford. He shook his head forcefully twice and waved off the other man.

Ford moved closer to her, and Talia's palms started to sweat. She swore she could smell his bear, that wild and untamed scent that drove her absolutely mad. Several other shifters in the coffee shop stopped what they were doing, moved out of his way, and stared at Ford approaching her.

The humans might not be able to smell that Ford was dangerously close to shifting, or that he was aroused and angry all in the same breath, but every shifter in there, including her, was drunk off it. It was all she could smell and feel move through her body since she had been with him.

He stopped in front of her, and she could see the vibrant-blue of his eyes. He held her gaze, and a flash of darkness from his bear starting to emerge turned the almost unreal color black. Slowly standing, they stared at each other, but as she opened her mouth to say “hello” or maybe even “I haven’t stopped thinking about you since we parted ways,” Mina spoke from behind her.

“Ford.” The way Mina said his name reminded Talia of a lover’s embrace. She took a step to the side so she could see her, and the lust pouring off the other female was potent and suffocating. “It’s been a long time.”

Mina had since gotten up from her seat and now stood right beside her. She turned back and looked at Ford, but her powerful bear was no longer looking at her and instead had his full attention on Mina, the indifference clear on his face.

Talia looked between her brother’s fiancée and the male who had consumed her so ferociously she couldn’t even think straight, then everything clicked into place.

Holy shit.

Their reaction to each other, although subtle, had Talia’s fox bristling. Could it be that this was the person Ford was talking about getting married? What were the odds?

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The very thought sickened her, and her stomach roiled. Mina took another step forward and now stood directly in front of Talia, blocking Ford's wide, muscular chest from her view.

"God, it has been far too long." Mina's voice was soft, but there was no mistaking the longing that was laced in the words. If Talia could sense it, no doubt Ford did as well. "You wouldn't believe how much I've missed you." Ford looked uncomfortable, but all Talia could smell was... disinterest.

Talia should say something, anything, but it was like the words refused to come forth. She cleared her throat and looked down, suddenly feeling very uncomfortable and out of place.

Yes, there was no doubt in her mind they had been together at some point in their lives. The scents coming from Mina were too clear to be anything else.

This was the human that was to marry her brother in just a week's time, yet here she was, standing before Ford with so much lust pouring out of her it thickened the air around them like a heavy, strangling blanket.

Talia lifted her gaze once more and saw the man who had come with Ford rubbing the back of his neck as if he too sensed the uncomfortable feeling that surrounded everyone. He still stood right by the door, and it was as if he refused to come any closer.

His face was also pretty beat up, with a healing black eye and a cut above his cheek. Had the two males been fighting each other? That was really the least of her worries,

but right now, she needed the distraction.

Feeling Mina's stare, Talia turned back toward the human. The burning question at the forefront of Talia's mind was, Who is Mina to Ford?

"I'm going to need some privacy, Talia," said Mina.

Talia locked her jaw, her anger, hurt, and discomfort a violent wave inside her. Talia looked back at Ford and was stunned to see him staring at her with so much raw... possession that it actually had her taking a step back.

"No," Ford said with so much dominance in that one word that Talia felt it to her bones. "She doesn't need to go anywhere, and you and I have nothing to talk about, Mina."

Mina scoffed. "Ford, you and I go way back."

"I said there isn't anything that needs discussed, especially not anything that would require Talia leaving."

Talia shook her head, needing air, needing to get away from this seriously awkward situation. "Um, yeah, I'm gonna go."

Ford opened his mouth to protest. She felt that down to her bones. But she gave him a smile, a shake of her head, and turned to leave before he could stop her. And she knew he would.

Talia grabbed her purse. Keeping her gaze trained to the floor, she got the hell out of there. She passed the other bear shifter who'd come in with Ford, and now that she was close enough that the scent of coffee beans didn't fill her nose, she could tell they were brothers.

She watched as Ford's brother's nostrils flared, sensed some kind of realization come over him, but Talia didn't stop. She let her feet carry her right outside the café and down the sidewalk until she was far enough away that she could actually take in a deep breath.

She knew what she sensed from Mina, could tell the woman still wanted Ford. Luke needed to know.

Talia darted behind a smaller building and leaned against the side of it. Closing her eyes, she tried to rein in her emotions. She shouldn't have this kind of reaction to Ford, not only because they were in essence virtual strangers, but because they were also not right for each other.

She never considered herself a strong female, not physically or emotionally. She considered herself the introverted and quiet type. But then there was Ford Wylde, a male who had her pushing all her reservations aside. She had gone home with him, not caring that her actions were far from what was normal for her.

Her human and fox had both wanted him, and although she had been with men before, that had been the first time her inner animal had urged her with tooth and claw to go after him. She had never been in love, didn't even know what the signs of that emotion were, but what she felt for him went beyond anything she was familiar or even comfortable with.

Could I be in love with a male I just met?

It seemed ludicrous on every level, but she knew it wasn't just simply lust. It couldn't be, not with how much he consumed her.

It was a good thing she was leaving after the wedding, because no way in hell did she want to go through something like this again. She and Ford were at totally different

ends of the spectrum, and it was best if she left.

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She just needed to understand this experience was one she wouldn't forget. That was the safe thing to do, and maybe the one that would keep her sane.

13

Ford stared at the door Talia just left through. Everything inside him demanded he go after her, his bear clawing to claim her, show her, tell her, make her see she was his.

His reaction to Talia had been instantaneous when he'd first seen her, and after speaking with his brothers, there was no fucking doubt she was his mate.

Mine.

My mate.

He sensed her in the café as soon as he stepped inside. Her scent was a powerful aphrodisiac that had him, as well as his bear, growing instantly aroused. He would have taken her right then and there, and fuck anyone who saw. In fact, he wanted everyone to see, to know she was his and no one else would ever touch her.

And then there was Mina, ruining the entire thing with her presence.

But Talia had taken away the darkness that had been his companion this whole time. His bear roared out to claim her, mark her, and let every other male know she was his. He'd known he wanted to tell her all of that, but it wasn't until he had seen her at the café that he knew without a doubt that she would be his.

“God, Ford. It has been so long.” Mina’s voice brought him back to the present, and he realized he much preferred his inner musings to being with Mina in reality.

An involuntary growl left him, and her eyes widened. She thought the noise that came from him was one of danger. No, it was of his bear knowing his mate had just walked out the door.

Mina sat down and gestured for him to take the seat across from her. Ford didn’t have time for this, and when he opened his mouth to tell her just that, she started speaking.

“Please, Ford, just talk to me. I know everything ended on bad terms, but it has been ten years. You wouldn’t talk to me when I called you about the wedding, but things are different. I’m different.” She held up her hand, showing him the ring on her finger. “Please.”

He should have said fuck no, but he sensed the withdrawal from Talia, knew going to her right now would probably push her away even more. Besides, this needed to be done and over with concerning Mina. He put her behind him all those years ago, and for the first time since Talia came into his life, he didn’t feel that self-loathing.

He pulled the seat out and sat down, and her smile grew wide.

“Don’t misunderstand this for something it isn’t. Yeah, it has been ten years. You aren’t part of my life anymore, haven’t been for far longer than ten years, Mina. And I know you feel the same.” The words fell from his mouth without emotion.

She gave him this sly smile, and his bear bristled.

“Come on, Ford. I know you have to still have feelings for me. I saw the way you reacted when you saw me.”

Hold on just a fucking minute.

“What?” He was shocked by what she just said. “Are you out of your fucking mind?” He hadn’t meant to be so coarse, but fuck, what in the hell was she thinking that he still wanted her?

Her eyes were wide, but he wasn’t surprised that she was so conceited she actually thought he’d been pining over her for all these years. No way in hell was he going to let her think he had been sitting around Sweet Water just waiting for her to come back.

“I saw the way you looked at me when you came in though,” she said again.

The fuck?

There was no fucking way she was going to take what he felt for Talia for herself.

“I assure you that wasn’t for you.” Her once arousal-filled expression fell, and she looked down. Ford let his gaze linger down to the very thick prenuptial book in front of her.

But then something clicked in his head.

Why was Talia with Mina in the first place?

Before he could broach the question, Mina started talking again as if he hadn’t just been totally honest with how he felt for her, or lack thereof.

The only thing he could think of, the only thing he felt aroused by, possessed by, consumed with was the image of a fiery little redheaded fox with curves that went on for miles and wide, light-blue eyes.

“I just...” Mina leaned back in her seat. “I have missed you so much. Not a day has gone by that I haven’t thought about you.” She reached across the table, and he knew she was about to grab for him, but he moved his hands onto his lap.

Her desire for him left a bitter taste in his mouth.

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And then a fucking lightbulb went off in his damn head.

Talia here with Mina. The wedding she was in Sweet Water for. All of those points came crashing into him.

“You’re marrying Talia’s brother?” He thought those words had only been in his head, but they now hung between them.

What are the fucking odds?

Mina nodded. “Yeah. Luke is my fiancé.” The smirk she gave him had even more disinterest filling him. He could smell the fact that she wanted him to be jealous. God, she had a lot of inner soul searching to do if she was that self-absorbed.

“I have to go.”

Ford was up and striding toward the door. The only thing on his mind was going to Talia, to say fuck everything and everyone except telling her how he felt, how he wanted only her, how he wouldn’t let her go.

They may have only shared one night together, but Talia Landon was his, and he was about to find his mate and claim her.

Talia pushed away from the side of the building after her heart finally slowed. She looked around, watched the people walk up and down the sidewalk, and realized life

went on, even when her mind and body were at war with each other.

She stepped back onto the cobblestone sidewalk and tightened her hand on the strap of her purse.

Next weekend couldn't come soon enough, because then she could leave Sweet Water and everything that came with it. She needed to tell Luke what she sensed and how Mina had been insanely aroused for Ford.

Her brother would believe her, no doubt about that, but it was the fact that he seemed to only see the positive and good in Mina that pissed Talia off. If this was what love did to someone, she would be content in the life she currently led.

As that thought went through her mind, she realized she may be already doomed. Her feelings for Ford were far from logical or sane, but maybe when one found their mate, this was how it worked?

The thought that Ford could be her mate, that he would take her as such, sent a hard wave of emotions through her.

The hair on her arms and the back of her neck stood up, and instantly her fox rose. Ford was close; she could sense it, and her body and fox knew that as well. Talia stopped and slowly turned around. Pedestrians parted as he made his way down the center of the sidewalk.

Even from where she stood, she could see he was more bear than man at that moment. His eyes were no longer blue but as dark as the night. He even seemed bigger, more muscular, and everything inside her melted at the sight of him.

There was a look of determination on his face, and it was directed right at her. Everything inside her grew liquid, and when he stared down at her, everything that

made her a female sighed in appreciation of his masculinity.

Her pussy was soaked, her nipples rock-hard, and all she wanted to do was reach out to him, take hold of his massive biceps, and bring him so close their bodies fused as one. She didn't care if people stopped to gawk at them or that they were staring at each other as if they were in some kind of trance.

“Talia?” His voice was harsh like sandpaper or even a serrated blade. It ran along her body, and she forced her eyes not to close as her pulse beat in her clit.

“Y-Yes?” She dragged her tongue along her bottom lip and nearly gasped at the way Ford dipped his eyes down to watch the act. He growled low in his throat, and she felt the vibrations come out through his chest and spear right into her body. His chest rose and fell in an almost violent motion, and he moved closer, just an inch.

Her breasts met his muscular abs, and she craned her neck back, realizing once again that this male was the epitome of masculinity. Ford made her seem so... insignificant in a purely feminine way.

He towered over her, taking up her entire view, and all she could think about was having him push all those thick inches inside her again. Already, he was hard, and his erection felt like a steel rod between them.

He had yet to answer her, to speak the words she knew were on the tip of his tongue. She inhaled deeply and loved that his wild scent filled her lungs. In the next second, he wrapped his huge hands around her waist, pulled her impossibly closer, and claimed her mouth like it was his and only his.

Talia reached up, wound her arms around his neck, and moaned into his mouth.

The spicy flavor that was everything Ford filled her mouth, and she moaned again.

He moved his tongue in and out of her mouth like he owned her. And he did. At this moment, she realized it with such clarity it would have brought her to her knees if he hadn't been holding onto her.

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He pulled away enough that he could speak but kept his lips lightly pressed to hers. “I’m going to take you back to my place and fuck you so hard there is no mistaking you are mine, Talia.” Her heart slammed against her ribs, and all she could do was nod her agreement. He took her mouth again, successfully banishing all thoughts of the woman who clearly still wanted the male Talia knew was her mate.

It was with startling clarity that she realized she couldn’t leave Sweet Water intact now that her feelings for Ford were right at the surface. How had she even contemplated leaving when her emotions were a turbulent arc inside her?

Knowing she needed him now and that all her worries and contemplations could be put on hold until the fire inside her was sated, Talia forced herself to take a step back and look into his face.

His expression was one that had her curling her fingers into her palms or she would rip his clothes off him right then and there.

“I’m staying at the Linden Hotel. It is so much closer than your place.”

The low rumble that came from his chest was all the confirmation she needed, but before she could take any kind of initiative, Ford grabbed her hand and started leading the way, presumably to her hotel that was right around the corner.

He looked over his shoulder, his eyes at half-mast, and that damn half smile that made her panties soaked came out in full force. Her cheeks heated at his unspoken words of lust, and his grin spread. She struggled to keep up with his long, determined strides. The hotel she was staying at came into view only minutes later.

It certainly wasn't the biggest or most luxurious one she had stayed in, but it beat the alternative in Sweet Water, which was really a drive-by motel situated right next to the bar she had gone to with Luke.

No thank you on that. Luke was staying with Mina at her parents' home, and although she had been offered a room, Talia could only handle so much of the human female and her hoity-toity family.

Before he could ask her what room she was in, she took the lead, which resulted in a deep growl coming from him. The fact that he was so very dominant might have offended other women, but Talia couldn't lie and say she didn't like it.

It made her feel all girly and wanted. Her hand was sweaty as she fished out her keycard and unlocked the door. Once inside the room she took in the small full-sized bed. It certainly wasn't the king-sized one at Ford's, but the fact that they would be even closer sent a fresh wave of desire through her.

"I—" Her words were cut off when she was spun around and pressed against the wall by Ford. Her shirt rode up, and she could feel the slightly textured wallpaper press against her exposed flesh. He claimed her lips with his, probed his tongue between the seam of her mouth, and took control like the animal he was.

Fabric rending filled the room, and then the cool breeze of the air conditioner brushed along her body.

With a flick of his wrist, he had her bra undone and tossed to the side. He cupped both of the overly sensitive mounds in his large hands and massaged them. Never breaking the kiss, he ran his thumbs along her aching nipples until she found herself pressing her chest more firmly against his touch.

They groaned in unison when he took his thumb and forefinger and pulled at the

peaks, drawing them out more until she felt the blood rush to the surface.

In a move so quick she couldn't even grasp what was happening, Ford let go of her breasts, grabbed her under the ass, and lifted her. He wedged his jean-clad cock against her now spread thighs and thrust forward three times. Her skirt was bunched along her upper thighs, and her legs were clasped tightly around his waist.

Despite her panties and his pants in the way, she knew she could get off easily this way if he kept moving his hips forward and pulling them back in the rhythmic way he was doing.

“God, I am going to fuck you so hard there won't be a place on you that I haven't claimed.”

A gasp left her, and she speared her hands in his hair, tugging at the dark strands until he grunted and tightened his hold on her. He thrust against her even more frantically until she knew her panties were soaked all the way through.

“Quit talking and do it already.”

His chuckle was deep and filled with more than just humor. Never in her life had she been so fierce, but here she was, acting completely out of character ever since she met Ford. She loved how she was with him, loved that she couldn't control herself, that he made her feel like she would explode if he didn't touch her, and she never wanted it to end.

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He dug his fingers into her ass, turned so she was no longer supported partially on the wall, and walked over to the bed. The springs creaked when he rested his weight on the mattress, but her blood was roaring so powerfully in her ears that all she could hear was Ford's rapid, fierce breathing and feel his rigid erection digging into her panty-covered pussy.

Her breasts bounced from the force of her own inhalations, and as if he read her mind, he moved his head low enough that he could take her right nipple into his mouth.

He alternated between the two, sucking and licking, biting and tugging. It was torture and ecstasy all in the same breath, and although she wanted to beg him to stop, she also wanted to scream for him to continue.

A popping noise filled the room when he let go of the nipple he had been giving attention to. He took her jaw in one hand and tilted her head back to take her mouth. His bear was out in full-force and controlling the situation. Tongues sliding together and hips moving in sync, Talia felt her climax nearing the surface.

He slowed his thrusts against her, and she knew he could sense her impending orgasm. The sweet scent of their combined arousal and of her ecstasy reaching the peak where she would soon go over filled the small room, and she became intoxicated.

Claws tipped his fingers instead of nails, and he dragged them down the side of her body until he reached the top of her panties. She thought he would just tear them from her, but instead he gripped her hips and flipped her onto her belly.

A sigh left her as soon as he thrust a pillow under her hips, causing her ass to be lifted. Memories of the night at his cabin came back instantly, and she didn't stop the moan that spilled from her lips.

The tip of one claw ran down the crack of her ass, and in the next second, he tore her underwear from her body and tossed the tattered remains aside. He palmed her cheeks, as if memorizing the mounds, and then spread her ass wide. She couldn't see his face but knew his gaze was trained on her pussy and ass.

“Fucking hell, baby, your cunt is so damn wet and pink for me.” He slipped his finger down her slit, and the slippery sounds of the digit moving along her sensitive labia had her biting her lip so she didn't plead for more. “You on the pill, Talia?” His question was phrased quickly and grainy, like sand along her skin.

“Yes.”

“Thank fuck, because I don't want anything between us when I take you this time, baby.” She had been on birth control since she was a teenager for her irregular periods, and right now, she was damn glad she was. Knowing Ford wanted nothing between them was exactly what she wanted. She sighed into the mattress when he slipped a thick finger into her body.

He pumped in and out of her and then pushed another one inside her. He worked her so good she found herself lifting and swiveling her hips until she was fucking herself on his hand.

“That's it, baby. Fuck yourself on me. Use me until you come all over my hand, until your pussy juices cover me.” A gasp left her at his filthy words, and she felt herself oh so close to getting off. “I'm clean, baby, was tested right before we fucked. I need to have you without anything between us.” His chest pressed to her back, and his breath teased the tendrils of hair by her ear. “And do you know why I need to do that,

Talia?” His low words were heated and filled with possessiveness and need.

She couldn't speak, couldn't form the words, so instead she shook her head and fisted her hands in the sheets. He still fucked her with his fingers, but his motions were slower, more deliberate, and she knew he was drawing this out, torturing her with pleasure.

“I don't want any barriers between us, because I need to claim my mate, Talia. I need to have my cum inside you so you smell like me and there is no denying you're mine.” He used his other hand to grip her shoulder, and his claws dug into her flesh.

As he trailed his lips down the side of her throat, Talia closed her eyes and let the feel of him dominating every part of her wash through her. First, he swiped his tongue along her rapidly beating pulse, and then she felt his canines lengthen.

“And you are mine, Talia. I won't let you go.” His voice was deep and distorted, and a shiver worked through her. All of a sudden, he started fucking her hard and fast with his digits, and she came right then. Crying out into the pillow, she felt her pussy contract around his penetration, absorbed the pleasure he gave her, and didn't want to let it go.

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“Tell me who you belong to.” His canines scraped along her tender flesh. He dragged those sharp teeth down her body, over the curve of her too big ass, and then he was removing his fingers from her still quivering pussy and pierced her with his tongue.

In and out, he pushed that thick muscle into her, driving her closer to yet another earth-shattering orgasm. It was almost too much, but here she was, climbing that ecstasy ladder and praying she survived it once more.

“Ford...” His name came out as a moan. He moved his tongue from her opening to her clit then back to her pussy hole. “You. I belong to you.” Over and over again, he licked her clit, and she widened her thighs, needing to have him as close as possible.

He took her silent command and gripped her legs, pushed them so far that her muscles protested, and wedged his shoulders between them. He ate her pussy like he was starving, like there was nothing better in the world.

“Christ, baby. Your cunt is the sweetest fucking thing I’ve ever tasted.” She could feel him flatten his tongue and drag it up and down her cleft and stop at the swollen nub of her clitoris. He sucked the engorged bud into his mouth, and all it took was that minimal suction to send her over the edge once again. This time, she didn’t bother muffling her cry of pleasure. “Tell me you want my bare cock in your sweet little pussy.”

“Yes, Ford. God, yes, that’s what I want.” The fact that he declared and claimed her as his mate was all the confirmation she needed. This was what she wanted, and Ford was the only male who could give it to her. His growl went right through her, and she bit her lip.

The metallic flavor of blood filled her mouth, but before the pain could register, he pulled his mouth away from her and positioned the tip of his cock at her pussy.

She stopped breathing as she felt the bulbous head start to stretch her wide. Talia vividly remembered having sex with him. Ford was so thick and long that the discomfort took over, but it didn't mask the intense pleasure.

He took hold of her waist and started easing himself inside her. His scorching hot flesh filled her, made her burn from the inside out, and had her aching for so much more.

The fact that nothing separated them, that this was just her and him coming together, had her arousal heightening. This was what it meant to be consumed.

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Ford lifted his upper body up slightly and looked down at where his body connected with Talia's. The sun came through the partially closed blinds, washing their bodies in dark and light stripes.

Despite the shadows that caressed her lusciously curved body, Ford could see perfectly as his cock parted the folds of her pussy.

She was stretched wide around his girth, taking him in completely and letting off the most drugging and glorious scent imaginable. Never in all his years had he been with a female who made him feel like this, made him want to lose control and protect her with his last breath yet cherish her like a precious gem.

“That's it, sweetness. You're taking my cock like you were made for me, like you know you are mine.” And that was exactly what she was... his.

There was no other for him, and by her body language and her confirmation that she knew what was happening to them was something overly special, she knew he was the only one for her as well. There was no more darkness, no more pain that had a hold of his body.

Talia released him from his misery, and he no longer felt that clawing agony of his self-hatred taking him under. And all he had to do was surrender himself to her, just like she was surrendering herself to him.

“Ford,” she said on a whisper, and he tunneled another inch into her wet, hot body. “There isn’t a part of me that you’re not touching.”

And that was exactly how he wanted it. She was made for him, and he was made for her, and there wasn’t anything or anyone who would stand in the way of that.

He pushed the last few inches into her, and they both groaned out in unison. He was balls-deep in his female, and the bear in him broke free, finally able to claim what was his. In a move his human side could hardly keep up with, his bear tried to take over, but Ford kept it under control.

He couldn’t take her in his animal form, not when his human side wanted her too damn bad.

Roaring out, he started pumping in and out of her, giving her everything he was and taking everything she had. She moaned and begged for more, and he was all too happy to give it to her. There wasn’t anything on the planet that would stop him from fulfilling every single one of her needs, and right now, his mate needed to be fucked just as much as he needed to fuck her.

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Slamming his hips forward and retreating back just as powerfully, Ford took her like there was no tomorrow.

The fact that he could feel every part of her, that there was no barrier separating him from his mate, had him roaring out again. Over and over again, he thrust his cock into her pussy, and he felt her become wetter, felt her swell around him, and knew she was close to coming for a third time.

He wanted her cunt convulsing around his cock, milking him until there wasn't any cum left inside him.

Sweat beaded along his brow, and as he looked down at the gorgeous slope of her spine, he saw droplets of perspiration along the slender line. Dipping his head low, he ran his tongue from her back all the way up to her neck.

His canines were out in full force, and his claws pricked her flesh. He smelled her blood from the tiny wounds he inflicted, and that had him going insane for more.

There was no pain coming from her, just her need for more. The arch of her neck called to him, and he opened his mouth and let his teeth move along her very tender, peach-colored flesh. She had tiny, kissable freckles along her shoulder blades, and he paid attention to each one with his mouth.

When he got to the side of her neck, her pulse jumped right below his tongue. Ford never stopped thrusting into her, and when he felt his balls draw up and his orgasm rush to the surface, he let his canines sink into her neck.

A guttural groan left him as he came deep inside her, and even though she was on birth control, he couldn't help but want her to become pregnant with his young. The primal need to watch her grow big with his child had his hips pressing harder into her as if he had no control of his own body.

It was a ludicrous notion to want that with a female he had just met, but this was not an ordinary relationship.

This was his mate, and they were now connected in every sense of the word.

Her fox brushed along the surface, and he could see her creamy flesh ripple from the animal's effect. She came again, and the feeling of her inner muscles clenching his dick had another gush of cum spilling from him.

When she'd wrung him dry and he could no longer hold himself up, Ford fell to the side and breathed out roughly. Talia was on her belly beside him, her respirations just as frantic as his.

Rolling over so he was close enough to run his tongue along her arm, Ford lavished affection to any part of her he could reach. The salty flavor that coated her body was a testament to the ferocity of their lovemaking. He wanted to lick her until she smelled like him not only on the inside but the outside as well.

"I don't think I'll be able to move for a very long time."

A chuckle left him, and he wrapped his arm around her. The fact that she snuggled right into him had his heart racing. How surreal was it that there was this tiny female who meant more to him than anything else in the world, even after such a short amount of time?

Whoever said finding a mate would leave a person's head reeling so they wouldn't

know right from left was pretty damn spot-on. They'd also forgotten to mention that it had him in a constant state of arousal.

Even after just fucking her until neither could move, his dick was still hard. Although he just wanted to hold her and forget about the world right outside her hotel door, he wanted to clear the air about Mina.

Ford had sensed Talia's jealousy, her hurt. It had been thick enough that even a human could have picked up on it. And he hated he'd been the cause of Talia feeling it.

"I want to talk about the relationship I had with Mina." Ford made sure to emphasize on the past tense part of that statement, but he felt her tense regardless.

She rolled onto her side and then sat up. He frowned when she reached for the comforter to cover her body, but he gave her the modesty she so desperately wanted.

"I haven't spoken to Mina in ten years."

Talia didn't move, didn't even blink as she listened to him. She showed no outward emotions, but they were tangible as they thickened the air and slammed right into him.

The sooner he got this out, explained that she was his world, the sooner they could start their lives together.

"She called me a week or so ago, told me she was coming to Sweet Water to get married, and that was that." He ran his hand over the back of his neck. "It wasn't until I saw her in the café and she talked to me that I realized the connection between you and her... and your brother." He looked away and tried to figure out how he was going to tell her. "The relationship didn't last, because we were never meant to be

together, and after we parted ways, I hated myself for not waiting for the woman who was meant to be mine.” He exhaled, feeling those emotions rise up again. “I hated myself that I threw my life into work, drinking away the pain, numbing everything outwardly.” They stared at each other, and he couldn’t form his next words as he waited for her to say something. “It took me ten years and you coming into my life for me to get rid of that self-hatred darkness that was a living entity inside me. I am just telling you all this, because I want nothing between us, and there never will be.” God, he cared about Talia so fucking much. “It should have always been you, my little fox.”

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Talia was quiet for a very long time, but then she asked him the question he had been waiting for. “Do you still love her?” The raw pain in her voice cut him deep, and all he wanted to do was take it away.

He stared into her eyes. “There was never any love there, Talia. There was companionship to dull the loneliness of the world.” He cleared his throat, because suddenly it had closed up. Ford wished she wasn’t so unsure.

He watched the emotions behind the tranquil blue depths of her eyes and finally decided to reach out and take her hand. And then she gave him the sweetest fucking smile.

“Your personality throws me for a loop, and all I can picture is seeing us together years down the road. It’s okay if what I say scares you, because fuck, it scares the shit out of me, but at least tell me you feel the same crazy-ass need I do.”

Her cheeks turned a pretty shade of pink, and she cleared her throat. “It’s crazy and doesn’t make any sense,” she said and dropped her gaze to her hands, which were bunched in her lap.

When she lifted her eyes back to his, he held his breath.

“I can’t think of leaving Sweet Water, because that would mean leaving you, and that does funny, painful things to my chest. I trust my fox, and ever since meeting you, it has told me this is where I’m supposed to be... with you, Ford.”

His heart was beating double-time at her words.

“I like being spontaneous with you, love that you don’t make me feel like I have to hide within myself.” Her expression was so... vulnerable as she stared at him. “You make me feel like I couldn’t live with never seeing you again.”

And that last sentence had his heart stopping.

He couldn’t help the smile that grew wide across his face. Everything she just said made him so damn happy he knew his euphoria was probably choking her. “You are my mate, Talia. It’s fast, intense, and doesn’t make any sense, but hell, it feels so damn right. There isn’t anything on this planet that could tell me this isn’t what was supposed to happen.”

With that, he didn’t wait for her to say anything, just took hold of her face between his hands and kissed her until they were both panting.

Resting his forehead against hers, he stared into her eyes. He’d never felt so complete before, but with Talia it was overflowing.

“All I can promise is that I am who I am. I have a tendency to start fights, to get drunk, and may even say some things that might piss you off. Despite all those flaws, I can also promise I will never let anyone hurt you, that I will treat you with the respect you deserve, and that I will always be the male who will protect you.”

He kissed her again, and again, and on the third time, he pulled away. His lips were tender, but he would have kissed her until his lips were numb.

“Do you understand what I’m saying, Talia?”

“Yes.”

“You’re mine, and the human and bear in me won’t let you go.”

Talia left the hotel room the following day after spending the entire evening wrapped in Ford's embrace. He left early that morning, telling her he would be at the construction site the majority of the day, but they were to meet up at one of the small bar-and-grills located right on the edge of town.

She had to meet with Luke and tell him what she sensed from Mina. What her brother did with that information was up to him, but at least she wouldn't feel as if she hadn't just sat back when it was clear the woman still had feelings for another male.

Twenty minutes later and she was pulling into the long driveway that led up to the massive estate that was owned by Mina's parents. The yard was being manicured to perfection, pristine white tents were being set up, and equipment was being assembled for the wedding that would be held the following day.

Every time she thought about her brother marrying Mina, a knot formed in her belly, and her fox snarled in distaste.

Talia could chalk it up to just not liking the woman but knew it was so much more than that. How her brother put up with the constant bitching, demands, and overall snotty attitude was beyond her, but it was clear love did strange things to people.

Talia just hoped Luke didn't take offense when she told him about the attraction she felt from Mina when Ford had come into the room.

Just thinking about Mina and Ford together had a sour taste filling her mouth, and although it was so long ago and way before Talia was even in the picture, she couldn't help but think about it.

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She parked the car off to the side and made her way into the house. The foyer was an impressive combination of crystal, marble, and dark oak. The staff Mina's family always seemed to have on hand bustled around, but it was the raised voice of

Luke that had everything else drifting away. Following the noise to a small study at the end of a long hallway, she found her brother in a very heated discussion with Mina.

Talia didn't want to intrude on their private conversation, but when she went to turn and leave, she heard Luke comment on how untrustworthy Mina was.

Everything inside Talia stopped. Had Mina finally dug her own hole? Would it be Mina who ultimately ruined her own relationship with Luke?

"I think you're blowing this way out of proportion, Luke."

Talia's interest was piqued, and she moved closer so she could see through the slightly open door. Mina sat on one of the leather chaises and appraised her nails. Unconcerned attitude wafted from her, and Talia gritted her teeth, because she could feel Luke's hurt and anger.

"Blowing this out of proportion? Are you serious right now?" Luke paced the length of the room and came to a stop in front of her. It was clear his anger was clouding his other senses, because he didn't even realize Talia stood right on the other side of the door. "I have to hear from your gossiping friends that you were with another man only months ago?"

Talia felt her eyes widen at the admission.

“Luke, honey, that was two years ago. We had just started seeing each other, and it was far from serious.” Mina glanced up at Luke and gave him a sugary smile. “You know I love only you. The past should be just that, the past, honey.”

Luke opened his mouth, most likely to let his anger spew forth in the form of words, but her brother didn’t say anything and instead ran a hand over his mouth.

“How am I to know you didn’t do the same at some point in our relationship?” Mina asked.

“Are you fucking serious right now?”

“Luke, watch your mouth in my parents’ home.” Mina stood and smoothed her hands down her too tight skirt. For someone who had supposedly come from such class, she looked pretty trashy at the moment. “Listen, the wedding is tomorrow, and you are acting like a lunatic. I don’t doubt the whole house can hear you right now.”

Talia could feel her brother’s ire growing by the second and moved away from the door. Was there any need to even tell him about Ford? Before she could answer her own inner questions, Luke started talking again.

“You say you love me, yet I can smell your desire for another man coming off you like cheap fucking perfume.” Silence followed, and Talia knew this was not a time for her to speak with her brother.

She headed out the same way she came in, and just as she slipped back into her car, she saw her brother storming out the front doors. He stopped on the top step and shoved his hands in his front pockets.

With his head downcast, he looked like a broken male. Before she could get out of her car to go to comfort him, Luke glanced up at her. He made his way toward her in long strides, got into the passenger seat, and stared out the front windshield.

Talia didn't know what to say, so she just kept her mouth shut and waited for him to say something.

"I know you were right outside the door and heard everything."

Talia kept her eyes trained ahead and watched as men and women in black-and-white attire moved back and forth in preparation. There was no accusation in Luke's words. She shouldn't have thought Luke was too upset to realize she was there. Nothing got by him.

"I didn't mean to spy or anything. I just came over to talk to you, and I should have left when I first realized you were in an argument with Mina." He didn't respond, and when she looked at him, she could see the muscle under his jaw ticking. "I'm sorry." Talia didn't know what else to say.

"I'm not mad at you, Talia." He looked over at her and smiled, but it didn't reach his eyes. "Want to hang out with your older brother today?"

Without responding, she nodded and started the car. She had plans to meet Ford later on tonight, so she headed over to the bar. It didn't matter if she spent all day there with Luke. It was clear he needed to get away, and she was going to be the person to help him ease some of his pain.

After they were at the bar and seated, they spent the next several hours drinking beer and talking about everything that didn't have to do with Mina.

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The sun was starting to set, and although he hadn't broached the topic of Queen Bitch and whether or not the wedding would progress, it was something they would have to discuss. Her brother's turmoil was a living entity, and she wanted him to unload his problems on her.

"I know you don't want to talk about it or you would have already, but Luke, you should get whatever you're feeling off your chest." She watched him, and although he stayed silent for several long moments, his emotions were written clearly on his face. "If you really have second thoughts on marrying Mina, we should address them."

"It isn't really your problem, Talia." His words were clipped. He stared at her for several long seconds and then brought his beer to his mouth and took a long pull from the bottle.

"This isn't the first time she's done this to a guy." By the look on his face, this didn't come as a surprise. "She did it with another guy more than ten years ago." Again, he showed no emotion over this. "Luke, are you even hearing what I'm saying?"

"Yeah, Talia, I'm not fucking deaf." The sound of him using such crass words didn't make her flinch, but it did sound strange coming from him. He never swore in front of her. "This isn't news to me. Hell, it seems anywhere I've gone in this fucking town, someone was talking about Mina and her ex, whoever the fuck he is." He leaned back in his seat and scrubbed his hand over his hair. "I don't even care about that shit. That was before I came along." He held her eyes, and she grew uncomfortable, because it was clear he had other things on his mind. "How about we not talk about her and instead you tell me about this bear shifter."

Well, she certainly hadn't planned on talking about this with him tonight. "What are you talking about?"

He finished off his beer and gestured to their waiter for another one. Talia looked down at her bottle and started picking at the label. He didn't respond, just gave her that look that said "don't play dumb."

"Okay, so you know I'm seeing someone."

"Yeah, I can smell him all over you and can see his fucking mark on your neck." Talia lifted her hand to the bite mark in question and felt the tender wound right under her fingertips. Surprisingly, there was no anger laced with her brother's words. "So you and that Ford guy, yeah? Damn, Talia and a bear... fucking crazy shit." The waiter gave them a fresh round of beer, and Luke finished half of the new one in two drinks. "He's the same one who is Mina's ex." It was a hard statement, one in which she thought he might have been warning her about something.

"Yeah, I know, actually just found out yesterday when Mina's arousal for him nearly choked the shit out of me in the café." Luke nodded slowly, and she could smell his acceptance in all of this. Just looking at him told her that he was already aware of who Ford Wylde was and what he had been to Mina.

"Yeah, I found out about his connection to Mina when she started talking about him today and her lust was off the charts." Luke shook his head, and all she wanted to do was comfort him, but he was drinking heavily and needed his space no doubt. She didn't bother telling him he needed to go easy on the alcohol.

Her brother hardly drank, but it was times like these some people just needed a little something to help numb the pain. They didn't speak for several more moments, but finally Luke went on.

“He claimed you pretty hard, Talia. You do realize that, right?” He leaned back in his seat, and although it was bizarre talking about this with her brother, it also felt right to discuss something so serious and important with him.

“Yeah.” She cleared her throat and took a small sip of her beer. She had only two prior to the one she was drinking now, so she was pretty clear on her thinking, but looking at her brother, she could see he was three sheets to the wind. “I care about him... a lot. I don’t want to leave Sweet Water.” Luke showed no reaction, and she was surprised.

“Even if you ran, it’s clear the bear would chase after you. No shifter male will let their mate go once they find them.”

“Is Mina your mate?” She hated asking him, but there really wasn’t a good time for that anyway.

“No, but it isn’t like I’m getting any younger. A shifter doesn’t always find his mate, and I didn’t want to be alone, knowing she might never show up. That’s not to say I didn’t care about Mina, because I did. She was sweet in the beginning, but I never felt the urge to mark her, and that had always left an empty feeling inside me.” He gave a humorless laugh.

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“I guess I should have known right then when my cougar didn’t feel the need to claim her.” He ran a hand over his face, and the devastation on his face broke her heart.

She could kill Mina for the pain she caused in Ford and now in Luke. He looked around the bar, but his gaze was emotionless.

“It’s strange to see all these people going on with their lives as if they don’t have a care in the world, but here I am heartbroken, knowing I have no future with her.”

“But isn’t it best that way?” Talia didn’t want to rub salt in the wound, but he had to know he was better off without her.

“Yeah, it is, but that doesn’t mean it doesn’t hurt like hell.” He stared at her and chuckled humorlessly again. “Here I am, with everything I could possibly want, and yet I can’t have the one thing I ache for.” He didn’t need to say “a mate” for her to know what he meant. “The wedding’s off, if you haven’t already figured that out.” He finished off his beer and snagged the waitress’s attention as she passed by. “It wasn’t just what you heard today that made everything come to light though. I have always had this feeling that being with her wasn’t the right thing to do, but I was a fool to be ignorant of the way she treated me and others.” He lowered his gaze so he was looking at the table. “I should have broken it off with her a long time ago.”

He smiled, even though he didn’t look up at her.

“I’ll tell you what. There are going to be a lot of pissed-off people when they find out the wedding is off.”

Talia's heart broke even more for her brother, because although he tried to act strong, there wasn't an emotion that could be hidden from her. Instead of saying anything more about that, she got up and gave him a hug. They might be adults, but even her big brother needed a hug every once in a while.

They sat there for a while longer, and Luke continued to drink with no end in sight. Her back was to the front doors, so she couldn't see him enter, but instantly she sensed Ford. He smelled crisp and clean with a hint of citrus and wilderness mixed together.

"I don't need to tell you your bear just arrived." Right after Luke spoke, he finished off his beer and stood. Talia's heart raced as she thought Luke might start trouble, so she quickly turned around and headed toward Ford but was surprised to see him already beside her.

Talia meant to place herself between the male she had grown to care about so strongly and her older brother, but apparently Ford wasn't having any of that, since he took hold of her waist and moved her behind him.

His wide, muscular back took up her entire view, and she tried to move around him, but it was no use. He reached around and stilled her actions with a firm yet gentle hand to her hip.

"Calm down, Talia. I'm not about to get into a brawl with your mate," Luke said with a slur in his words.

Ford tensed, but she didn't scent any discomfort over the situation from him. She also didn't sense any anger. There was only the deep-rooted need to protect her, and Talia would be lying if she said she didn't melt at that very idea.

"I just want to tell him that you are very special to me, and if he hurts you in any way,

I'll make sure to hunt him down and break every one of his bones."

Ford was still tense in front of her, and for a moment, she thought things would get violent. In just the short amount of time she had been in his presence, Talia knew Ford Wylde was not a shifter to mess with, but then again, Luke Landon was also powerful in his own right.

Looking around Ford's massive bicep, she could see the two males staring each other down. It was so tense between them, but then again, a glance around the bar showed no one paid them much attention.

"Yeah, I understand, but know this." Ford curled his fingers just slightly on her hip. "I will protect your sister until my last breath. She isn't just my mate; she is my everything." Nothing more was said, but she saw the subtle nod each male gave the other and let out the breath she was holding. "Now, maybe I could join you two for a beer?"

Luke nodded again, turned, and gestured for three beers before turning back toward them. "I'm Luke, by the way. We didn't really get proper introductions the last time we met."

"True." They shook hands in the quick way men usually did, and just like that, there was no more tension. Maybe it was because Luke was drunk, but his easy acceptance of her relationship with Ford shocked her. That wasn't to say she wasn't pleased beyond belief. They spent the next hour drinking, talking, and actually laughing. To see her brother smile, despite what he was going through, had Talia feeling so much better.

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The night was closing in, and she could see it was time for her to take Luke home. He was far too drunk to even speak in full sentences, and that broke her heart all over again.

“I should probably take Luke back to my hotel, since the wedding is off.”

That had Ford’s eyebrows lifting and him glancing back at her brother. “Man, she did a number on him, too.” It wasn’t a question. She went to grab Luke’s arm, but Ford shook his head and took a step closer. “Let me get him, baby. Here, pay the tab.” He handed her a wad of cash and leaned down to give her a long, drugging kiss.

“I’m good. I’m good.” Her brother stood but wobbled slightly. His words were slurred, and she had a moment of regret for letting him get the way he was, but then she heard the voice that sounded like nails on a chalkboard, and her anger went to nuclear levels. Turning around, she came face-to-face with Mina. For a moment, all she saw was a red haze, but she reined in her temper and took a deep breath.

Mina looked behind Talia’s shoulder, and her eyes widened. There was a shot of lust that came from her, and Talia knew it was because she was looking right at Ford. That had her inner fox rising to the surface. “I figured you’d be slumming it at one of the only two bars in town. I thought we could work out whatever it is you think is wrong, Luke, but apparently you’d rather get drunk.” The way Mina looked at Talia and curled her lip in disgust led Talia to believe she would have liked to say more on the subject. For whatever reason, she kept her mouth shut.

“Listen, I don’t think now is a good time to talk about anything, especially since Luke explained pretty clearly that things between the two of you are over.” Talia said it as

nicely as possible.

“You’ve never wanted your brother and me to be together.” Mina gave her a onceover, the distaste on her face evident. “I don’t need to be an animal to smell the jealousy all over you, Talia. It isn’t my fault you got stuck with the less than favorable genes.” Mina crossed her arms under her chest, successfully popping the huge mounds up and in everyone’s face.

Mina looked at Ford, who was now standing behind Talia, and then back at her. Realization dawned on the human, and her eyes narrowed.

“Are you kidding me, Ford? This is what you’ve moved on to?”

This fucking bitch. Talia stiffened at the condescending tone. A glance over her shoulder showed Luke had taken a step forward. He wobbled slightly and braced his hand on the table to hold himself up.

“You are way out of line, Mina, and showing exactly how tacky and tasteless you really are.” Ford’s voice was loud and deep enough that the whole bar could hear, and this was verified when everything and everyone became utterly quiet.

“I told you it was over, Mina. I don’t care who gets pissed at it.” Luke stood to his full six-foot-two height and was surprisingly steady despite his glossed-over eyes and less than clear speech. “I shouldn’t have let it get as far as it did, and I’m sorry about that, but you said things that can’t be taken back, did things I will never forget, and have disrespected far too many people I care about. I’m not going to get into this with you again, especially with a crowd, but just know I can’t do this anymore.”

“Luke, we can discuss this later tonight back at my family’s estate.”

“No, Mina.” He shook his head. “Talia, I’ll meet you back in the car.” Mina tried to

stop him, but whatever look he gave her had her snapping her mouth closed and grinding her teeth.

“This is all your fault.” Mina rounded back at Talia and bared her teeth like she had an animal inside her. “For the past two years, you never liked me, and, honey, the feeling is mutual.” Mina curled her lip. “It’s not my fault your social status is less than dog shit.”

Ford took a step forward and growled low in his throat, but Talia had had enough of this bitch. “No, Ford.” She curled her hands into fists, and right when Mina smiled in the way that always made Talia feel like she was the gum on the bottom of Mina’s heel, she reared her arm back and clocked the bitch right in the side of the face.

Mina gasped and stumbled back, covering her cheek with a hand. Her mouth opened and closed, but before she could mouth off once again, Talia said, “Say something else, bitch, because I can do this all night with you.”

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Mina pursed her lips, and before Talia lost control again and the police were called, she was being ushered out of there by Ford.

He muttered a few choice swear words to Mina, and the next thing that Talia was aware of was the cool night air washing over her face. She spotted Luke in the front seat of her car, his eyes closed and his throat working.

It was going to take time for him to heal, but she would be there for him, because there was no way in hell she'd let him be consumed by the pain a woman like Mina could inflict.

Ford leaned in close, and Talia braced herself against the side of the building. This position brought back a lot of very good memories, and Talia let the negative and toxic emotions that came from Mina fade into the distance.

“There isn’t a female who can compare to you.”

Talia’s eyes fluttered, but she forced them to stay open.

He ran his hand down the side of her body, and her breathing hitched from the intimate contact. “Your gorgeous red hair reminds me of liquid fire.” He leaned in until his nose brushed the underside of her jaw and inhaled deeply. “And every time I look at you, all I want to do is drop to my knees and worship you.” He leaned back and stared into her eyes. “And the color of your eyes reminds me of cut aquamarine, and I can’t help but get lost in them.”

Talia’s knees threatened to give out. Never had anyone said such things to her, but it

wasn't just the things he said, but how he said them. Talia didn't give a shit what Mina said, didn't even bat a lash at them. She had wanted to hit her for far too long, and the throbbing in her fist made it all real.

Ford wrapped his arms around her, brought her flush with his body, and kissed her until she swore her heart was going to beat right out of her chest. "If you'll have me, I plan on showing you every single day that what you have is exactly what I want."

And just like that, Mina was no longer an issue, her self-image issues were the last thing on her mind, and all she could think about was always having this big, bad bear next to her.

Whatever it was about Ford Wylde that made her feel so at ease, Talia never wanted to let it go.

Epilogue

One year later

"Luke, stop it." Talia smacked her brother's hand away but grinned in the process.

Talia rubbed her palm over her swollen belly, and little Amelia kicked wildly. Luke immediately had his hand on her belly again. He looked in awe, and she couldn't help but feel her chest warm at the sight.

The past year had been hard for him, but he was coming around and not immersing himself in his work so much. Even though things had gone badly with Mina, Luke honestly loved her despite the fact that he had known deep down what kind of person she really was.

Even after Luke called off the wedding and had spoken to everyone on the reason

why he couldn't marry a woman who would betray him, their whole family had been shunned by the Sheldon's, since they blamed their daughter's failed relationship and wedding on Luke.

In the end, none of that mattered, because Luke was strong and determined not to let her ruin his life like she did Ford's. Now, here they were, twelve months later, and Talia was married to Ford. The little girl kicking inside her had been a pleasant surprise shortly after they were married.

"Have you talked to Mom and Dad yet?" His smile widened when the baby kicked again right under his hand. With only a few more weeks to go before she delivered, Talia couldn't wait to have the baby. Her aching back and swollen ankles would be grateful as well.

"Yeah. They will come out the week after next, unless I have the baby before then." She turned so she faced Luke.

Since the disaster with Mina, she hadn't really sat down and talked with him about it all, mainly because Luke had always been standoffish about it. The time never seemed right, and he had immersed himself in work so that he was cut off from everyone who loved him. Although there had been plenty of opportunities, Talia hadn't wanted to talk about something that was obviously still raw inside him. "Do you—"

He shook his head, cutting her off. "No, I don't want to talk about Mina, or the almost wedding, or anything else that will take away from this moment I'm having with my soon-to-be niece." He glanced up at her, and she saw his genuine smile. "Okay?"

Talia nodded. "Okay, Luke." If he didn't want to talk about it or how he felt, then that was okay.

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“You guys ready to eat?” Ford came out of the kitchen. He was wiping his hands on the apron he wore, the one that had a bikini-clad woman on the front of it. Talia grinned and eyed her husband. How could a male as big and strong as Ford look so cute and domestic?

“Absolutely.” Talia’s stomach decided to give a mighty growl, and she felt her cheeks heat. She went to stand, but Ford was right there, taking her hands in his and helping her to her feet. As he did every time he was near, he drew her into the safety and warmth of his arms, and she felt her strength grow tenfold.

The doorbell rang, and she pulled away.

“Looks like the rest of the clan has arrived.”

She made her way to the front door and pulled it open. Bram walked in first, and after he gave her a brotherly hug and a belly rub, he moved farther into the cabin. Charlie and Ary were next, and they also gave her a hug before entering.

Little Cole hung onto his mother, and Talia couldn’t help but smile and place her hand on her stomach. Who would’ve ever thought a red fox who thought she was overweight and had self-esteem issues would have mated with an alpha bear that had been damaged for ten years of his life?

It just went to show that everyone made their own path in life, and Talia’s just happened to be a cobblestone one in the little town of Sweet Water.

The End