



Holly's Grizzly

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Category: Romance, Paranormal

Description: Being snowed in with a grizzly shifter wasn't on the itinerary for my holiday in the mountains.

Going on a winter backpacking trip may not have been the best thing to fix a broken heart. After an accident on trail leaves me without my pack and nearly freezing to death, the last thing I expect to see is a huge, terrifying grizzly lumbering out of the woods.

Even more unexpected is watching that grizzly turn into a man who scoops me up and carries me back to his cabin.

With a blizzard setting in and no way to get home until the storm passes, Irving invites me to stay. And it doesn't take long for cozy nights in front of the fire with my big, burly, handsome rescuer to turn into something else. Snowed in together with nowhere to go, we quickly discover the merits of sharing body heat to stave off the cold. But I came out to these mountains for a reason, and after a breakup that left my confidence shattered, I don't know if I can trust this, trust him, trust myself not to make another mistake and fall for the wrong person. Especially with time running out as the snow stops falling, and real life waiting for me back in Seattle.

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Holly

Running away to the woods for a winter backpacking trip may not have been the best thing for a broken heart.

My heavy hiking boots slip over a patch of ice-covered ground, and I bite out a harsh curse. It's at least the fourth time I've almost gone sprawling onto my ass in the last ten minutes as I make my way down from an exposed, rocky ridge into a densely forested valley between two peaks. It might be beautiful here under normal circumstances, but I don't have any time to enjoy it while I press onwards, headed as fast as I can safely manage back to my car.

That aforementioned broken heart is firmly lodged in the back of my throat, and if I thought this trip was going to do anything at all to patch it back up, those illusions evaporated hours ago.

No healing to be found here, nothing but growing dread and certainty that this whole cursed trip was a monumental mistake.

In theory, it seemed great.

I've been expanding my horizons over the last year. Learning to survive on my own in every sense of the word, finding myself after Cody, my ex, walked out and didn't look back.

It's become a bit of an obsession, trying to excise that relationship—or, maybe more accurately, excise who I became in that relationship—by any means necessary. Physical, mental, spiritual—if it's aimed at cleansing myself of negative energy and starting fresh, there's a good chance I've tried it.

Over the past six months that's meant getting out of Seattle, unplugging from technology and connecting with nature, and out of all the things I've tried, backpacking seems to have stuck better than most. Something about the peace, the fresh air, the solitude, has gotten me in and out of my head all at the same time. Focusing on the trail, tuning in to my body, and pushing myself out of my comfort zone scratches my restless mental itch in the very best way.

I've been all over the Pacific Northwest on hiking and backpacking trips, and I've even started toying with the idea of taking a summer off to do the whole Pacific Crest Trail.

Winter backpacking was supposed to be no big deal. I've done the research, bought the gear, and even took a primer weekend trip a few weeks ago with a trail buddy. She showed me some of the finer points of setting up camp in the snow and keeping myself alive when the temps are below freezing.

It was exhilarating, a whole new challenge to tackle, and I thought I'd been ready to strike out on my own.

What I didn't count on?

A weather forecast that's proven to be so far from accurate, I'm seriously considering suing.

Suingwhoexactly, I'm not sure, but there's got to be something criminal about the meteorologist announcing all we were supposed to expect over the Christmas holiday

was a few inches of soft powder, when in reality a system of heavy, pelting, freezing rain passed right over the mountain I'm hiking on.

Snow wouldn't have been such a big deal, but this mess?

This is awful.

And freaking dangerous.

All that rain eventually changed over to snow, but the damage is done. Beneath the layer of fresh powder, the ground is completely coated in ice. It makes every step treacherous, and my muscles ache and shake from the effort of keeping my feet under me through each slip and slide.

Even worse, the weather didn't set in until I was more than halfway through my in-hike to the spot I was supposed to be camping tonight.

When I realized how dangerous it had gotten, I made the executive decision to turn back, but that was only an hour ago, and I've got at least two more until I make it to my car.

I don't even know if bailing was the right choice, but there's nothing to do now but keep moving, even as the same condemnation rings through my head with each uncertain step over the slippery ground.

Stupid, stupid, stupid.

I could be warm and safe right now, getting ready to spend the holiday with my friends. Nora invited me to the celebration she's hosting, and Kenna would have been there, too.

I should have just gone.

I shouldn't have given Nora a half-assed apology about having this trip planned for months when, in reality, I decided to go just a few weeks ago. I should have sucked it up and not let the idea of being the single friend showing up to spend Christmas with my joyful, content, blissfully partnered friends bother me as much as it did.

Not that it matters now.

Now, it doesn't matter that I'm sad, single Holly trying to eat, pray, love my way into patching up my broken heart. All the affirmations and zen in the world won't get me out of this mess.

I'm the only one who can save me now.

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On my next step, my foot slides and my knee buckles. I barely stop myself from going sprawling onto the ground, but can't do anything to prevent the terrified sob that rips out of me.

It's loud enough to startle me, the depth of my frustration and anxiety cresting over the top of all the mental guardrails I've put in place. Over my focus and control, over the calming breaths and rationalizations.

Losing control is only going to make all of this even more dangerous, and I do everything I can to push it back down.

I breathe in, then out.

I focus on the trail, and picture the safety of my car waiting for me at the trailhead.

I'm not thinking about the way the frigid winter air bites my nostrils.

I'm not thinking about the way it curls down my throat and into my lungs, putting an icy stab of dread squarely in the center of my chest and threatening to unravel my control completely.

"Enough," I mutter, biting down on the inside of my cheek to ground myself back into reality. "Focus."

I press on, over the rocky, icy, snow-strewn ground. My feet stay under me and my legs stay steady. No more of that overwhelm escapes from the place I've got it buried.

At least until I get to the river crossing that marks the approximate halfway point back to my car.

The “bridge” over this section of trail is nothing more than a fallen tree with one end resting on each bank. It’s wide and sturdy enough that in good conditions it would be no big deal to cross it, but right now its worn bark is coated in a thick layer of ice like everything else in this forest.

Below, the river it crosses runs swollen and fast from late-season rains.

I pause on the bank, watching those waters.

My eyes blur on the churning, dark, freezing depths, and I almost lose my nerve completely.

But finding another route would add hours to my journey, and even now I’m at least two hours from making it back to the trailhead and my vehicle.

So I make another judgment call.

Dropping into a crawl, I get my bearings on the log. Arms and legs wrapped awkwardly around the thick trunk, I inch forward. I probably look like a graceless mess, but there’s no one around to see, and I’m not taking any chances crossing on foot.

Inch by inch, I make my way across the trunk, growing more and more confident with each bit of distance gained.

That confidence, however, lasts only as long as it takes my eyes to stray to the river below.

In the middle of the log, over the deepest, fastest portion of the river, the black water roils angrily, and my heart leaps into my throat.

Letting that panic get the best of me is my first mistake.

My second is trying to speed up my slow, awkward crawl.

Suddenly overcome by the desperate need to be anywhere in the world but on this log, I make a mad grab to move faster. The other bank is my salvation, and every single second I'm not on it feels like my lungs are getting smaller and smaller. Muscles shaking, another broken sob climbing the back of my throat, I reach forward to drag myself closer to safety.

But it's not enough, and my haste makes me reckless, careless, abandoning all those carefully laid plans and all the caution I've spent so many months cultivating.

My hand slips from the gnarled knot I meant to grasp, and the fumbled momentum throws me to one side.

The next few moments happen in slow motion.

On my back, the heavy pack I'm wearing wobbles to the side, pulling me right along with it. My hands scramble over the ice-coated tree trunk, flailing uselessly. There's absolutely nothing for me to grasp to keep myself from sliding off the log and into the icy river below, and I let out a scream of pure terror as I fall, the churn of the river rising to meet me.

The water hits me like falling into a bed of knives.

Stabbing against my face and throat, rushing in through the top of my jacket and up the legs of my pants, over the tops of my gloves to engulf my hands. It sucks all the

breath from my lungs, though I get a few gasped mouthfuls as I surface, then plunge, surface, then plunge.

Instinct takes over completely.

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There's nothing left but the need to survive this, no thoughts about what comes after or what might be the smartest thing to do in this situation.

All I need to do is live.

My pack is soaked through, weighing me down, and I instinctively shrug it off. Anything to keep me from going under again.

As I surface once more, my eyes fix on the bank closest to me. Land, safety, something real and solid I can aim for.

My muscles scream with every stroke through the water. Churning rapids threaten to tug me down into their depths, but whatever adrenaline is keeping me alive right now stops them from swallowing me completely.

With every last bit of strength I can muster in my shocked, shaking body, I pull myself out of the river.

Grasping at tree roots, shrubs, whatever I can reach, I haul myself up and out, rolling a few times to put as much distance as I can manage between myself and the horror of that freezing black water.

As I come to a stop at the base of a towering pine and tuck myself into a dry patch of needle-covered ground, a brief wave of triumph washes over me. Triumph for surviving, for not letting that fucking river claim me.

That triumph, however, shatters into a million glittering, icy shards when reality

comes crashing back in.

I lost my pack.

I'm soaking wet.

I'm miles away from my car.

And even if I could make it back, my keys are probably already fifty yards down the river along with my shelter, food, spare clothes, and tools for making a fire.

Right alongside the sinking dread of those realizations, the bitter cold makes itself known again. Worse, this time, with my wet clothes, cutting me all the way to the bone.

It's hard to breathe right, and my limbs start to tremble in rough, jerking motions that go way beyond shivers.

My thoughts stutter and slow, strangely warped and twisted with the cold and the panic pounding through me, but I try to snap out of it, willing myself to focus.

I've prepared for emergency situations. I've made plans and backup plans. I know how to handle myself and keep myself safe.

I close my eyes.

Think. I have to think.

But the only thing left is the cold and the softly falling flakes and the gentle whoosh of a slight breeze through the pines. The splash of the river, much less ominous now that I'm not in it, lulls against my ears like a gentle whisper to rest.

My struggling mind slows even further, and that deep trembling slows, too.

Bad. I think that's bad.

I should be shivering, shouldn't I?

I should get moving. I should try to get my blood pumping. I should... I should...

Staying here might be nice, too.

Wrong. I know that's wrong.

It's the cold talking, the quiet left after the storm of adrenaline burned itself out. I need to go... need to stand... need... need...

A sudden noise from the forest pierces the sluggish haze of those thoughts. I turn to look, and my rapidly slowing heart jumps right back into my throat.

I blink, then blink again, but the image doesn't change.

A grizzly, huge and terrifying, emerges out of the woods, headed straight for me.

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My thoughts are still slow, scrambled, coated in ice, but in some far-away, rational corner of my brain, I know I'm afraid. It's deep, instinctual, and, driven by that animal instinct, my body makes a valiant attempt to propel itself upward.

But my mind isn't cooperating with the rest of me all that well right at the moment.

My limbs twitch uselessly in an effort to... what? Make me appear smaller? Curl up in a defensive little ball? Like that's going to do anything.

Dimly, I remember I didn't even bring any bear spray on this trip.

Nevermind that if I did, it would be floating away down the river with the rest of my gear. Bears are supposed to be hibernating right now, and having one approaching me, head down as it chuffs and lumbers its way through the snow, is one last terrible, macabre joke.

Will anyone even find my body, or will I end up as a cautionary tale about a woman who wandered into the woods and never came out again?

The morbid thought rips a whimper from my throat, and I snap my eyes shut.

I can't move, can't run. I'm frozen by fear and the ice clinging to my clothes and skin, piercing its way into my bones, and I really don't want to see my own death coming right toward me.

A few more heavy footsteps echo through the stillness of the forest, and my thoughts careen wildly.

Was any of this worth it? Or have I only been fooling myself?

Did it matter? Did I accomplish anything in my short life, or was it all just a waste?
What will they put on my tombstone?

Here lies Holly Petersen. Heartbroken. Lost. Searching and searching for something she couldn't have explained even if you'd asked her.

I guess I'll never know.

None of this is going to mean a damn thing when I'm eaten by this—

“Hello?”

My eyes snap open.

There, where the bear had been just a moment ago, is a man.

A tall, broad, hairy, naked man.

Through the frost clinging to my lashes and my scatter-brained shock, I can only make out little bits and pieces of him.

Thick dark hair and a full bushy beard. Rich brown eyes under a brow furrowed with concern.

And his body.

This bear-man is huge.

A broad chest and lumberjack arms. A soft layer of padding over his muscled

abdomen. Thighs like tree trunks. All covered in coarse, dark brown crinkles of body hair, like even in his human form, he's still more than a little bit grizzly.

"My name is Irving. I'm not going to hurt you. Is it alright if I come closer?"

I nod.

Or, well, at least I think I nod.

It's hard to fully wrap my mind around what my body's doing right now.

Somehow, though, it doesn't even occur to me to feel surprised or afraid of this man standing in front of me.

Nora is mated to a shifter. Kenna is, too, and having one here, now, makes some sort of sense in my cold-addled brain.

He'll help me. Yes, of course he'll help me.

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“My name is Holly,” I manage to choke out.

“Hi, Holly,” he says, his voice a quiet rumble in the falling snow.

It’s almost peaceful now, but that could also be the hypothermia setting in. Thick flakes stick in Irving’s hair and beard as he moves closer and crouches down next to me, and somewhere in the deep recesses of my mind the word beautiful flicks in, then out, then disappears completely as he speaks again.

“I’m going to pick you up,” he says, still so low and gentle. “Are you hurt anywhere? Anything broken?”

I shake my head. Not that I really have any idea if anything is hurt or broken, but it doesn’t feel like it. I’m just cold as hell and ready to get inside somewhere.

Even if that somewhere is with a naked bear shifter who just appeared out of the forest.

Stranger things have happened, right?

Maybe not.

Maybe this is all some hallucination my brain cooked up to keep me from realizing I’m about to freeze to death, but I’m not going to question it.

“Alright.” He tucks his arms beneath me, lifting me into a bridal-style carry with absolutely no apparent effort. No struggle, no caught breath or grunt of difficulty, just a smooth rise and a gentle jostle as he tucks me into the furnace of his chest. “Easy,

now.”

I can’t help it, I moan. Nuzzling my face against the thick mat of hair and nestling into the incredible warmth of him, the sound slips out before I can stop it.

Irving freezes. “Did I hurt you?”

“No,” I whisper, and my voice comes out in a broken rasp, the single word an effort as relief crashes over me and I truly realize for the first time that I might not die after all. “No. You didn’t hurt me.”

He grunts his acknowledgment as he starts moving, snow crunching underfoot.

The warmth of him, the strength, the steady hold of his arms, and the undeniable sense of safety that wraps itself around me like a warm blanket is suddenly too much. Tears prick hot and embarrassing in the backs of my eyes.

I’m not going to die.

I don’t have the faintest idea where he’s taking me, and maybe it’s just the cold and the fear playing havoc with my sense of self-preservation, but... I feel like I can trust him. He told me he wouldn’t hurt me, and whether or not it makes me an idiot, I believe him.

All those emotions lodge themselves in my throat, and a small, pitiful sob breaks free.

“It’s alright,” Irving soothes, shifting his arms to press me more firmly against him. “You’re alright, Holly. I’ve got you. You’re safe.”

The forest passes swiftly as Irving carries me to wherever it is we’re going, and I let myself close my eyes. His feet are sure and his stride steady, the warmth of him

chasing away the biting cold.

2

Irving

Holly goes quiet and still in my arms, and alarm bells immediately start ringing.

Did she pass out?

She seemed... well, fine isn't exactly the word I would use, but at least somewhat coherent when I picked her up. Drenched through, and absolutely at risk of exposure if she stayed out here much longer, but not in imminent danger.

"Holly," I say, jostling her slightly. "Still with me?"

Instead of answering, she lets out a soft, disgruntled grunt, and it's enough to loosen my tense muscles a bit as she settles herself back against my chest.

My naked chest.

Because if that isn't just the bizarre cherry on top of this shit sundae of a situation—somehow, some way, ending up bare-ass naked out in the woods, saving a woman who by the looks of things crawled her way out of the river not long before I reached her.

But maybe it's also a stroke of luck.

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I run warmer than humans do, much warmer, and grizzly shifters even give most paranormals a run for their money in the internal temperature department. Holly's still bundled in hersoaking wet clothing—which we'll have to take care of as soon as we get back to my cabin—but like this, she can at least partly take advantage of my body heat.

In my arms, a violent shiver wracks her frame.

I pull her closer and rub my hand up and down her bicep, like that would do anything to help at this point since she's nearly soaked to the bone.

What the hell she's doing out here so far from the trailhead, all alone, with no pack, and how in the world she ended up in the river is a complete mystery, but none of it really matters right now. All that matters is getting her somewhere safe, warm, out of the cold and out of these soaking clothes.

With that imperative pounding through me, I keep my attention on holding Holly steady and moving as quickly as I can through the woods, which are quickly filling up with snow.

We're not far from my cabin, and that's a damn good thing.

If it was any further, I might have been too far away to hear her scream. Grizzly shifters don't have as sharp a sense of hearing as some other paranormals, but her cry of fear was unmistakable.

It hit me just as I was settling in to ride out the storm, and I was out the door and

shifting before I fully thought it through. Someone was in trouble, I could help, and going to investigate in my grizzly form seemed at the time like a better idea than walking into whatever was happening in my much-less-durable human form.

We round a bend in the path, and my cabin comes into view. The lights shining from the windows must catch Holly's attention, too, because she turns to look and lets out a little squeak of something I really, really hope is relief.

The last thing I want to do is scare her when she's already in such tough shape, but I can't imagine seeing a bear come stalking out of the woods toward her, and then having that bear turn into a large, unfamiliar man, could have been very comforting in her situation.

But there was no way in hell I was going to do anything but get her to safety, and now I just hope I wasn't too late to prevent any serious hypothermia from setting in.

Pushing the door open, a wave of warmth from the furnace and the fire burning in the living room fireplace washes over us. I carry Holly to the middle of the room and set her on her feet, but her knees buckle immediately.

"Easy," I say, keeping my voice low so I don't startle her and bracing my hands under her elbows to haul her upright. "I've got you. Can you stand?"

She mumbles something that isn't quite a response. Another shiver wracks her frame, and I think her legs are going to give out again, but she draws in a shaking breath and grasps my forearms, her grip surprisingly strong.

Briefly, I war with myself over whether I should go find my phone and call for help, try to get a helicopter up here or something to evacuate her. The roads are already covered in ice and snow, and we're at least twenty miles away from the nearest ambulance service, so at this point that would probably be the only option.

But... is it even an option? Can helicopters fly through blizzards?

I have no fucking idea, and when I glance down and see the growing puddle on the floor from all the water and melting ice in Holly's clothes, a more immediate need presents itself, so I momentarily push the question aside.

"We have to get these wet clothes off of you," I mutter, not knowing how to put it any less bluntly.

Holly nods, and shivers again as I reach for the zipper at the front of her jacket.

Shivering is good, right?

Shit, I really hope it is.

I help her out of her outer layer, tossing the jacket and the thermal pants aside. When I pause, Holly reaches for the hem of her shirt to tug it off.

That's good, too, right? That she's helping, that she's coherent enough to help.

It's going to have to be as she strips off the rest of her clothes until she's down to her bra and underwear.

I avert my eyes and grab a blanket from the sofa. "Here."

Holding it out to her, it only takes her a moment to understand what I mean. She takes it from me and wraps herself up, sinking down onto the sofa and shimmying out of her underwear and bra before fishing them out and dropping them into a pile with the rest of her clothes.

Closing her eyes and slumping back into the couch, she pulls the blanket tighter

around her.

I turn to the fire, adding a few more logs and stoking it higher. But even with the blazing warmth, my heart sinks when I turn back to Holly.

She's still shivering.

Running a rough hand through my hair, I'm about to go find my phone and finally, finally call for help.

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I should have done it sooner, shouldn't I? I fucked all of this up. I put Holly at risk. I didn't do the right —

“Can I...” Holly says, her voice a rough rasp. “Can you... you're warm.”

She reaches a hand toward me, and I immediately understand the unspoken request.

There are a few more blankets in a trunk at the side of the room, and I grab two before I join Holly on the sofa. I drape one over myself in an attempt to cover my own naked body at least a little. After pulling Holly into my lap, I settle the other over us both, tucking it in around her.

She lets out a little sigh and burrows into me.

“How are you feeling?”

It's a stupid question.

I know it's a stupid question, but I can't think of anything else to say in the lingering haze of panic and worry that I've made some kind of catastrophic mistake here, that I should let her rest while I call someone for more help. Or just, I don't know, Google it, maybe. Try to dosomethingother than freeze with indecision.

What the hell do I know about how to keep a human alive in the cold?

I've never had to worry much about winter survival, and Holly's small, slender frame seems so impossibly fragile in my arms.

“I’ve been better,” she murmurs. “But I’m... alright. I can feel all my fingers. And my toes. I don’t think I’m going to lose any.”

She falls silent for a moment, wiggling a little like she’s double checking the accuracy of that statement, and a few more of my ragged nerves calm. Once she’s satisfied, she continues.

“I wasn’t in the river very long, and climbed out just before you got there. I lost... I lost my pack... and I didn’t know what I was going to... I would have... I would have died if you didn’t...”

Holly’s breathing speeds up, and an edge of anxious tears trembles at the corners of her words.

“It’s alright,” I tell her. “You’re alright. Don’t worry about it now. You’re here, and you’re safe. We’ll figure the rest of it out later.”

I’m rambling a bit, saying whatever I can think of to assure her that everything’s going to be okay.

I don’t know Holly. I don’t know what she was doing out in the woods during a storm. I can’t imagine how frightening it was to have fallen into that ice-cold water, to have come so close to freezing to death all alone.

All of that considered, I only hope I can give her some comfort and reassurance now.

“Thank you,” she says, barely above a whisper.

“You don’t have to thank me, Holly.”

Her body curls up even more tightly, and it brings her feet in unfortunately close

proximity to my side. When they brush against me, I can't help the way my entire body locks up or my sharp gasp of surprise, and I regret both immediately.

"Sorry," Holly says, shifting on me like she's about to crawl out of my lap.

"No harm done." I band my arm more firmly around her, keeping her right where she is.

Fishing a hand down between the blankets, I find that icicle foot of hers and start rubbing it slowly.

"Is this okay?" I ask, watching her face intently for any signs I've crossed a line.

"It's..." Her voice trails off, and when my thumb presses into her arch, she lets out a soft, breathless moan. "It's good."

Fuck, I don't want to let that moan do anything to me.

It's completely, utterly, wildly inappropriate for that moan to do anything to me. I'm just warming her up, making sure nothing needs to be amputated later from frostbite. I'm helping her, and letting my mind wander down any other path would make me a first-class creep.

So I shut those thoughts down and focus on rubbing some warmth back into her feet, her calves, keeping a sharp eye on her face for any signs of discomfort or fear.

I find none.

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In fact, the longer I hold her, the more she relaxes. Her breathing grows deep and even, and her color gets better with each passing moment. From deathly pale when I found her, to a deep flush after we got inside, to something softer and more natural—a light blush over her cheeks and the rest of her skin back to a much less concerning shade of pale peachy cream.

After a few more minutes, she's fallen into a doze, and I can almost convince myself she's out of the woods for any serious lasting effects of exposure.

Gently, watching her face for any signs I'm disturbing her sleep, I brush some of her golden blond hair back and away from where it's scrunched up against the blankets between us. It falls free, catching the firelight and hopefully drying in a way that won't be such a nightmare for her to untangle later.

Holly's eyelids flutter and she stirs slightly in her sleep, but nestles closer and lets out a soft sigh, the only sound in the cabin other than the crackle of the fire and the occasional gust of wind outside.

All of that peace and quiet makes room for the absolute unreality of the situation to come creeping back in.

Was it just a half-hour ago I was sprawled out on this same sofa, watching the snow fall and getting ready to spend another holiday alone?

It seems impossible to believe it was, and as the minutes tick by, more and more questions pile up.

Where did Holly come from? Was she alone, or will there be anyone looking for her?

And, maybe most importantly, how am I going to help her get wherever it is she was going? Either back to her car or somewhere else on the mountain, she must have had a destination in mind.

A sharp gust of wind interrupts that thought, and my eyes cut to the world outside the wide windows at the front of my cabin.

The blizzard doesn't seem to be abating. In fact, it only seems to be getting worse.

It puts a stab of dread in my gut, knowing that if I hadn't been around to hear her scream, she might still be out in this nightmare. And with the way the weather's fixing to shape up over the next few days, it might have been a long, long time before anyone else found her.

I swallow that dread and all my questions. They'll have to wait until Holly wakes, and nothing matters right now except that she's safe. She's here, she's alive, and we can figure out what happens next when she's had some time to rest.

Glancing back down at her, I find her expression even more relaxed, breathing steady and deep. Seeing her like that makes me relax a bit more, too, enough to find a small thread of absurd humor in this whole mess.

Gods, but it's strange to have another living being in this space.

It's a solitary life up here, so far from the nearest town. Peaceful, too, but lonely at times, especially when the winter snow blows down from the peaks and the world settles in to wait for spring.

Aside from some neighbors who also live in cabins dotted up and down the

mountainside, I don't get a lot of company. And that's mostly by design. Most folk who choose a life like this do it willingly, with full knowledge of the challenges that come along with it.

It's probably mad as hell, keeping my solitude up here. Spending long hours in my woodshop and puttering around my garden in the summer like I'm some kind of hermit.

Or maybe I was always that way.

Maybe anyone who chooses a life like this has to be a little off-kilter.

Which is just one more thing to worry about when Holly wakes up—how the hell she's going to react to being here, alone, with a man she doesn't know. And she doesn't know.

For now, Holly rests peacefully in my arms, eyelids shut and long, dark lashes fanned out over her cheeks. Her wavy blond hair is still a little damp, but quickly drying in the cabin's warmth. The light of the crackling fire catches those soft waves, gilding them and illuminating the upturned slope of her nose and the graceful arc of her high cheekbones.

Outside, the snow falls thick and unrelenting. Big, heavy flakes stick to every branch and pile up on the ground in fast-growing drifts. On top of the freezing rain that came down all afternoon, it's created a big damn mess. Temps won't get back above freezing for a couple of days, and the last time I checked the forecast, the brunt of the storm was going to pass right over this part of the mountain.

It doesn't bode well for helping Holly get out of here.

The roads up to my cabin are rough to traverse even in good conditions, and by now

they're probably impassable. With snowshoes, and if the snow eases some, it might be possible for Holly to make it wherever she was headed, but she doesn't have a pack of supplies for that kind of journey and I don't have the right type of gear to lend her.

Glancing out the window again, realization settles over me.

I don't think Holly is going anywhere anytime soon.

3

Holly

I wake in a furnace.

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Or, maybe more accurately, I wake in the arms of a furnace.

Irving is dozing beneath me, still with both arms cradled around me, keeping me held steady in his lap. I'm warm, so warm, and it takes a few long, hazy moments for that last bit to fully register.

In his lap.

As soon as it does, more memories come rushing back in.

Falling in the river. Dragging myself out. Being carried through the woods by a bear who's actually not a bear to the most picture-perfect little cabin.

And then...

Oh.

Oh, god.

I got naked in front of him, didn't I?

Which, I mean, was probably necessary considering I was drenched and about to freeze to death, and I do remember there being a blanket involved, but still.

Doing my best not to wake him, I prop myself up a little and glance down to find I'm still wrapped in that blanket. Irving's got one draped over him, too, and another memory rushes in at the sight of it.

A big, broad male body dusted in coarse dark hair. How easily he scooped me up. How careful he was in bringing me back here and making sure I was alright.

I glance up.

My face is just a few inches from his. His eyes are closed and his face is relaxed in sleep, but he's still just as ruggedly handsome as I remember, with his big bushy beard and his thick brown hair.

And he's still just as impossibly warm.

I'm no longer half-frozen from my idiotic dunk into the river, but the memory of it still lingers deep in my bones, and I can't stop myself from savoring that warmth as I take a deep inhale.

Irving smells like the mountains. Rich pine and crisp snow, fresh air and something deep and earthy that's almost as calming to my frayed nerves as his warmth is.

I close my eyes and take another whiff.

"Holly?"

They snap back open, and I'm met by Irving's deep brown, very concerned gaze. He shifts me in his arms, helping me sit up and putting a few inches of distance between our torsos.

I barely bite back a groan of protest at losing even a little bit of his warmth, then give myself a mental slap.

Get a grip, Holly.

The man single-handedly saved me from freezing to death. The very least I can do is not be an absolute weirdo, losing my mind over his body heat and his freakingscent.

“Are you alright?”

Am I?

Aside from the unreasonable, scattered-brained attraction that I’m absolutely going to blame on my dunk in the river and my subsequent thaw, I think I am. My limbs seem to all be in working order, and I reluctantly put them to use as I wiggle my way off Irving.

“Yeah. I’m alright.”

Settling on the sofa beside him, I clutch at the blanket, way too aware of the fact that I’m completely naked beneath it.

I’m way too aware of everything all of a sudden.

I’m in a stranger’s house.

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I'm naked in a stranger's house. My pack is gone, there's a blizzard outside, and I'm alone with a grizzly shifter somewhere deep in the woods on the side of a mountain with no idea where I am or what I'm going to do now.

All those realizations tighten my throat and spike my heart rate, and not even Irving's mountain-fresh scent is enough to keep my wildly careening emotions in check.

Irving must be able to see the rising panic on my face, because his eyes widen, and he stands and takes a few steps away. He keeps his own blanket held firmly around his waist, but as he glances down at himself, his cheeks flare with color over the top of his beard.

"Are you okay here for a few minutes if I go get dressed?"

I nod silently, and Irving retreats to a set of stairs at the side of the room leading to a lofted space above. When he disappears from view, I let out a long breath and try to get a handle on myself, looking around the room to get my bearings.

The cabin is beautiful.

Filled with warm wood—from the high-vaulted ceiling to the walls to the wonderfully worn floorboards—the space radiates a cozy mountain charm. A full wall of windows at the front of the living space overlooks a clearing and what must be a great view when it's not completely whited out by a blizzard. A stone fireplace sits opposite the couch, stretching all the way to the ceiling and still burning low with the fire Irving built up when we got here.

All around the living space—which connects to a small but tidy open-concept kitchen—are little touches of color and softness. A woven rug on the floor. Framed photos and art prints on the walls. The low, comfortable couch I’m sitting on, and a pair of mid-century armchairs. All those touches soften the edges of what might have come across as a hyper-rugged, mountain man aesthetic with all the pine and stone.

My inspection of Irving’s cabin is interrupted by a noise from the loft. A door shuts, and footsteps echo across the floorboards as he reappears at the top of the stairs.

Blanket discarded, he’s dressed in a pair of jeans and a red and black plaid shirt. It’s all very lumberjack-chic, and that, combined with the hesitant look on his face, the way he chooses to sit in a chair on the opposite side of the room, and the memory of how gentle he was with me earlier chase away some more of my panic.

Which... maybe I shouldn’t let my guard down so easily.

I don’t know anything about him, after all. I don’t know if he’s some kind of solitary, homicidal maniac, or a genuinely good guy trying to help, and just because he’s handsome as hell and has a scent that makes my head spin doesn’t mean I need to trust him immediately.

It also doesn’t mean I should overstay my welcome.

Irving stays silent as he settles himself in the chair, like he’s waiting for me to speak first, and I clear my throat.

“Thanks again for helping me out,” I start, though thanks doesn’t seem to be nearly enough to acknowledge what he did for me earlier. “But I... I should probably get going. I need to get back to my—”

“Holly,” Irving interrupts, looking at me with a furrowed brow and confusion written

all over his face, as if he's seriously questioning my sanity. "I don't think it's a good idea for you to go back out in this weather."

My stomach sinks as I glance toward the wall of windows at the front of the cabin. The snow has gotten worse in the last few... hours? How long have I been asleep?

"I..." I say, completely at a loss.

I've got no gear, no snowshoes, my clothes are in a wet heap on the floor.

Beyond that, all my muscles still feel shaky and weak, my head is aching slightly, and the idea of trekking back out in the cold kicks up that same ache deep in my bones, the memory of the river not far from my mind.

"Holly," Irving says again, drawing my attention away from the windows and the growing dread that's lodged itself firmly in the center of my chest. "I think you should stay here and wait out the storm."

"N-no," I stammer. "I can't. I mean—I don't expect you to—I can probably make it back to—"

"I don't mind," he says, sounding so earnest and sincere it stops my babbled protests short. "I don't think it would be safe to go back out before the storm passes, and I'm not sure trying to drive somewhere would be the best idea, either. The roads up here are dangerous in these conditions."

I nod slowly.

He makes a lot of good points, but...

"If it's me you're worried about," Irving says softly, "I've got a small apartment over

my shop out back. I can stay there if it would make you feel—”

“No! Oh my gosh, no. I wouldn’t want to put you out of your own house. If anything, I can—”

“Please, you’re my guest.”

For some reason, the word *guest* draws a small, unlikely smile to my lips.

Absurd.

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Absolutely absurd.

Like all of this is just some typical Christmas holiday, and I've come up to the mountains for a visit. Like it's not completely bonkers for me to be here right now, sitting on Irving's couch and seriously considering riding out the blizzard with someone I only met hours ago. Someone who saved me, carried me through the woods, saw me naked, and let me sleep on him.

But...

Irving still has that earnest, serious look on his face, and I'm not sure I've got any other options. And while I'm almost certain it should bother me more, make me more panicked or afraid or... I don't know, like I've just landed myself smack in the middle of a horror movie rather than a warm and cozy Christmas special, it... doesn't.

"Am I?" I can't help but tease a little, the tightness in my chest slowly unspooling. "Your guest, I mean."

"If you want to be?" A smile tugs at the corner of his lips, answering mine.

And... alright. I guess we're doing this.

I guess I'm doing this. Leaning on Irving, deciding to trust a stranger, when all I wanted from this trip was to prove that I could do it all on my own.

It puts a note of bittersweetness in my relief, a tremble in my smile, but I take a small,

steadying breath to try to dispel it.

“Okay. Sure. And the couch is fine. It’s not you, really. I just...” I trail off, not sure exactly how to phrase what it is I’m feeling.

Beyond the immediate concern of shacking up with some guy in the middle of nowhere, it’s the same old discomfort I always feel when asking for or receiving help. Some nagging sense of putting people out, of being a burden, of getting more attention and charity than I deserve.

“Do you have your phone?”

Irving’s question pulls me out of those uncomfortable thoughts.

“I...” I look around, trying to remember where exactly I had it. “Oh! I think it was in my...”

I glance at my pile of wet clothes and grimace, but when I try to stand, he beats me to it.

“I’ve got it. Coat pocket?”

Nodding, I watch as he fishes it out of the zippered pocket at the front of my jacket. By some stroke of dumb luck, I had the foresight to tuck it into a waterproof bag to keep it safe from the elements, and as he hands it over I find it still has a charge.

And surprisingly good cell service this far out in the forest.

“I have a signal booster,” Irving explains when he catches my furrowed brow. “And I thought it might be good if you let someone know where you are, and that you’re alright. Do you have friends or family who might be looking for you?”

I shake my head. “No. I was alone on this trip.”

The words come out hollow and flat, but Irving doesn’t push for details. He’s right, too, that it would be good to let someone know I’m okay. I think for a moment before sending a text to Kenna and Nora.

My family—well, what little family I have—is back on the East Coast. Beyond telling them I wasn’t going to be back for the holidays, I didn’t let them know my plans. Since I only talk to them once every couple of months, they won’t be worried or waiting to hear from me.

My friends, however...

Almost immediately, both Kenna and Nora send back texts saying that they’re glad I’m alright, and wanting to know exactly where the hell I am.

I glance over at Irving. “Is it... would it be alright if I let them know your address? Just, you know, so they know where I am?”

“Of course,” he answers, relaying the info as I fire off another quick text with more assurances that I don’t think I’m in any imminent danger from my grizzly shifter rescuer.

It seems to appease them, though they’re both painfully curious to know the story about how I got here, and I promise to call them later.

It all seems like too much to deal with right now, so I set the phone aside and settle back against the couch cushions.

“I was going to make some dinner,” Irving says, standing from his chair. “Are you hungry?”

I hesitate, and he waits in silence for my reply.

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It's a little quirk of his I'm beginning to notice, the tendency not to rush me for an answer, to be alright sitting with the silence and letting me take my time deciding what I want to say.

I'm not sure if I appreciate it or am unnerved by it.

Maybe both.

"It's just that..." My cheeks heat and my stomach squirms with discomfort. "I don't... I don't eat meat. Or eggs. Or dairy. But if you've got some... I don't know, some bread and peanut butter, I could make myself a—"

"Making something vegan is no problem. How do you feel about mushrooms?"

"I—" I say, stopping short in surprise. "I love mushrooms."

Irving smiles. "Good. And pasta?"

"Pasta sounds incredible." At just the mention of it, my stomach lets out a little growl, and Irving's smile grows even wider.

"Coming right up. While I get things ready, do you want to take a shower?"

He nods toward a door at the side of the room that I assume leads into a bathroom, but another problem presents itself.

I glance down at the pile of my wet clothes sitting on the rug in the middle of the

floor, then at the blanket still wrapped around me, and Irving chuckles.

“It’ll absolutely be too big on you, but I’ve got something you can wear.”

Before I can protest, he heads back up to the loft. When he returns a minute later, he’s got another big plaid shirt and a pair of sweats with a drawstring waist bundled up in his arms.

“Sorry,” he says with a rueful grin. “You’ll probably be swimming in these. I can throw your stuff in the wash so it’s clean for later.”

My surprise at just how generous he’s being momentarily overrides my immediate instinct to deny the offer, to tell him I can do my own laundry if he shows me where it is, and I simply nod.

“Bathroom’s that way,” he says. “Use whatever you need to, and there are fresh towels in the cabinet.”

Again, I have no chance to protest before he passes over the bundle of clothes and turns to grab mine off the floor. He carries them through another door at the back of the kitchen that must lead to the laundry, and I stumble into the bathroom feeling more than a little off balance.

I drop the blanket and start poking around the room to find what I need. There’s shampoo and conditioner and soap in the shower, and after grabbing myself a fresh towel and turning on the water, I step beneath the spray.

As I do, I try to ignore the cloying feel of surreality tugging at the corners of my mind.

I breathe in, then out, then glance around the bathroom through the clear glass of the

shower door to anchor myself in the present.

It's another beautiful space—small, but thoughtfully designed with dark gray slate floors and fully tiled walls. The shower is huge, taking up nearly half the room, and the waterfall head is mounted directly above on the ceiling, obviously installed with Irving's height in mind.

Those little details give me a mental perch to stand on, something to keep me here, grounded, and prevent me from thinking too hard about everything that happened today, how my entire world feels like it's been tipped on its head.

But as hard as I try to stay where I am, my thoughts keep wandering, from Irving's cabin, to my car who-knows-how-many miles away at the trailhead, to my life back in Seattle.

Inexplicably, they land on Cody.

More specifically, I think of one of the last big fights we had before he left. It's the fight that would be waiting for me if I followed all the strings that stretch from this moment I'm in to the one that started it all. The fight that led to the break-up and my desperate need to feel normal again, to feel like myself, to search and search for some way to take back my power and find my center.

What had it been about, again?

A year later, it's hard to remember all the details, but I think it had started with his insistence that he hadn't forgotten to show up for a dinner hosted by the biotech company I work for, celebrating all the company's highest performers.

It had just been my fault.

My fault, that I didn't text him earlier that day to remind him.

My fault, that I didn't schedule him a reminder on the goddamn Google calendar we'd shared.

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My fault, that I'd come home crying, a little plaque in hand proclaiming me as one of the company's best up-and-coming software developers. It was an honor that had felt stupid and hollow as I set it on the counter of the apartment we shared and trudged into the bedroom to fall into bed fully clothed, clutching a pillow to my chest as I tried to breathe through the bitter disappointment.

It was just one more hurt to add to the pile.

One more thing I shouldn't have assumed he'd care about, should have made sure to communicate more clearly if it was important to me he showed up for it.

But it doesn't matter now.

Cody is long gone, and getting over him was the impetus behind... all of this.

Changing things up, learning to survive on my own, finding out who I am now. Twenty-eight and completely capable, expanding my horizons and proving to myself just how much I don't need anyone at all.

And I had gotten over it, or at least over him. Even if it's still hard sometimes to open up about it, and even if running away to the woods for Christmas seemed preferable to being the sad single friend at the holiday gathering, I've been so proud of how much I've grown.

Well, at least until I fell into a goddamn river and almost died. Until I got my ass saved by a bear shifter who's being so unbelievably kind to me.

My thoughts tangle again, but instead of trying to make sense of them, I try not to think of anything at all and instead lose myself in the warmth and the steam of the shower.

4

Irving

The pasta sauce I threw together simmers on the stove and the noodles are nearly done cooking by the time I hear the shower turn off.

I freeze for a moment, hands hovering over the counter, knife poised just above the head of romaine I was cutting for a side salad. But, giving my head a hard shake, I make myself snap out of it.

All of this is... fine.

It's fine that Holly's staying here.

It'll just be for a couple of days, and then she'll be on her way. Although I can't actually remember the last time I had a houseguest, I can be a good host. I can make Holly feel welcome and hopefully cheer her up after the weighted conversation we had earlier and her repeated insistence that she doesn't need any help or want to make me feel put out.

And dinner is a perfect place to start.

Having my hands full with the cooking is exactly the distraction I need to get out of my own head a little. I'm not going to overthink this. I'm not going to question why every inch of me feels so tuned up and tuned in, vibrating with some strange energy and hyper-aware of every sound coming from the other side of that door.

I finish the salad, drain the noodles, and give the sauce a quick stir before flipping off the burner. Everything's ready, and I lean back against the kitchen island in satisfaction, doing a quick sweep of the spread to see if there's anything I missed.

Knowing the right thing to say to ease Holly's fears and assuage the guilt she seems to feel about accepting my help isn't exactly in my wheelhouse—truthfully, knowing the right thing to say isn't ever really in my wheelhouse—but this? This I can do.

I love cooking. Well, I love food, more accurately. Growing it, preparing it, trying new recipes and developing my own.

It's always been one of my hobbies, and my favorite way to spoil the people I care about on the rare occasions I have to do so. I'm solitary by nature, but given the opportunity, there's nothing I love more than making sure the people around me have enough to eat and a comfortable place to sit and rest a while. I'm no expert in love languages, but if I had one, that would certainly be it.

That last thought gives me a moment of pause.

Is this too much?

Is that part of the reason Holly's so uncomfortable? Maybe I'm coming on too strong, being presumptuous, putting too much pressure on her.

The instinct to provide for her—to offer her shelter and warmth and a good meal after all she went through today—was so immediate I didn't stop to question it.

At the same time, I don't think it's any more or less than I'd offer to anyone who found themselves stranded in the woods or who showed up on my doorstep looking for help. It's hardly an inconvenience or a burden, and I doubt I'd be questioning it at all if it didn't seem to make Holly so uncomfortable.

Well, that, and the fact that providing for this particular stranger seems to tug at some deeper, less rational need to protect and provide.

Beneath my skin, my grizzly rumbles his approval.

He's a greedy bastard.

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Like most shifters, my other form is me... and not me. He takes his post in the corner of my mind while I'm in this human form, but when I allow myself to shift, he's at the forefront.

His wants, his needs, his instincts. They're still mostly aligned with my own, and I'm not beyond the capability of reining them in when they rear up as strong as they are now.

But it's not the time or place to indulge them, so I push them down and turn my attention back to shuffling things around on the counter and making sure everything's ready when Holly is.

Only a couple of short minutes later, the bathroom door creaks open and Holly steps out.

Cheeks pink, hair hanging in damp waves around her face, her petite frame draped in my shirt and pants, the sight of her sends a strange lurching sensation through the center of my chest, bringing all those unreasonable instincts right back to the surface.

A small island separates the kitchen from the living space, and Holly settles onto a stool there, leaning over her crossed arms as she watches me work.

"Did you find everything you needed in there?" I ask, keeping my gaze focused on the sauce that doesn't need any more damn stirring.

"I did. Thanks again for... well, for all of this."

It's on the tip of my tongue to tell her she doesn't need to keep thanking me, but I'm still half-convinced anything I try to say to put those worries of hers at ease will only make them worse, so I just murmur my acceptance of her thanks.

Silence falls for a few moments, and when I chance a glance back over my shoulder, I find her looking curiously at the open cupboard next to the stove.

"Do you do a lot of canning?" she asks, gesturing toward the various jars of vegetables and preserves lining the shelf.

I nod. "I keep a garden on the south side of my property and grow enough during the summer to have me pretty well-stocked for the rest of the year."

Holly perks up a little at that. "I've always wanted to get into gardening. Someday, I mean. Having a condo in the city doesn't give me a whole lot of room for planting things."

"Portland?" I guess.

"Seattle. I live pretty close to downtown and work for a biotech company."

I raise an impressed eyebrow. "Scientist?"

"Software developer," she says a little ruefully. "Not as sexy as coming up with new miracle drugs, but it pays the bills."

"Sounds pretty impressive to me." I dish up our pasta and salad and hand a plate across the counter to her.

She takes it with an abashed smile. "It's... it's alright."

Circling the counter, I take the spot at the opposite end of the island and set my own plate down before returning to the kitchen and getting us both a glass of water.

“What about you?” Holly asks, changing the subject as she twirls a bit of pasta around her fork. “What do you do for work?”

“I own a woodworking business,” I tell her, settling into my seat. “Furniture, mostly, and I work out of a shop I built next to the house.”

Holly hums her response before she takes a bite, and I very determinedly don’t look at her, even as she hums again—lower, and more appreciative this time.

“This is incredible.”

“It’s a pretty simple dish,” I say with a shrug, trying not to let my ego inflate any more than it needs to.

But, as we lapse into silence and dig into our meal, I find it’s a losing battle.

I catch a glimpse of her out of the corner of my eye, and the sight of her sitting there doesn’t do any favors for the instincts I’m doing my damndest to keep at bay.

She’s safe, warm, fed, cared for, and my grizzly reaffirms how much he likes that with a low, satisfied rumble.

Holly glances over, and for a few mortified seconds I almost think I let the sound escape, that she heard merumbling at her. But she doesn’t look upset, or like she’s ready to bolt, so maybe I’m in the clear.

“I get the feeling you’re probably sick of me thanking you,” she says with a small, chagrin smile, “but I’m going to have to at least one more time. Thank you, Irving,

truly. For dinner, and the rest of it.”

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Another swallowed rumble, and I murmur what might be a ‘no problem’ or a ‘that’s alright’, but it’s a little hard to tell with how loudly my grizzly is making his godsdamn satisfaction known in the corner of my mind I’ve relegated him to.

Conversation flows easily while we eat. Holly offers a few more details about the type of work she does, describing how she creates computer programs that let the company’s scientists leverage data to gather new insights about their work. In return, I tell her a little about the apprenticeship I did with a master carpenter when I was fresh out of high school, and how much more I feel like I still have to learn.

Midway through our conversation, it strikes me that it’s been years since I had one even remotely resembling it.

Most of the people and paranormals I see and talk to on a regular basis are mountain folk. And while we’re not any better or worse up here than anyone who lives in a city and leads a different kind of life, this conversation with Holly only serves to highlight how very different those lives are.

It’s refreshing, on one hand, to hear about her home and her job and enjoy the soft cadence of her voice as she talks about everything waiting for her back in Seattle.

On the other hand, it puts a strange weight in the bottom of my gut—a weight I’d swear was disappointment if I didn’t know better—to be reminded again she’ll be off this mountain and back to that life in just a couple of days.

After we’re finished eating, I deposit our dishes in the sink, and Holly wanders back into the living room to look out the windows at the snow still falling hard and fast

outside.

I settle into a chair at the side of the room, and she sinks down on the couch. She pulls a blanket over her lap, watches the embers crackle in the hearth, and looks so damned cozy and adorable that I have to battle the urge to go cuddle up next to her and make sure she's got all the warmth she needs.

"So," I say, venturing slowly back into conversation, though it almost seems a shame to disturb the peace of the moment. "What was it that brought you all the way out here?"

Holly shoots me a quick glance, a bit of color climbing her cheeks, and she takes a few seconds to think before she answers. Her eyes turn back to the fire and her expression falls, all her calm and satisfaction melting away.

It's the same look she was wearing earlier when I asked if there'd be anyone searching for her—some combination of frustration and guilt, maybe even a bit of shame, and I regret my question immediately. I remember how hollow she sounded when she said she'd come on this trip all alone, and I want to kick myself for spoiling the mood.

"It's... a little complicated."

I'm about to change topics, or let her know she doesn't have to answer, when she suddenly looks up at me with something resolved and heartbreaking on her beautiful face.

"It started with a breakup."

Holly

I really, really don't need to trauma-dump all over the kind, handsome shifter who's taken me in.

But Irving's doing that thing again.

The thing where he's quiet and patient and watching me like he's really interested in what I have to say. And I must either still have my brains scrambled from falling in the river, or I'm so thrown off balance by having a guy seem genuinely tuned into a conversation, because I start speaking before I think better of it.

"It started with a breakup."

His brow furrows. "What do you mean?"

For a second, I almost let it go, backtrack, give some excuse. There's no reason at all I should share this with him. Not even when he looks like he's more than willing to listen, and not when he's been so damn nice to me since the moment he found me out in the woods.

"I... sorry. It's just a long story, and it would probably bore you. Or bum you out. Or both."

"Why don't you let me be the judge of that," he says gently.

I hesitate... but there it is again, in those soft brown eyes of his. Something that makes me want to trust him.

Maybe it's fine.

I'll be gone in a couple of days. All of this is so far from the realm of normality that maybe it's fine for me to just say the hell with it and confide in him. What happens when you're snowed into a cabin in the middle of the woods stays in the cabin in the middle of the woods, right?

Maybe I'm also tempted because I've never talked about it, not really. Not even with Kenna and Nora. It's always felt easier to pretend I wasn't struggling so much. If I could convince them that all my talk about personal growth, all my hiking trips and meditation were really healing me, and not just the bandage I slapped over all my cracks so I could pretend I wasn't hobbling around half-shattered, maybe eventually it would be true.

But I'm tired, so incredibly tired.

From everything that happened today and everything that brought me here. From the way it feels like all the walls I built around myself came crashing down the moment I hit the water and thought I was about to die.

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So I tell him.

I tell Irving about Cody. I tell him about how we met while we were both interning for the same financial services company and how I was drawn to his drive and his intelligence and how, somewhere along the way, those things also became what I grew to resent him for.

I tell him how our relationship felt more like a competition than a partnership sometimes, and how I'm half-certain the emotional crumbs Cody dealt out like he was doing me a favor were all part of some deranged need to win that competition.

I tell him how, even with all of that, Cody was the one to leave me, and I was absolutely blindsided by it. I tell him about the months I spent reeling and my decision to take back my sense of self and my confidence, to strike out on my own and prove I was tough enough to get through it all.

Once the words start, there's not a whole hell of a lot I can do to stop them.

Trauma dumping, indeed.

"So," I say when I get to the end, letting out a long breath. "I guess that's what it all stacked up to, all my hiking and yoga and meditation and anything else I could think of to help me find some sort of center, because mine was just... gone."

Irving hasn't said a single word during my monologue, but now he frowns and lets out a short, disgruntled grunt.

“He sounds insecure as hell,” he says darkly. “A fucking child, if he had to make you feel lesser to feel better about himself.”

“He... you know what? You’re not wrong,” I say with an unexpected laugh, surprised by how good it feels to say it out loud. “He was insecure. And a child. And an asshole.”

Irving nods his agreement, still with that serious, disapproving look on his face that somehow lightens a bit of the heaviness I’ve been carrying around in my chest for who knows how long.

We lapse into silence for a few moments, but there’s nothing uncomfortable about it this time. It’s strangely... intimate, this quiet. Nothing demanded, nothing expected. Just two strangers in an absolutely bizarre situation, all the normal niceties and social boundaries buried under the still-falling snow.

“I guess I just got in a little over my head this time,” I say after a few moments, embarrassment creeping up my cheeks. “I didn’t expect the weather to be as bad as it was, and I was trying to get back to the trailhead when I went in the river. I lost my balance on the log bridge and fell, and then my pack came off, and then...”

I trail off with a groan, slump into the cushions, and throw an arm over my eyes. “And my keys are in my pack, so I don’t even know what I’m going to do when I get back to my car. And all of this is so—”

“Holly.”

When I look up, I find Irving leaning forward with his elbows resting on his knees and another one of those soft, kind expressions on his face.

“You couldn’t have known the weather would turn, and you did a hell of a job

surviving an awful situation.”

Something in my chest catches at the reminder.

I did do a hell of a job surviving.

Even if I still can't quite stop wanting to beat myself up about it, and even if it shouldn't be on Irving to reaffirm it for me, I did as much as I could and held on until help arrived.

“And as far as the rest of it?” Irving continues. “We'll figure it out.”

Just like all the other times he's offered me his help, the immediate urge to either thank him profusely or refuse the offer sits on the tip of my tongue. But I know he doesn't need me thanking him all the time, and I know it's not going to do me any good to offer more protests.

So I don't give them.

Maybe it's alright to accept help when it's offered, if only just this once.

I look back at Irving, who's still waiting so patiently for me to work it out in my own time.

“Alright. We'll figure it out.”

There's a brief flash of surprise on his face before his expression melts into warm satisfaction. The slow smile on his lips and the approving sparkle in his eye do strange things to the bottom of my belly, but I make myself ignore it.

It would be so incredibly stupid to do anything but ignore it.

Because the alternative would mean facing the fact that there's something incredibly attractive about this grizzly shifter, and I'm having a hard time denying it.

Not that it matters.

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It doesn't matter at all that I'm way too aware of Irving and his devastatingly handsome smile. It doesn't matter that I'm tempted to shiver and pretend like I'm cold, so maybe he'll come over here and give me some more of his incredible body heat. It doesn't matter that every time he does or says something nice to me I'm torn between bursting into grateful tears, telling him to knock it the hell off, or wrapping my arms around him for what I'm sure would be the warmest, softest hug in the world.

Admitting to any of that would be certifiably pathetic, and just because I'm so damn broken that any little crumb of care feels like water in the desert doesn't mean I need to make it his problem.

"And besides," Irving says, drawing my attention out of that spiral, "there's nothing we can do about it tonight, right? So we might as well just sit back, relax, and enjoy the blizzard."

Despite myself, a small laugh slips out. "Yeah. I guess we can do that."

6

Irving

"Alright, tell me where you're hiding them."

"Hiding what?"

"The weighted dice you've been using to absolutely wipe the floor with me."

Holly laughs behind her hand, and the sound of it is enough to soothe away the bruise to my pride over losing the last four rounds of Yahtzee. Light, bright, not forced or polite, Holly's laugh nestles itself right into the center of my chest.

"It's just luck," she says with a delicate shrug of one shoulder, not looking contrite in the slightest.

"Yeah, sure," I say as I stand and pick up the empty bowl of popcorn we've been sharing and the two mugs we used for tea and carry them back to the kitchen.

"A degree in mathematics helps, too," Holly calls after me. "Statistics and probability and all that."

"Fine," I call back. "Then next time we'll play Jenga, and you'll be cooked."

She laughs again, and that same satisfied ache kicks up behind my sternum.

Holly has finally stopped thanking me for every little bit of kindness, though from what she told me about her piece of shit ex, the compulsion makes more sense now. So does her hesitation to ask for help, and her insistence to fend for herself.

Understandable, but still not something I'm going to compromise on. As long as Holly's here, she's my guest, and she's going to have to get used to letting someone else carry a bit of the burden she's no doubt gotten used to dealing with all on her own.

When I return to the living room, she's curled up on the couch, eyes shut as she rests her head on a throw pillow, though they flick back open when she hears me approach.

And godsdamn, those eyes are beautiful enough to get lost in.

The piercingly bright blue of the sky over the mountain in springtime, they crinkle at the corners when she smiles up at me.

I almost lose it again, the small scrap of restraint holding back my grizzly's rumble of pleasure, the soul-deep instinct that's so damn satisfied to see her happy and safe.

A content, relaxed Holly is an entirely different person than the woman I carried through the woods, or the woman who was so adamant about trekking back outside instead of accepting a place to stay. It's enough to make me want to curl up on the couch right next to her, or, better yet, carry her upstairs and tuck her into the soft flannel sheets on my bed.

"Sorry," she murmurs. "I'm like ninety-five percent certain I'm about to conk out and end the night early."

"It's alright. You've had a long day." Despite my better judgment, I sink down onto the opposite end of the couch. Not close enough for the two of us to be touching, but the proximity makes my fingertips ache. I fold my hands together in my lap and ignore the sensation. "I don't suppose I can convince you to take the bed?"

With a knowing smile, Holly shakes her head and burrows a little deeper under the blanket she's got draped over her.

"I'm good here."

"You'd be better in an actual bed," I grumble, but she doesn't budge. "And I really don't mind sleeping down—"

"Irving," she says, and the sound of my name on her lips is enough to startle me into silence. "You're chronically generous, and I'm chronically allergic to accepting anyone's help. I don't think either of us are going to fundamentally change tonight, so

let's just get some sleep.”

“I think you’re overestimating my generosity.”

She arches a sleepy brow. “I don’t think I am. And I’m also way too cozy here to let you win this one.”

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“Fine.” I huff a laugh. “Let me get you a better pillow, at least?”

She nods, and I guess I’ll have to be satisfied with that as I make a quick trip upstairs to grab one off my bed and slip a fresh pillowcase on it before returning to the living room.

By the time I get back, Holly is nearly asleep. It’s not a surprise after the day she’s had, but some part of me is still a little disappointed to see the night end.

Already, there’s a clock ticking in the back of my mind. As soon as the snow clears and the roads are passable, she’ll be gone.

Which is fine. It’s reasonable that she’ll be on her way as soon as it’s safe for her to do so.

What’s not reasonable is the fact that I’m already dreading her leaving. Maybe it’s just the loneliness of deep winter and how quiet life can get up here, but... I don’t think it’s just that. At least not entirely.

Examining it in any more detail feels like a colossal mistake, so I don’t.

Instead, I walk slowly to the end of the couch where Holly is dozing, and when those blue, blue eyes of hers flutter open and another small, sleepy smile turns up the corners of her lips, I ignore the sharp pang in my chest and hold out the pillow to her.

She lifts her head instead of taking it, and maybe it’s a sign she’s finally relaxing enough around me to be alright with accepting help—or, maybe more likely, she’s

just tired enough not to feel self-conscious about it.

Whatever the case, I don't question it as I slide the pillow beneath her head. I try not to think too hard about it when I drag the tips of my fingers through her fire-warmed hair as she lies back down.

And when I flip off the lights and head up to the loft, I do my damndest not to think of her there, just a few yards away in the darkness. I try not to think of anything at all as I tuck my hands behind my head, stare up at the skylight above the bed, and watch the snow swirl, knowing sleep is going to be a long, long time coming.

I wake to the scent of pancakes.

Wafting up from the kitchen, my mouth's already watering as I blink blearily and spend my first few waking seconds trying to figure out why the hell my house smells like breakfast.

It only takes a couple of moments for everything that happened yesterday to come rushing back, and just a few more after that for me to be out of bed and halfway down the stairs before I realize.

Shirt. Shit.

I shucked mine off before I went to sleep, and probably shouldn't be walking around half-naked while Holly's—

“Hey,” she calls from where she stands at the stove, flipping a pancake. “Sorry if I woke you up, I saw you had everything on hand for pancakes, so I thought I'd return the favor of—”

Cake flipped, she turns, and stops speaking immediately when she sees me standing

there, eyes widening as they rove up and down my naked torso.

I clear my throat awkwardly. “Sorry. I’ll go back upstairs and...”

Holly murmurs something from the kitchen, but I’m already retreating and miss whatever it is she says. By the time I make it back down—fully clothed, this time—there’s a bit of pink lingering on her cheeks.

“Sorry,” she says again, and I think I dislike the sound of the word on her lips even more than I dislikethanks. “This is weird, isn’t it? Me just barging in and raiding your cupboards. I should have waited for—”

I reach around her and grab one of the plates loaded up with fresh, steaming hot pancakes that look fluffy and delicious and perfect, then head to the cupboard for a bottle of maple syrup.

“These look great.”

Her cheeks flush pink again, but I think it’s more from pleasure this time as she finishes up the last pancake she’s working on and joins me at the kitchen island. As she does, she gives her hair a shake, and I notice a bit of perspiration on the back of her neck from standing over the hot stove.

“You wouldn’t happen to have a hair tie, would you? I lost mine in the river, and the only spares I had were in my pack.”

I reach over to open the junk drawer at the end of the island. “I think a rubber band is the best I can do. It’s been at least a decade since I wore my hair long enough to need those.”

“Sold,” she says gamely, studying me as she ties her hair up into a messy bun on the

top of her head. “And you could still pull it off. You’ve got the whole ‘rugged man of the woods’ thing going on up here. It would fit the aesthetic.”

“The beard’s not enough?”

She tilts her head and gives it so much adorable consideration I have to chuckle.

“It’s a start, but a man bun would be the icing on top.” Her eyes sparkle, and the corners of her full lips turn up in a smile.

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Is she... flirting with me?

Probably not, but damn if I don't like the possibility anyway as we both settle into our seats at the island and dig in. She's put a pot of coffee on as well, and the coziness of it all strikes me right in the same tender spot in my chest that's been there since last night.

Gods above, I thought I was a more evolved creature than this.

But no, give me a warm breakfast and a bit of teasing from a pretty woman and the pleasure of her company, and it turns out I'm not complicated at all. I can't remember the last time I felt this damn content.

After breakfast, we tag-team the clean up before I remember the clothes I put in the laundry for her last night. She takes them gratefully, then heads into the bathroom to change while I finish up the last of the dishes.

Holly pokes her head out of the bathroom. "Mind if I keep your shirt and pants for later? The clothes I was hiking in don't exactly make the best sleepwear."

"Leave those in the laundry," I say, nodding toward the small room off the kitchen. "I'll get you a fresh set to wear."

Holly smiles and shakes her head, but doesn't argue the point as she disappears into the bathroom for a few moments more.

When she reemerges, I have to stop myself from doing a double-take.

The clothes she had on under her outer winter layers are made of stretchy, form-fitting material that hugs every one of her slender curves.

My fingertips ache again, and I have to give myself a mental slap and a silent reminder not to stare, even if that's nearly impossible.

Holly is gorgeous, smart, and something about her speaks to my deepest instincts to care, to protect, to provide.

But I'm not going to do anything about it. I can't do anything about it.

Doing anything other than offering her shelter and safety with no strings attached would make it seem like I had some ulterior motive in giving her this place to stay. Even though I didn't, the idea of saying the wrong thing and making Holly feel awkward at best, or at worst unsafe, while she's here is repugnant.

The wild attraction I feel toward her is my problem to deal with, not hers.

So I keep my shit together as we finish tidying up the kitchen and face another day of being snowed in together with nothing to do but get cozy and watch the flakes fall.

7

Holly

As Irving and I lounge around after breakfast, one thing has become very clear.

I've got a crush on my rescuer.

Or maybe 'crush' is the wrong word.

I've never been one to feel this kind of instant, bone-deep attraction, and now that it's here, I don't know what the hell to do with it.

It's not only how he looks—although his ruggedly handsome face and his incredible body really, really aren't doing me any favors in ignoring this pesky little crush—but it's just... everything.

I've got a crush on all of him.

His kindness and patience and generosity. The way he's listened and made me feel heard. The way he's picked up on all my silent cues and seamlessly acted accordingly, never once making me feel like I'm imposing on him by being here.

But even with all that considered, I wouldn't let myself indulge in this crush if it weren't for all the little tells that make me think it might not be entirely one-sided.

Irving is not being nearly as sneaky as he thinks he's being.

At least I hope he's not.

Because if I'm reading this all wrong, it's going to be really, really embarrassing when I do something stupid like kiss him.

Which I'm not going to do.

Probably.

Maybe.

But if he keeps looking at me like that...

At first I thought it was just concern. I thought it was just him checking to make sure I wasn't still messed up six ways from Sunday from my dunk in the river, or about to grab my gear and sneak out because I'm so entirely hopeless at accepting help when it's offered.

The longer it goes on, though, the more I'm not so sure. All those lingering glances that cut away as I turn to look, the heat I've caught in his eyes more than once, the way it seems like he's deliberately trying to keep himself at a distance.

And covered up, unfortunately. Even though the glimpse I got of him shirtless this morning was enough to remind me I didn't hallucinate how hot he was when he saved me yesterday, and I really wouldn't mind getting a little more of that view, it doesn't seem to be in the cards for me.

Nope, Irving's been a perfect gentleman, and I absolutely, positively, shouldn't want to see what he's like when he's not being so polite.

I shouldn't want to ask him if I could join him up in his loft tonight. I shouldn't suggest bunking up together so the two of us could keep warm, cuddled up under the blankets, skin-to-skin with the fire crackling and—

Down, girl.

I should know better than this. I should leave it well enough alone and not press the issue.

Maybe I am still messed up from my near-miss with hypothermia. Maybe nearly freezing to death rewired something in my usually cautious brain. It flipped a switch that has me lusty after my big, burly, bear-shifter hero when I absolutely shouldn't be.

But then I catch Irving looking at me again.

We're both sprawled out on the sofa in his living room, not doing much of anything at all, when I feel the telltale prickle of eyes on me. By the time I look over he's glanced away, staring at the embers glowing in the hearth from the fire he rebuilt this morning.

The damage is done, though, and all my nerve endings are lit up again, all my bells and signals flashing a bright red 'oh yeah, he's interested.'

I wonder if Irving's single.

There's nothing around here that hints he's got a girlfriend—no product in the shower, no hair tie he could lend me—but that doesn't mean anything. He could have a boyfriend, for all I know, or someone long-distance.

But that question is just one more I shouldn't think about, so I choose a different topic.

"Is this weather keeping you from any Christmas plans?"

Irving looks a little surprised, like the thought hadn't occurred to him.

He shakes his head. "Not really. I sometimes stop by my buddy Vic's house for the Yule party he throws, but that's about it."

"No family gatherings?" I ask, immediately realizing how prying that question is, but Irving doesn't seem to mind.

"Nah. My mom's up in Alaska and she doesn't travel much during the winter. Dad died when I was young, and most of my other family lives spread across the back-country of the U.S. and Canada." He shrugs. "So holidays are never really a big deal. You?"

"Same," I say, trying for the same level of nonchalance. "I have some family out east I don't get back to see much. And the last few years I celebrated with Cody's family since they're near Seattle, but... well, that obviously wasn't an option this year."

Irving nods, brow furrowed and a familiar spark of brooding irritation in his eye. The same one that was there when I told him about Cody in the first place.

It's just one more mark in his favor, one more thing to feed my little crush.

We talk a bit more about how we've spent holidays past, from the typical Christmas tree and Santa years of my childhood to the years he's traveled up to Alaska to spend a couple of weeks in near darkness close to the Arctic.

The conversation is easy, meandering, woven through with comfortable silence as we sit and chat and lounge the morning away.

After a particularly long lull, Irving rubs a hand on the back of his neck and looks over at me, his expression a bit chagrin.

“Sorry about how boring things are up here.” He nods toward the well-stocked bookcase at the side of the room. “Feel free to grab something to read, if you’d like. Or I could try to dig out my old laptop if you wanted to find a movie to watch on Netflix or something.”

I think for a moment. “You mentioned last night you have a shop where you do your woodworking. Can I see it?”

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He glances toward the windows where the snow's still coming down in thick white sheets.

"If it's not too much trouble to get out there," I add.

Irving smiles and shakes his head. "No, it's not too much trouble."

We both get ready to venture out in the snow—me in my heavy hiking gear that's dried out overnight, Irving in what he's already got on, with a Carhartt jacket thrown on top. He doesn't bother with any more layers or gear, and I arch a brow at him from where I'm all bundled up near the front door.

"The cold doesn't bother you much, huh?"

"I have my grizzly to thank for that. I run warm because of him."

Oh, I know how warm he runs.

Blazing, his incredible body heat. The memory of it makes me ache to curl up next to him again, maybe without the blankets between us this time.

Cheeks heating, I turn and open the door.

Winter hits me like a slap to the face. Flying flakes pelt my cheeks and stick in my hair, and I gulp in a deep lungful of frigid air.

It's not nearly as painful today, when I'm not making a mad dash through the forest

or pulling myself out of the river. It's bracing, almost refreshing, and when I glance back over my shoulder, Irving is watching me with a small smile on his face.

"Just down that path," he says, nodding to a building a couple dozen yards away from the main house.

As I start down what only marginally qualifies as a 'path' considering how much snow is already covering it, my boots slip on the layer of ice below, and Irving is right there. He scoops me up, lifting me into his arms and carrying me the rest of the way to his shop.

I huff a laugh. "Now you're just showing off. I do know how to walk, you know."

"Can't be too careful," he says in that low, gruff, delicious voice of his, even more tempting with how close he is.

Apparently he's more than able to carry me with a single arm as he uses his free hand to open the door into his workshop and steps us both over the threshold before setting me back on my feet.

Inside, the whole place is decked out with tools and workbenches and projects in various phases of completion. A set of rocking chairs in one corner, an armoire in the other, a hugetable in the center of the room made of a slab of gorgeous oak, carefully carved and crafted into a beautiful showpiece.

"Irving," I breathe, running my fingers over the table's smooth, polished wood. "This is incredible."

Irving shrugs, bashful again. "It's something my grandfather taught me when I was growing up. And I just kept learning. I did my apprenticeship, and then spent some time with another highly renowned craftsman out of Portland who specializes in

furniture-making, and eventually I found myself here.”

He tells me a bit about the other pieces he’s working on as we make a slow circuit of the room, some of the stories that come along with the custom orders he receives, and his passion for his work is clear in his voice. It shines through bright and endearing, and it’s just one more thing I admire about him.

It also makes me think more about my own work, work that’s started to feel less and less appealing over the last couple of years. As my priorities have shifted, so has the conviction I used to feel about being in corporate life, climbing ladders, all that bullshit. I’m still not sure what to do with all those nagging doubts about where my career path might lead, but it’s refreshing to hear Irving talk and see how much he’s accomplished for himself.

We stop near a wide work table at the back of the shop, and I lean against it, taking it all in.

“This is great,” I say. “All of this is so amazing, truly. Your shop, your life up here. I’m impressed.”

I swear I can see a bit of pink climbing over the line of his beard, but Irving just shrugs again. “It’s suits me pretty well. It’s home.”

“What made you choose to settle up here? Doesn’t it ever get lonely?”

He runs a hand over the back of his neck. “It’s always been... a part of my nature. The need for solitude.”

I nod. “I get that. It’s part of what made me get into hiking, the need to have some time alone with my thoughts and no one else around. The solitude can be incredible.”

He makes a low noise of agreement in the back of his throat, but his eyes go distant for a moment in thought. I take a page out of his book and wait to see if there's anything more he might want to say.

“I grew up in Canada, in a place not all that different from this one. Mountains, forests, plenty of room to roam. But when I got my apprenticeship and had to move to the city, I thought it would be alright. Change of pace, you know? Something different.”

“And it didn't exactly suit?” I guess.

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Irving huffs a soft laugh. “That would be an understatement. I... I used to think there was something wrong with me. I could never get over all the noise and the lights and the cars. Too much to process, maybe. Just more than I could ever really handle.”

He lapses into silence, brow furrowed.

“I don’t think there’s anything wrong with you, Irving. I think we’re all just a little bit... different. And if a city’s not your thing, it’s not your thing.”

His eyes cut back to me, a tentative smile turning up the corners of his lips.

“Besides,” I tell him, catching that smile and answering it with one of my own, “cities are overrated anyway. Why do you think I’ve spent the last year running away from mine? There’s something to be said for the solitude.”

“I suppose that’s true.” He scrubs a hand over his beard, then looks down at me with an expression on his face I can’t quite read. “Not that it can’t be lonely sometimes, too. Especially around this time of year.”

The moment stretches out between us. Silent, weighted, but somehow not uncomfortable. Like we understand each other even though we barely know each other.

I probably shouldn’t read so much into it, and I probably shouldn’t be spilling so much of my heart out to a stranger.

But we’re still in this weird, yet somehow completely natural space of trust and

intimacy, so the words tumble out without me giving them much thought.

“Yeah, I... I get that. And I wasn’t fully honest earlier. I did have... other plans. For the holiday, I mean.”

I tell him about Nora and Elias and their beautiful home on the coast. I tell him about Kenna and Blair and their whirlwind romance. I tell him how spending the holiday with them sounded like way too much warm, cozy happiness to handle.

“I feel awful about it, you know? Avoiding them probably makes me a terrible friend, but I just... couldn’t. Being alone sounded better.”

The shame of it all settles heavy on my shoulders, but Irving only makes a low, understanding noise in the back of his throat. When I meet his gaze, there’s no judgment there.

“Taking the time and space you need to heal is nothing to be ashamed of, Holly. I’m sure your friends would understand that.”

My throat tightens, but I nod slowly. “Yeah, I think they would.”

I know they would. They’ve been patient as hell with me as I’ve processed my breakup and tried to keep a brave face. They’ve made it clear they’re here to talk about it, even if I’ve mostly kept it to myself. They’ve remembered to include me and made time for me even while both their lives have changed so drastically in the past year, while they’ve been off finding their happily ever afters with their mates.

Irving’s words also remind me I forgot to call them last night like I said I would, and I resolve to do that as soon as we get back into the house.

“Come on,” Irving says. “I’ll show you the rest of the place. I think I’ve got that old

laptop I mentioned up in the guest apartment. If you want, I can bring it down to watch a movie or something later so you won't lose your mind from boredom."

I laugh as I follow him toward a set of back stairs. "I'm not bored. I like it up here. I like the solitude... and the company."

Another weighted moment, a pause as Irving turns to face me, some unspoken thought hovering in his expression. He chooses to discard it, though, offering me another smile as he leads me up the stairs.

But in that pause, there are a hundred different ways I might read that stoic expression of his. Heat and wanting, hesitation, like he can't quite bring himself to acknowledge... whatever this is between us.

And that's fine.

I'll just have to make it clearer.

I'll have to try harder to make it obvious I don't just like his company, I really, really like it. And I'd like it even better if we could both drop the polite little dance we've been doing.

I make that resolution, too, mind whirring with the ways I might help him shed all of his hesitation and give in to this wild, unexpected magick brewing between us.

"So, what you're saying is that he's probably not a backwoods ax murderer?"

"Kenna," I hiss into my phone, looking over my shoulder to make sure Irving hasn't come back inside the cabin. "No, he's not."

I don't know how good his hearing is, but I definitely don't want him to walk in and

hear my friends speculating on whether he's some kind of criminal.

“We have to ask, Hol,” Kenna says matter-of-factly. “I mean sure, we know where he lives and all that, but you could still be in danger.”

“I’m not in danger.”

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“Good,” Nora cuts in, much more encouragingly. “I’m so glad he found you before anything bad happened, and got you somewhere safe.”

“Yeah, me too.”

I could add that safe is a colossal understatement, but I’m a little worried I’ve already given myself away to my friends in the way I talked about Irving at the start of our conversation.

It turns out that worry isn’t entirely unfounded as Kenna speaks back up after a few-second lull in our three-way call.

“So... is he hot?”

“Kenna,” I hiss again, but I’m not sure she heard me over the deep male voice that pops up on the other end of the line where she has us on speaker.

“Who’s hot?” Blair, her dragon-shifter mate, asks.

“The grizzly Holly’s shacking up with.”

“I’m not shacking up with anyone,” I groan.

Blair’s voice is clearer when he speaks again. “I could still shift and fly up there to get you.”

“And then have her freeze to death when you fly her back down through a blizzard?”

Kenna asks.

She's not wrong.

Kenna had thrown out the possibility during our first volley of texts when I let them know where I am, but the prospect wasn't very appealing then, and is even less so now. As much as I like Blair, the idea of climbing up on dragonback and flying through the storm kicks up a dull ache of icy dread in my bones.

"I'm alright," I say, and there's a little more muffled back and forth on her end before Blair's voice fades away.

"Sorry," Kenna says. "Six months mated, and you'd think he'd be a little less grumbly when I'm talking about how hot your shifter is."

"Kenna," Nora warns, but I swear I can hear a smile in her voice.

Kenna sighs dramatically. "Okay. Fine. And I'm glad to hear you're safe, Hol. Really."

I gave them both the rundown of the last day and a half, and they seem much less likely to call in the cavalry to save me than they did when we first got on the phone.

I should have done this sooner. I shouldn't have felt that same stupid urge not to bother them, and just twenty minutes on the phone with them has my spirits even higher than before.

Even if it's also a reminder of just how much I've been holding back from them this last year.

"I'm sorry I missed your holiday party, Nora."

“There’s always next year,” she says.

“I know... I just... I feel like there’s more I should be apologizing for.”

“What do you mean?” Kenna asks.

I swallow hard. “I mean... acting the way I have since me and Cody... well, since everything happened. I know I haven’t talked about it much, and I’ve been off doing my own thing a lot, and I just... I feel like I haven’t been a very good friend.”

After a few seconds of rushed protests from them both, I cut back in.

“We don’t have to hash it all out right now,” I say, letting out a short, shaky laugh.

“But can we talk when I get back? There’s a lot I want to tell you both.”

“Of course,” Nora says.

“You know we’re always here,” Kenna adds.

“I know.”

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And I do, I really do. Even if I forget sometimes. Even if I've been lost in the fog this past year and haven't always seen it clearly, it's time to get my head back on straight and remember they both love me, broken bits and all.

After a couple more minutes, and with promises to keep them updated about when I make it home, we hang up. I settle back into the soft cushions on Irving's couch, and it's just a few more minutes after that before he reappears from outside.

He claimed he needed to get a couple of things done in his shop, but I'm almost certain that was a fib to give me some privacy to talk to my friends.

As he shrugs off his jacket and comes to join me on the couch, that little bit of consideration is just one more thing to admire about him. It's one more sappy, gooey ache in my chest, and one more reason I'm determined to find out if I'm the only one feeling this way.

8

Irving

By the end of Holly's second day with me, one thing is very clear.

I've got it bad for my temporary house guest.

I can't remember the last time I met someone I felt so instantly comfortable with. In the steady stream of conversation we keep up throughout the day and the times we lapse into easy silence, there's never a moment of discomfort. Even when she

casually drops in a question about whether or not I'm dating anyone and sends my heart leaping into my throat, a sensation that's only amplified by her small, unreadable smile when I tell her I'm not. It gives me hope I shouldn't feel that I might not be losing my mind here.

It doesn't hurt that Holly's absolutely stunning. I have to keep giving myself reminders not to stare when all I want is to admire the gleam of her golden hair, the adorable little dimples in her cheeks, the sparkle in her eyes when they catch the firelight.

The logical part of me knows I should question it more. I shouldn't feel so much so fast. I should keep some perspective and some distance and I shouldn't forget this will all be over when she leaves in a couple of days.

The less logical part of me, though...

The less logical part of me marvels over how any of this is possible. It makes me wonder just how often in life I'll meet someone I connect with so easily. Effortless, the time we spend together, like we've known each other all our lives.

Grizzly shifters aren't so fortunate—or unfortunate, I suppose, depending on who you ask—to have fated mates like some other kinds of paranormals do. If we did, though, I imagine it would feel like this.

Easy. Natural. Like the answer to a question I never knew to ask or the first deep, gasping breath taken after being underwater.

But I can't let myself go there.

As soon as the roads are passable, I'll get her down the mountain.

The old truck I drive hasn't been starting reliably for the past couple of weeks, but I'll figure something out. I can call Vic to give her a ride, or get my buddy Emery from the other side of the mountain to come out and take a look at what I suspect is a faulty alternator. I'd meant to get on that before the blizzard, but it hadn't seemed all that urgent.

It doesn't seem urgent now, either. Not when it means that as soon as the truck is back up and running, Holly will leave, but that's a problem for tomorrow.

Today, we've got a little more time to spend together. The snow is still falling and the fire's still warm, and the unexpected woman who came crashing into my life makes it all so much brighter.

With that in mind, I resolve to keep my head on straight.

I resolve to quit gawking at her, to stop all those unreasonable thoughts right in their tracks.

It's resolve that only lasts as long as it takes Holly to step out of the bathroom, where she'd been changing from her hiking clothes into something more comfortable.

She's wearing nothing more than the plaid flannel button-down I gave her a few minutes ago. It hits her at mid-thigh and leaves her shapely legs on full display. All that soft golden skin of hers gleams in the low light from the flames dancing in the hearth.

My mouth goes dry. "Didn't need the pants?"

Holly shrugs, tugging gently at the shirt. "Well, this is basically a dress on me, and it's plenty warm with the fire, so I figured they weren't necessary."

She walks over and holds the discarded sweats in question out to me, with some expression on her face I can't quite read. Her lips are turned up at the corners and there's a sparkle of... something in her eye. Some small teasing challenge, like she's just waiting for me to say something else, do something else, pull her into my arms and—

Nope. Not going there.

If she's more comfortable this way, that's fine. I don't need to be a godsdamned creep about it.

We settle onto the couch and sit in silence for a couple of minutes, watching the snow fall outside the window. The fire crackles and pops, and I'm far too aware of how easily I could reach for her, tug her to me, have her sprawled across my lap in seconds.

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Holly props her feet up on the coffee table, clad adorably in her thick woolen socks. From the corner of my eye, I see the movement shift the shirt higher on her thighs. Though I don't dare fully look over at her, in my mind's eye I can more than imagine just how much of her it puts on display. I can imagine all that fire-gilded skin, soft and so damn touchable.

What was I worried about earlier? Holly having to leave in a day or two?

At this rate, I should be more concerned about my ability to survive that long. Because the way things are going, I might just expire of sheer, pathetic longing well before that.

My grizzly agrees, grumbling his displeasure at the distance between us, the fact that my hands stay firmly in my lap instead of reaching for her, every last instinct whispering temptation in our ear.

Holly stretches her arms over her head and shifts a little on the couch to get more comfortable. She probably doesn't realize it puts her even closer to me. It's probably innocent, the way she's near enough now for me to feel her warmth, near enough that I could reach over and tug her into my lap in half a heartbeat.

I can scent her from this distance—the freshness of my soap and shampoo that smells so damn good on her, the under-notes of her natural essence, something like spring meadows and crisp, clean air.

If sunshine had a scent, it would smell like her.

But I can't think about that. I can't act on any of those impulsive, reckless instincts that would have me reach for her and bury my face in the soft waves of her hair, tug that shirt even higher so I could—

Holly's fingertips brush against my thigh—just one gentle touch—but it ricochets all the way through me. My entire body goes rigid and my grizzly roars his protest, demanding to touch her, hold her, keep her close.

“Holly.” Her name comes out lower and rougher than I intended. A warning.

I'm about to apologize, or maybe just get up and leave before I do anything else so unbelievably stupid. I'm probably scaring her. She's probably ready to bolt from this room, from this cabin, to head back out into the elements where she doesn't have to deal with me and my idiotic, desperate need for her.

Only, when I meet her eye, it's not fear I find there.

It's more of that soft, wicked teasing, another smile that's just for me. Knowing, so endlessly knowing, like she's more than aware what that one small touch did to me.

If I was fucked before, I'm obliterated now, breathless in the silence and the waning light of the fire, not daring to hope she's feeling the same.

9

Holly

I think I've pushed this grizzly to the edge of his good manners.

Finally.

Irving's gone absolutely still at my light touch against his thigh, a faint rumble kicking up deep in his chest.

"Holly," he says, voice low and gruff, rougher than I've ever heard it.

And damn, do I like the sound of my name when he says it like that.

He looks over at me, and I know I'm not imagining the hunger in his eyes, the want, the need. My breath hitches, my heart races, and an aching anticipation settles itself between my thighs.

Irving takes a deep, shuddering inhale, his body tense. "I need you to tell me if I'm misreading things. I didn't ask you to stay because I wanted to... fuck, I don't want you to feel like I expected... just... please say something and I'll back off. I won't do anything that you don't—"

"You're not misreading things," I murmur just before I move, shifting off the couch and swinging one leg over his lap.

Irving is almost too big for me to straddle.

All that broad strength beneath me spreads my thighs wide, stretching my muscles to a delicious edge and sending a pulse of desire straight to my aching core. I press myself into the soft contours of his chest and stomach, loop my arms around his neck, and tangle my hands in his hair as I savor the warmth and the size of him.

He holds himself absolutely still while I get comfortable, hands hovering in the air on either side of my hips but not touching me, like he's still not sure if he's allowed.

"Irving," I whisper, leaning in and brushing my cheek to his, trailing my lips over his bearded jaw, then lower to the column of his throat. "Touch me."

It's all the permission he needs. I kiss his Adam's apple as it bobs in a harsh swallow, and murmur my approval when his big hands land on my hips. Gripping firmly, he presses his thumbs into the divots where my thighs meet my stomach, fingers digging into soft flesh that yields immediately.

He pulls me flush against him, bucks his hips up to meet mine, and the press of his thick cock makes my pulse leap and my pussy throb.

He's huge here, too.

I mean, I shouldn't be surprised. I got a little peek at him that first day in the forest, and the man is built like some kind of Nordic god.

I've never been with a guy this... large. Most of the men I've been with have been pretty much average—a bit slimmer here, a bit more muscled there—none of them built like this. Burly, solid, like I could throw myself against him or climb him like a tree and he wouldn't budge an inch.

It thrills me. It makes me want to test that theory, to see how hard I could push, how much I could demand from him, everything he could give me before we both shatter.

His hands move over my ass, my waist, my thighs, learning all the curves of me and keeping me pinned flush against his hips. I rock on him once, twice, desperately seeking friction right where I need it most, and that rumble kicks up in his chest again.

“Holly,” he rasps, my name threaded through with urgent desire. “I want to kiss you.”

Instead of answering, I take him up on the offer, brushing my lips against his. Soft, at first, but quickly becoming something else. Polite to carnal, tentative to ravenous, he slants his lips over mine and brushes his tongue against me. I open for him and he immediately deepens the kiss. One of his hands tangles in the back of my hair, tilting my head to give him better access.

I can't stop the soft groan that breaks from the back of my throat, can't stop myself

from grasping at his hair, getting two big handfuls of it and dragging myself even closer.

He growls his approval into the kiss and tugs at the hem of my shirt, rucking it up my thighs so he can get a better hold on me over the cotton briefs I'm wearing.

Irving's hands cover my ass completely—grasping and squeezing, holding me in place when I try to squirm against him again.

“Be still,” he murmurs into my lips. “Unless you want this to be over before it's even started.”

It takes me a moment to grasp what he means, and when I do, my cheeks go pink. I pull back enough to get a better look at his face, and a shot of triumphant satisfaction snaps through me at how entirely undone he looks.

He's just as ravenous for me as I am for him, and relief floods in right alongside that triumph. I wasn't imagining it all. Irving wants this, too. Maybe he's been wanting it just as much as I have, thinking about it, fantasizing about what it would be like to—

“You like that?” Irving asks, a new, delicious edge to his voice as he slides a hand up to cradle the back of my head. “You like knowing just how worked up you make me, Holly?”

“Yes,” I whisper, and he growls again, tightening his grip on my hair.

“Then I'll have to return the favor.”

He kisses me again, slow and deliberate, deep and commanding as he goes to work taking me apart.

While he feasts on me, his hands move to the buttons running down the front of my borrowed shirt. He undoes them one by one, tearing his mouth from mine so he can kiss each bit of skin exposed inch by delicious inch until the shirt hangs completely open, baring me to him.

“I love these,” he growls into the hollow between my breasts, cupping and squeezing them. “I fucking love them.”

“Not much there to love,” I say with a breathless laugh. I know I don’t have a whole lot going on in that department, but I appreciate his enthusiasm nonetheless.

Irving stills and looks up at me from where his mouth hovers just an inch away from my skin.

“Holly.”

He sounds serious. So serious. Firelight gleams in his warm brown eyes and something in me melts at the adoration I find there.

“You’re allowed to feel however you want about your body.” He licks a lazy stroke over one nipple. “But if you think for one damn second—” His teeth, this time, rasping against my taut flesh. “—that I’m ever going to agree with—” Lips pulling and sucking, releasing with a sharp pop. “—something negative you might say about it—” Finally, a kiss, right to the center of my chest where my heart beats wildly for him. “—then you’re sorely mistaken, sweetheart.”

Sweetheart.

I’m not sure where the hell that came from, but I’m not complaining.

Truthfully, he could say anything to me in that deep, rumbling baritone of his and I’d

probably find it sexy as hell, but sweetheart?

Yeah, that'll do it.

He catches one nipple between his lips and sucks hard, drawing the sensitive peak into his mouth while he cups the other and massages slow circles around it.

Irving teases me that way for a long, long time. Like it's imperative that no single inch of me goes without being explored and worshiped, he takes his time and savors.

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It drives me out of my damn mind, has me shamelessly grinding my hips into his, whimpering low in the back of my throat formoreuntil he finally gives me what I want.

With one big hand back in my hair—gripping firmly and holding me a few inches away from him so he can see my face—he drops the other to dip into the waistband of my underwear. He skates his fingers low over the curve of my stomach, and lower still until he reaches—

“Fuck, Holly.” Irving finds my soaked pussy, sliding his fingers through the pooled wetness there. “Fuck, you love this, don’t you sweetheart?”

I can’t answer with anything resembling coherency, so I kiss him again. I grind my hips into his hand and let out a short, broken moan into his mouth when he finds my clit and circles it with a firm, commanding touch.

Tension coils low in my belly, as hot and urgent as the flames in the hearth, and after all the teasing and touch and worship he’s given me, I’m shocked to find myself already on the brink of a climax.

This is... new.

I’m usually terrible at being able to come with a partner.

I always get so far into my head about what I look or sound like, if I’m taking too long, if the guy I’m with is enjoying himself, that it hardly ever works out for me. I’m not proud to say I’ve faked more than a few orgasms in my life, or played it off and

pretended it was fine if the guy I was with asked if I came after the fact.

And Cody hardly ever bothered to ask. Or to give much of a shit after he'd gotten his and rolled over to go to sleep.

But I don't want to think about him. I don't want to think about anyone but Irving.

I don't want anything but to be here, right here, with him.

It's too late, though. Those doubts are already worming their way in and stealing my focus. As the orgasm that just started to build recedes, I can barely swallow my whimper of disappointment as I move with Irving and try to make it come back.

It must be bad enough for him to notice something is off, because his hand stills beneath me.

"Holly," he says, and the stern command in his tone breaks through my haze of worry and arousal, though I think he has to say it twice for it to really sink in. "Look at me."

I do, and the disappointment on his face makes my heart sink all the way to the hardwood floor below us.

10

Irving

I feel the moment Holly starts slipping away from me. Lost somewhere in her own head, her muscles tense, her rhythm falters, and I pull back a little so I can see her better.

Even though there's definitely still pleasure on her face, something in that tightened

expression of hers looks almost... anxious. Like she's reaching, grasping, trying to catch her climax before someone yanks it away. Unhappy with that, I still my hand and she groans in protest, chasing my fingers with her hips.

"Holly," I say, and then repeat it when it doesn't quite register the first time. "Look at me."

Slowly, she does. Her eyes are glazed and unfocused, lips swollen and hanging open slightly, but all those little furrows of worry are still etched deep into her forehead. They get even deeper as she meets my gaze, and her eyes go big and round.

"Do you trust me to take care of you?"

"I—" she starts, frowning, and I hear her silent denial.

Wherever that fucking ex of hers—or whoever's made her feel like her pleasure isn't guaranteed when she trusts someone enough to let them touch her—is tonight, I hope he's miserable. I hope he lives to regret ever treating Holly with anything less than reverence.

"Listen up, sweetheart," I tell her, letting a bit of my grizzly's growl slip into my voice and reveling in the way her body melts and her pupils blow wide at the rasped endearment. "If I don't make you come at least twice tonight, then I'm not doing my job. Your pleasure is the only pleasure that matters here, and I'm going to take care of you and make sure you get what you need."

Slowly, she nods. I stroke a hand down her bare back and she relaxes into the touch.

"Can you do that for me, Holly? Can you trust me to take care of you?"

"Yes," she breathes, and it might just be the sweetest sound I've ever heard.

I kiss her gently, easing back into things, ready to take it as slow as she needs me to, but it only takes a few short moments for her to come back to life beneath my touch. She grabs at my hair, plunges her tongue into my mouth, and a shudder rolls through her as I groan into the kiss.

Bracing a hand on the middle of her back, I pull her closer, keep her flush against me as I kiss her and kiss her and kiss her.

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I could kiss her for the rest of my life.

The thought flicks briefly through my mind, but it's chased away by the drag of Holly's teeth against my lip and the urgent roll of her hips over the iron-hard bar of my dick.

Impatient, demanding, she doesn't have to say a word for me to follow her silent order immediately.

With my other hand, I reach back down between our bodies and find the slick heat of her.

Fuck, she feels incredible.

Holly is eager and scorching against my fingers as I ease two inside of her, stretching her around them. I circle her clit with my thumb and find a rhythm she seems to enjoy, if the moans I'm devouring straight from her lips are any indication.

When I pull back to get a look at her face, all that earlier worry is gone.

It's replaced by a deep flush on her cheeks, a wild abandon in the way she arches her back and lets out a breathless gasp when I find a particularly sensitive spot inside her. Her hands brace on my shoulders, nails scoring my skin, and I follow each snap of her hips with my hand, learning just how she likes to be touched.

It's a primal thrill to watch her come apart. It's my own personal challenge to see what makes her moan and what makes a needy little whimper lodge itself in the back

of her throat, to test how much of me she can take as I slip a third finger inside her and press down hard on her clit with the heel of my palm.

And it's a challenge I've absolutely won as she comes apart in my arms. A broken scream rips from her throat and her pussy clenches around my fingers. The flush on her cheeks stains her neck, her chest, all the way to the hard peaks of her nipples, and I'm not sure I've seen anything more beautiful.

Easing her through every wave of her climax, I pump my fingers gently in and out of her, avoiding the sensitive nub of her clit after she lets out a little squeak of protest when my thumb brushes up against it. Instead, I catch one of her taut pink nipples in my mouth, drawing slowly on it and swirling my tongue around its peak before switching to the other, lavishing them both with attention until Holly slumps in my embrace, boneless and sated.

"That's one," I say, barely recognizing the deep, husky satisfaction lowering my voice.

Holly lets out a grumbled, garbled reply that isn't quite actual words, and I chuckle as I ease her off my lap.

She's pliant and trusting in my arms, letting me lay her gently back against the couch cushions as I position myself on the floor. And when I take her behind both knees, lift her legs to rest on my shoulders, and use a firm grip on her thighs to tug her right to the edge of the sofa, she lets out another desperate, needy groan and tangles her fingers into my hair, tugging me down to her wet, glistening cunt.

My grizzly loses his godsdamn mind being so close to her.

Close enough to taste, to devour, to find out if she's just as impossibly sweet and tangy as her mouth-watering scent suggests.

The first press of my mouth against her soaked core has Holly crying out again, the dip of my tongue just inside her pussy makes her hips buck up to chase the sensation, and it only takes a few heartbeats more for her to lose herself entirely.

I lose myself with her.

Some part of me can sense it's just what Holly needs—a lover to be right by her side and just as engrossed in her pleasure as she is. Focused on nothing more than making her feel good—no expectations of reciprocity hanging over her head and no pressure to perform, nothing but all the focused attention in the world and enough patience to let her get there in her own time.

Two fingers in her cunt, lips wrapped around her clit, I stroke forward inside of her and her back arches up off the couch. I do it again, and she cries out, fingers tangling in my hair and tightening almost to the edge of pain, but I'm so far beyond caring right now that I barely even feel it.

“Irving,” she gasps. “God, that’s—just like—yes, fuck, keep doing that.”

I'm not sure what's more gratifying—hearing Holly say my name in that breathy, lust-drenched voice, or having her ask for just what she wants with no hesitation and no restraint.

And I have absolutely no problem giving it to her.

Keeping my rhythm sure and steady, I give Holly all the time she needs to find her pleasure, and it's another hit of heady gratification to feel her tightening around me a few minutes later.

Holly doesn't hold back or hesitate or second guess herself as she falls over that edge. She tugs me closer, soaks my beard with her arousal as she presses herself into my

eager mouth, and shatters on a breathless cry, waves of pleasure wracking her body before she slumps into the couch cushions.

I'm hard as a fucking rock beneath the flannel pajama pants I'm wearing, but I try my best to tuck my aching dick out of the way as I crawl up beside her and pull her into my arms.

In the flickering light and warmth from the fire, I make us both comfortable. I pull a blanket up and over us and wrap Holly into my embrace with the small trembling aftershocks of her orgasm still a palpable force between us.

When she settles against me, her heavy lids flick open and a wide, dreamy smile spreads across her lips. She seems like she's half-asleep, or maybe still half-drunk with pleasure, and seeing her so relaxed, feeling her body so loose and trusting in my arms, tugs on all those same roaring instincts again.

To protect her. To make sure she's always warm and sheltered and so entirely blissed-out.

To keep her.

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That last thought should come as more of a surprise, but it settles over me with a realization that's no surprise at all. Age-old and bone deep, it feels more right than anything in the world to hug her closer and run my lips over her forehead, letting out a soft chuckle when her face scrunches up at the tickle of my beard against her nose. It's exactly where I was meant to be—right here with Holly.

Even if I know it can't last.

I push that stark truth to the furthest corner of my mind that I can.

Sure, Holly is going to have to leave in a day or two, back to Seattle and her job and her friends and her whole life waiting for her, back to reality.

But just for tonight, this is reality.

The incredible woman in my arms and the taste of her still lingering on my lips. The crackle of the fire and the snow falling in heavy sheets outside.

There's nothing in the world but this.

11

Holly

I wake up back in my own personal furnace, tucked tight into Irving's arms and surrounded by the warmth and the scent of him.

Only this time we're not tangled on a couch, but in his bed.

Bundled close and cozy under flannel sheets and a huge quilt that looks like it was handmade, I nuzzle into him and brush my cheek against the springy, coarse hair on his chest.

Dimly, I remember him carrying me up here last night after he gave me two of the most incredible orgasms of my life. I remember him tucking us both into bed and kissing my forehead, my cheeks, making sure I was comfortable and safe.

In my dreamy, half-sleeping state, it makes me think of all the times I've gone without that kind of care from a partner.

How many times have I felt like I was begging for every single crumb in my relationships?

It wasn't even just with Cody, if I'm being honest. It's a pattern I've let myself slip into too many times—accepting less than I want, less than I deserve, always settling. Always being the one to plan and carry the mental load, to do the emotional labor without ever truly feeling like I was getting the same in return.

I glance up at Irving.

These few days we have together aren't... real. They're like something out of a made-for-TV holiday movie, cozy and warm and temporary.

I shouldn't be reading so far into things, shouldn't be holding up the care and attention he's shown me in the last forty-eight hours against all my past relationships like it means something.

But I'll be damned if I can make my soft, wounded heart believe that.

And maybe I don't have to. Maybe I can just enjoy this brief respite from reality for what it is.

An exhale. A chance to slow down and catch my breath, let myself be cared for and handled with all the wonderful, aching tenderness Irving's shown me and not expect it to be anything more than what it is.

I'll be gone when the snow stops falling, when the mountain roads are passable again.

But until then?

Until then I'm going to savor every single second of this.

I turn my attention back to the big, handsome bear shifter beneath me.

Irving is sleepy and warm and still smells like mountain pine and crisp winter snow—a scent I want to bottle up and take with me when I go.

When he feels me stirring, a low rumble reverberates in his chest, and he lays a hand on my back to keep me still.

"It's too early," he mutters. "Go back to sleep, sweetheart."

I just hum in reply. My hand wanders beneath the covers, tracing the expanse of his chest, his abdomen, brushing over the soft planes of his stomach before dipping lower and—

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“Holly.” Irving’s half-hooded eyes are dark with warning, his tone graveled and husky, sending a shiver down my spine.

“You didn’t give me a chance to explore last night,” I say, leaning up to press a kiss on his bearded jaw, his neck, dragging my teeth across his skin. “Are you going to ruin my fun?”

My fingers creep lower, teasing at the hair low on his belly before I reach under the waist of his boxer-briefs, wrap them around the base of his cock, and squeeze.

Irving sucks in a harsh breath and his hips jerk off the bed, thrusting into my grip.

All that power coiled in his muscles, the broad expanse of his strength, the throbbing heat of his cock where I have my fingers wrapped around him, it thrills me. It makes a low, slow heat build in my pussy and the rest of me ache with the need to make him feel as good as he made me.

I stroke him again and he growls, hands fisting into the sheets like he’s trying to keep himself from grabbing me. It’s another shot of wicked power straight into my veins, and even though I’m already beyond drunk on it, I want more.

Kissing a trail down Irving’s throat, I ease the covers back with my free hand. In the gray morning light streaming in through the skylight, it puts him on full display.

God, he’s beautiful.

I don’t know where to look first, what to touch first, but I decide to start with the

most obvious. Reaching down, I slide his boxers and pajama pants lower, biting back a moan when the rigid length of his cock springs free.

Considering what I have in mind this morning, that moan is half admiration, half intimidation. But I'm not about to chicken out now.

I take my time exploring every inch of him. From the soft springy hair on his chest to the happy trail leading all the way down below his navel, I kiss and lick and nip at him until he seems to be just as far gone as he had me last night. Hands still fisted in the sheets, eyes screwed shut, he lets out a hissing breath when I finally make it to his cock.

I get my lips around the tip of him and his hips jerk again, forcing him a few inches into my mouth. It's not necessarily a bad thing, just a surprise, and I gasp and pull back, only to find Irving looking at me with a mixture of horror and embarrassment in his eyes.

"Holly," he says, breathless. "Fuck, I didn't mean to—"

"It's alright," I hastily assure him.

I reach one hand up to grasp his where it's knotted in the sheets. Irving loosens his grip, tangles his fingers with mine, and some of the panic melts from his expression as he takes a deep, steadying breath.

"You're just a little bigger than I'm used to," I murmur as I lower myself back to his cock. "But I think I can manage."

"Holly," he groans as I get my mouth on him again, relaxing my jaw as I take one thick inch, then two, then three, working my tongue over him as I try to get used to his size.

I flick my eyes up, and satisfaction courses through me. Head thrown back, an expression of tortured pleasure on his face, I make it my singular goal in life to take this grizzly apart.

I'm still nowhere near able to take the full length of him into my mouth, but I give it my best try and get creative with my hands, my tongue, stroking him in time with the bob of my head up and down his thick shaft.

Irving lets out a strangled shout as he comes, the hot, thick ropes of his release lashing the back of my throat. All his straining muscles tremble and shake, the taut lines of his throat and almost painful-looking pleasure on his face flooding me with triumph.

At least until his dark brown eyes flick open, hungry and entirely focused on me.

He moves faster than I can react, reaching for me and pulling me into his embrace, flipping our positions so I'm sprawled out on the bed.

And then it's not triumph filling my veins, but more of that heady, unimaginable pleasure as he takes his time easing his way down my body. With lips and tongue and teeth and all the patience in the world, he takes me apart.

Irving and I are in no hurry to get out of bed.

Even after he gives me two more toe-curling orgasms, and even as the watery light of dawn turns to full day through the skylight, we stay cuddled and close, luxuriating in each other and in having nothing to do, nowhere to go, nothing that needs our attention but this.

It gives my mind time to wander.

From all the delicious moments we shared last night, to the day we spent together, back to him finding me in the woods.

I run my hands over the hairy planes of his chest, remembering how massive he was in his other form, how terrifying. My touch makes a low growl of pleasure reverberate in his chest, and it's just another reminder of how superhuman he truly is.

“Can I...” I start, face flushing when I realize what I almost just asked him.

“Can you what, sweetheart? Because there's not a whole hell of a lot I'd say no to if you asked.”

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“Can I see him? Your grizzly? Or would that not be safe?”

I don’t know all the ins and outs of how shifting works, but from what Nora and Kenna have told me, a shifter’s animal takes over at least a little while they’re in a full shift. I’m not sure what that would mean for Irving, or for me, if I came face to face with his grizzly again, but I’m too curious not to ask.

Irving considers for a moment. “I don’t think you’d be in any danger.”

“Really?”

He huffs a soft laugh. “Really. Anyone or anything who tried to hurt you, though, would be a different story. My grizzly, well, he’s a little protective of you.”

“Just him?” I tease, and that growl kicks up again.

“Not just him,” Irving murmurs, kissing me with an unhurried intensity that makes my chest ache.

We finally disentangle from each other a few long minutes later and head downstairs.

Though my deliciously achy muscles protest at leaving the warmth of his bed, I’m spurred on by my excitement and my painful curiosity to get a better look at him in his shifted form.

I start pulling on my winter clothes, but when Irving follows me down from the loft, he’s still completely naked. All burly strength and coarse dark hair, thick cock

swinging between his thighs and a knowing, satisfied look on his face when he catches me staring.

“You ready?” he asks, and I give him an enthusiastic nod before following him outside.

Irving paces to the middle of the clearing in front of his cabin before turning to face me. He looks rugged and magickal out here in the snow, completely unbothered by the cold and looking at me with something warm and admiring in his eye as he gives me one last warning before he shifts.

“I’m ready,” I confirm again, a heartbeat before my breath catches in my throat at the sight in front of me.

Irving’s whole body trembles with the magick of his shift, and it happens almost faster than my eyes can process what I’m seeing. One second he’s there, standing in the snow, and the next a massive grizzly has taken his place, even bigger than in my hazy, half-frozen memories.

Despite his assurances I wouldn’t be in any danger, I freeze, feet rooted to the snowy ground as the bear lumbers forward. I fight the very real urge to flee from the danger in front of me, heart leaping into my throat when he reaches me and nudges my hand with his big, furry head.

“Hi,” I whisper, reaching down to remove my glove.

I run my bare fingers through his fur, and a very familiar rumble kicks up in his chest. Huge brown eyes meet mine, the same ones I’ve been so captivated by for the last two days.

With how enormous he is, I barely have to lean down at all to rest my cheek against

his soft fur. I move my hand to stroke down the side of his neck, and Irving's grizzly rumbles again, a soft, contented sound in the crisp winter air.

A bubble of incredulous laughter rises in my throat, more awe at just how impossible all of this is.

We stay that way for a little while, touching and nuzzling and wondering at the magick between us, until he shifts back and swings me up into his arms. A wide, devastatingly handsome grin spreads across his face as he carries me back inside, and it's just one more tender squeeze in my already aching heart.

The magick between us lasts for the rest of the day.

It's enough that even the quiet voice of realism in the back of my mind has gone silent. Any doubts, any reservations, any reminders that all of this is going to end sooner rather than later are shut away, tucked behind a door I latch tight and lock firmly.

They can wait for now.

We spend the day lazing and lounging, touching and kissing and basking in the fire's warmth. The snow has lightened to a few soft flurries, and with temps set to be on the rise through the night and into tomorrow, it's likely the roads will clear soon.

But I'm not thinking about that right now.

I'm thinking about Irving. I'm thinking about how easy this all feels, how natural, how wonderful. Even when I belatedly remember mid-way through the day that it's Christmas Eve, and shoot a couple of texts off to family and friends, I still feel like I'm exactly where I need to be.

Here, right here, with him.

My lazing turns into a late afternoon nap on the couch in front of the fire, and when I wake, it's fully dark outside. I sit up and look around, searching for Irving, and he reappears through the back entryway.

"I've got a surprise for you," he says, holding out a hand and helping me up.

I follow him across the room to the big wall of windows.

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“Stay here,” he tells me. “And put your hands over your eyes.”

I toss him a questioning look, but do as he says. His footsteps echo across the floorboards, pausing for a moment before I dimly sense the room plunge into darkness on the other side of my hands.

“No peeking,” he calls from somewhere on the other side of the room.

“I’m not,” I say with a laugh.

Another few silent moments pass before his footsteps return. The warmth of him washes over me a split-second before his hands brace my shoulders, turning me so I’m fully facing the window.

“Alright, you can look.”

My hands fall away and my eyes go wide.

There, in the center of the clearing, framed perfectly by the window, is a brightly lit tree. The quintessential pine, strung with lights and casting the surrounding snow in a warm golden glow.

“I hang the lights over my back patio in the summer,” Irving says, and when I crane my neck to look at him, there’s a bit of bashful color on his cheeks. “And I thought they could work for this, too. I know it’s probably not the kind of Christmas tree you’re used to, but—”

His words cut off when I turn and throw my arms around his neck. He bands his own around me, lifting me up so I'm on my tiptoes as I bury my face against his throat.

"Thank you," I croak. "For all of this, thank you."

"You never have to thank me, Holly. It makes me happy to make you happy."

My heart feels at least two sizes too big in my chest, and Irving is suddenly a blur in front of me. At least until I reach up with a small, hiccuping laugh and self-consciously wipe the tears away.

He curls his hand around my jaw. "Why tears, sweetheart?"

"I just... all of this is... I never thought I'd..." The words come out in a jumble, filled with more shaky tears that Irving uses a thumb to swipe away. "I'm just really happy."

Happy isn't anywhere near strong enough a word for what it is I feel, and all of this is still a tangle. So fast, but achingly real, this connection between us. Something new and familiar. Foreign and just like home.

And by the way Irving nods—his warm brown eyes soft and knowing, like all of this makes just as much impossible sense to him—I'm not alone in that feeling.

We're here. Together.

Right now, none of the rest of it matters.

It feels as natural as breathing to lean up on my tiptoes and wind my arms around his neck, to kiss him and taste the certainty in the smile on his lips, to draw him down to the rug in front of the fire and lose myself in him.

In the sparkle of the lights and the flickering of the flames, in the wonderful warmth of him, there's only me and Irving and nothing else in the world seems to matter.

It's all I want, and I take it without a moment of hesitation.

12

Irving

Holly surprises me by drawing me down onto the floor.

Like she's too impatient, too eager to spare even the time it would take to get upstairs to my bed.

And I'm not about to make her wait.

I'm not about to do anything but make her comfortable as I tug at the pile of blankets on the couch so I can make a haphazard nest on the floor for us.

It's not the most elegant solution, and it's made even harder because I can't seem to stop kissing her, touching her. I can't disentangle myself from her for long enough to do a proper job of it, but oh well.

It's perfect in its imperfection.

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Just like Holly, just like us, just like this whole wondrous holiday.

As soon as we're settled into those blankets, however, I get enough of a handle on myself to slow things down at least a little.

Now that we're here, we're going to savor this.

Holly is sprawled out beneath me, eyes glowing with desire and need, skin gleaming and golden, so godsdamn beautiful even in my old flannel.

The shirt hangs loosely enough on her slim frame that I could easily slip it over her head and toss it aside, bare her entirely, have her flushed and naked in the firelight in a matter of seconds.

But I'm a patient man.

If making myself a home in these woods and living with the seasons and patterns of nature has taught me anything, it's that the best things in life can't be rushed. The sun will rise in its own time and the rain will fall as long as it needs to. The longest, bitterest winters melt into the sweetest springs. A garden blooms and shares its abundance in equal measure to the time and care you put into tending it.

And the woman in my arms deserves seasons, years, decades to coax out every bit of pleasure life has to offer.

I know it as surely as I know I'll never forget the sight of her flame-kissed blond hair spread wild and glorious over the blankets. I know it like I know I'll be hearing the

sounds she makes—all her moans and gasps and her bell-bright laugh—in my dreams for as long as I live to dream them.

I know it with each gentle touch, with each centimeter of soft golden skin exposed.

If Holly's been taught to expect rushed touches and half-measures, if she's been left wanting and disappointed by men who never deserved to touch her in the first place, then it's my privilege to show her something different.

Starting with getting her naked.

I take my time undoing each button and lingering to explore all the way down. Sucking kisses against her collarbones and long, slow draws on her taut pink nipples, standing stiff and proud in the fire's golden light. Feather-light brushes of my lips against her sternum and lower, making her squirm and giggle when I reach her navel.

Every inch is mine to adore, mine to worship, mine to savor.

And when I finally, finally settle myself between her thighs and glance up, she's watching me with heavy, half-hooded eyes glazed over with pleasure. Her pretty cunt is swollen and glistening, just begging to be tasted, and the intoxicating aroma of her arousal perfumes the air between us.

I kiss my way up the inside of her thigh, dragging my teeth over warm, trembling flesh, and my grizzly growls his approval as she cants her hips, straining toward me, stretched as taut as a bowstring.

I get my mouth on her, and she cries out her pleasure. Back arching, hands tangling in my hair and pulling me closer, Holly is wild beneath me. She's demanding and greedy in the most viscerally satisfying way. I want to stoke those flames even higher, feed her greed, show her she can demand anything and everything she wants

from me and I'll give it all to her.

I shift so I'm on my back on the blankets, and take her hips in a firm grip as I haul her over me.

Holly lets out a squeak of surprise when she realizes what I intend to do.

"Irving," she breathes, a little trepidation in her voice even as her knees fall perfectly into place on either side of my head, her body settling over me like she's done this a hundred times.

"Move however it feels right," I tell her, voice a rumble against her inner thigh. "You take everything you need from me, sweetheart."

She shifts, inching herself closer to my face, but still not letting herself go completely. I urge her forward with a firm grip on her ass, keeping her anchored and giving her permission to sink onto me, press that perfect, delicious cunt of hers against my face, soak my beard, sit on the throne that was made for her.

And when she does—body loose and trusting beneath my hands, head thrown back, a fractured moan ripped from her lips as I spear my tongue into her—I've never seen anything more beautiful.

If she was glorious spread across the blankets, then like this she's something else entirely.

Reservations gone, given full rein to take her pleasure, Holly is magnificent.

She arches back, resting her hands on my chest for balance and shoving her hips toward my face, grinding her cunt into my eager lips. I growl my pleasure into the softness of her, lap at her sweet arousal, squeeze her in encouragement and a

command to continue. Holly cries out and writhes on me, nails scoring my skin and every muscle stretched and straining in abandon.

It only takes her a few short minutes to find her peak, and I'm almost disappointed. But nothing matters more than her pleasure, so I can tuck away my own greed to have her here, riding me, for hours. I grip her tighter, keep her supported as she falls off that edge, body wracked with the spasms of her release.

I ease her down to the blankets beside me while the last of her tremors subside. Praising her, telling her how beautiful she is, how good she tastes, how proud I am that she took exactly what she wanted, her cheeks flush and delightful little trembles run through her, even as she tucks her face bashfully into the side of my throat.

We'll work on that.

We'll work on her accepting the praise she more than deserves, on owning it without embarrassment, on reveling in it, on...

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Only... will we?

How much more time do we have?

I make myself shove the thoughts aside.

Tonight, we have an eternity.

Tonight, there's no tomorrow, no next week, no uncertain future.

Tonight there's just me and Holly and the sparkling magick between us, and nothing is going to ruin that.

And if I don't get inside her soon, I'm not sure I'll survive until tomorrow, anyway.

Holly reaches for me, a desperate little noise of protest lodging in her throat when I pull away.

"What are you doing?" she rasps, voice hoarse and threaded through with pleasure.

I let out a low, gruff laugh. "I'm not going to fuck you for the first time on the floor. I'm taking you to bed."

13

Holly

I could get used to being in Irving's arms.

Held steady, tucked into his embrace and still trembling with the last aftershocks of the orgasm he just gave me, I relax into his arms as he carries me to his bed and sets me down on soft flannel sheets.

I'm bare-ass naked, but he's still fully clothed in his t-shirt and pajama bottoms. He watches me with dark, intent, half-hooded eyes as he strips beside the bed.

His shirt goes first, stripped away to reveal the broad, hairy expanse of his chest and stomach. Then his pants, slid so slowly down his legs that I just know he's enjoying this. He's enjoying watching me squirm, enjoying the needy, demanding noise I make and the way I can't stop myself from reaching for him.

Irving climbs into bed wearing only a pair of black boxer-briefs. Crawling up the length of me, he settles between my spread thighs and rubs his fabric-covered erection against my bare pussy. The friction is amazing, even more so when he puts some of his weight into it, pinning me to the bed.

But it's not enough.

"Irving," I whisper, reaching down to tug at his waistband.

He kisses me long and slow and deep, continuing to rub his cock against me, but not allowing enough space between us for me to get them off of him. The pressure of him, the steady bulk of him on top of me, the warm kisses he presses to my lips and neck and breasts, all of it sends waves of pleasure coursing through me.

I thought dry-humping was just for teenagers, but god this is good. Good enough to have that low warmth building in my core again. Good enough for me to wrap my thighs around his waist and squeeze hard, a moan slipping out of me.

“I could make you come just like this, couldn’t I, sweetheart?”

I don’t even bother trying to disagree with that. I don’t do anything but rock my hips again, pressing closer, trying to get more friction so I can—

Irving pulls away.

I let out a wordless cry of protest, but he just chuckles, dropping his face to the crook of my neck and running his teeth over my too-sensitive skin while he finally, finally slides his boxers off.

“The next time you come, I want it to be on my cock. Can you do that for me, Holly? Can you let me feel that tight pussy of yours strangling me while I fill you up?”

Well, damn.

I already knew Irving had a way with words, but hearing that filth from him really, really does something for me.

“Yes,” I pant, arching my hips up in a silent demand. “Yes, I can do that.”

And I know I can.

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I know Irving won't let me stop myself from feeling every little bit of pleasure he has to give me. He'll stay with me, right here with me, until I get exactly what I need.

He rumbles his approval before reaching over to open the bedside table drawer. I hear a rustle of foil, and my next words slip out before I can fully think them through.

"You don't have to... I mean... I have an IUD. And I was tested. After Cody and I split, I got tested, and there hasn't been... there hasn't been anyone since then."

Irving freezes above me.

He withdraws his hand from the drawer and brings it to my face, smoothing back my hair and running his thumb over the heated crest of my cheek.

"I've been tested too, and it's been a long, long time since there's been anyone else for me, but... is that what you want? I'm more than alright either way, all that matters here is what you're comfortable with."

The words are slow, measured, earnest, and I can't hear anything within them that makes me think they're just platitudes. He really does want me to be comfortable, and I absolutely believe that no matter what I choose, he'll be just fine.

But his eyes tell a different story.

There's a light shining in his deep brown gaze, an edge I haven't seen there before.

It's focused, hungry, feral, like the idea of him fucking me bare is driving him just as

wild as it's driving me. Like as much as he might want to be all noble and considerate, there's also a part of him that wants to see me filled with his come, dripping with it.

I recognize that edge because I'm feeling it too.

Unhinged, irrational, undeniable, I've never felt anything like it. The deep-seated urge to have him just how he is, not even a thin layer of latex between us. So yes, this will be fine either way, but I want so much fucking more than fine.

"Yes," I tell him, and all that hunger in his eyes grows even sharper. "Yes, that's what I want, Irving. I want your cock in me. I want you to come in me, mark me, make me—"

I don't get to finish my sentence before his mouth crashes into mine. Open, carnal, devouring, he growls his approval into the kiss.

Irving takes his cock in hand and nudges it toward my entrance. Just like downstairs, though, he's in no hurry to get where he's going. He takes his time to tease me, to make sure I'm desperate and begging for it before he gives me what I want.

The thick head of his cock runs over my slick pussy. He wets himself thoroughly before sliding it up to bump against my clit. Once, twice, again, keeping the press of his warm skin oh so light against mine.

I can already feel the first stirrings of another orgasm building deep in my belly by the time he notches himself at my entrance and pushes forward an inch.

Just one.

Just enough to test me a little, to hint at everything he has to give me, before he

withdraws and runs himself up the length of my slit again.

He does that a few more times. Teasing, just teasing, until I'm squirming beneath him, nails scoring his back, teeth pressed to his throat in a bite that's half warning, half plea.

"Irving," I rasp into his skin. "Irving, please. Please."

Apparently that's the magick word, because he takes my lips again as he sinks into me. Slowly, steadily, letting me feel every single inch.

Even with as ready as I am for him, the stretch still has a little sting to it. A delicious sting. A sting that feeds the feral need in me. A sting that has me breathing deep and willing my body to soften for him, to take all of him, to—

"Holly," Irving murmurs, stilling his hips. "Easy, now. I'm going to take care of you. You just relax."

"Okay," I whisper.

I bury my face in his throat and inhale the impossible pine and winter scent of him while he works himself inside in a series of short, gentle thrusts. And when he's finally pressed all the way inside, I let out a fractured, shuddering moan, canting my hips as I try to get used to the feel of him.

"Just wait, sweetheart," he says, with a hand tightening on my hip to keep me still. "I don't want this to be over too soon."

A rush of warm satisfaction runs through me as I meet his gaze. Pleasure, so much pleasure there, along with tight, fraying control as he tries to get a handle on himself.

I bask in it. The heave of his chest against mine, the heavy press of his belly and the damp warmth of his skin, the slight tremble in his muscles as he grasps for control, I bask in it all.

And when he finally, finally starts moving, I bask in that, too.

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I meet his deep thrust with a buck of my hips, wrap my thighs around him and squeeze, clutch at his shoulders and neck and back and let out a groan of wordless want as I draw his mouth to mine and claim that, too.

He drops a hand between our bodies and finds my clit, rubbing firm strokes in perfect time with the thrust of his cock inside me, the caress of his tongue devouring each little moan and cry and whimper as he builds me towards my climax.

It hits me harder and faster than I expected, crashing over me with enough force for every one of my muscles to go taut, every nerve ending sparking to life.

Devastating, complete, more powerful than anything I've ever felt.

The groan Irving lets out sounds like it comes from the bottom of his soul as his cock swells inside of me, as I'm filled with a rush of liquid warmth. Head thrown back, every inch of him shuddering and straining, he pours himself into me, fucking me through every spasm of his climax, filling me so deep and so well.

"Holly," he gasps, falling into me. "Fuck, Holly. That was..."

"I know." My voice is shaking a little, words hoarse and thready.

We stay that way for a few long minutes. Trembling, sweaty, sharing breath and body and pleasure, and I never want it to end.

But apparently Irving gets his sanity back before I do.

“I’m going to crush you,” he mutters, moving like he’s about to lift himself off me.

“No,” I groan. The word is breathless, desperate as I get as much of myself wrapped around him as I can. It’s a losing effort. There’s just so much of him above me, far too much for me to do anything but cling to him with grasping arms and straining thighs. “Stay.”

He relents with a low chuckle, bracing his elbows on the bed and giving me more of his wonderful weight. His hips settle against mine, the snug fit of his cock and the warm, obscene wetness of our combined release trailing out of me as he thrusts in a lazy, languid rut of his body against mine. No urgency, no peak to chase, nothing but heat and tenderness so exquisite it makes my eyes sting.

“You feel so fucking incredible,” he says gruffly, a hitch in his breath when I meet his thrust with a tight squeeze of thighs around his waist. “Was it good for you, too?”

My laugh is starlight and tinsel, delightful absurdity that he would even have to ask.

Still, his dark eyes watch me carefully, something uncertain in them tugging at the tender thing in the center of my chest.

“Yes. It was good for me, Irving.”

The best I’ve ever had.

I don’t say that part, because admitting it and knowing that all of this is going to end in just a couple of days makes my chest feel fluttery and tight. Panicked, like if I don’t admit it to myself, then maybe this doesn’t have to end.

Irving starts to slide out of me, and I tighten my legs around his waist, holding him in place.

“You don’t have to... you could just... leave it.”

He doesn’t respond right away, and when I meet his gaze he’s got one dark brow raised.

“Leave it... in?”

Oh, lord.

I blush all the way to my hairline.

He huffs a low, gruff laugh. “You’re going to get cleaned up first. Then we can figure out how to keep you full all night.”

I grumble a little, but he just swats my ass.

“Up. You’re not getting a UTI on my watch.”

After a little more half-hearted grumbling—he’s right, after all, about the UTI thing—and a quick trip to the bathroom for both of us, we crawl back into bed.

Irving lets out a satisfied rumble as he pulls me into the cradle of his body, kissing my shoulder, the nape of my neck, nuzzling into my hair and finding the shell of my ear.

“You still want my cock, sweetheart?”

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I can only moan, craning my neck back and catching his lips as he snakes a hand down between our bodies. He works his fingers in me to make sure I'm ready for him.

The blunt head of his cock presses into my pussy, and I moan again. He swallows the sound as he fills me with one sure thrust, burying himself deep and rumbling his satisfaction into the kiss.

I've never felt this impossibly cozy.

And maybe that's a little weird, all things considered. Maybe cozy isn't exactly what I should be feeling in the bed of a grizzlyshifter I've only known for a couple of days, with his cock tucked inside me as we start to drift off, but that's the only word for it.

Cozy. Impossibly cozy.

Safe and warm and cared for.

Perfectly, throat-tighteningly at peace, like this is all I'll ever need.

14

Irving

Peace settles over the cabin, the forest, the whole damn world as Holly and I lie entangled in my bed.

Her body is loose and languid against mine, her head nuzzled into the arm I have banded beneath her, the length of her pressed against me. Her voice is a soft, dreamy caress in the darkness and the lingering heat of the fire drifting up from below.

“I want to hike the Pacific Crest Trail,” Holly says. “And I want to quit my job. I mean, not before I have something else figured out, but eventually.”

Both our words have been meandering for the last few minutes as we drift off, and maybe it should feel strange to have my cock buried in her while we have this conversation, but somehow... it doesn't.

It feels like the most natural thing in the world to be connected to her this way, listening to the gentle cadence of her voice and feeling the rise and fall of her breath, adjusting to the small shifting movements she makes as she gets comfortable, savoring the softness and the warmth of her, all the little bits and pieces that make her who she is.

“I think you should,” I tell her. “Maybe sooner rather than later.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah.” I press a kiss to the top of her head, lingering there as I take a long, indulgent inhale of her. “No time like the present.”

She laughs softly. “Says the man who likes to take his time.”

That's not entirely inaccurate. I do take my time. In fact, I might even take too much of it, let too much life pass me by while I stay tucked into my little hermitage up here.

But something about Holly makes me want to hurry.

Sure, I'll take every damn second I can tasting her and touching her and fucking her, but when I think about the rest of it, something deep and urgent stirs in the bottom of my soul. Some urge to change things, make things happen, like with her and her hiking trip.

In some distant, glittering future, maybe I'd go with her.

I've never been one for long-distance hikes, but my body is muscled and strong and made for the mountains. With a little prep and some training, I might be able to...

My thoughts stutter, then draw up short as I realize what I'm doing.

I'm thinking about something months, maybe years from now, when we'll be saying goodbye in just a day or two.

My half-formed fantasies don't change the fact that the gulf between our lives feels too massive to bridge.

The way Holly talks about her life back in Seattle, her friends, all her plans and everything she's achieved, I can't imagine she'd ever be happy with a life all the way out here. Or, if I'm anything like a partner she would have imagined for herself, for that matter.

Beyond that, I know myself well enough to know I'd never be happy in a city. I'd never be able to leave these woods behind or give up the happiness and solitude I've found here. Even if it's a solitude I'd like to share with her, it's also one that feels essential to my very being.

The conflict and complexity of it all settles firmly in the center of my chest in a dull, hollow ache.

But I refuse to let it in.

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I refuse to let it ruin these moments I have with Holly.

“I’ll always take my time with you, sweetheart,” I say, rumbling the words into the tender skin below her ear, and she shivers with pleasure. “All the time in the world, it’s yours.”

Sometime in the deepest, darkest hours of the night, I wake with the immediate feeling of something missing.

It only takes a few bleary moments to realize what it is.

As we slept, my cock slipped out of Holly’s tight, warm cunt, and in my half-sleeping stupor, that feels entirely unacceptable.

She stirs, and must feel that same sense of loss, because she lets out a frustrated little moan as she pushes her hips back toward mine. The swell of her pert, perfect ass presses to my erection, and I push back, the head of my cock slipping between her cheeks, sliding down to her soaked entrance.

We both groan, but Holly moves first. Faster than I expected, given she only woke a few moments ago, she turns in my arms and throws herself across my chest, claiming my mouth.

Her kiss is hard, deep, demanding, and my body roars back to life, all the lingering, hazy tendrils of sleep disappearing in an instant. I growl against her lips, and she moans, stroking her tongue against mine, moving until she’s sprawled out on top of me.

Her knees fall to either side of my hips, her naked body fitting itself into every inch of mine. I thrust up to meet her, and she moans again, grinding her cunt into the hard, ready length of my cock.

“Holly,” I say, half out of my mind and desperate for her, still reeling from the whiplash of going from dead asleep to burning for her in the span of a few heartbeats. “Sweetheart.”

I don’t know if it’s a warning, or a plea, maybe both.

With a firm grip and a decisive shift of her hips, Holly guides me inside her. She rears back, sitting up and sinking herself onto me.

Unable to help myself, I fling an arm to the side. After bashing my hand against the lamp a couple of times, I finally manage to turn it on.

And fuck, am I glad I did.

Holly has her head thrown back, eyes squeezed shut, bottom lip caught between her teeth as she rocks her hips and works herself onto my full length.

Her pretty cunt is stretched wide around my cock, her thighs straining, her breasts thrust forward with the arch of her back. Her golden hair catches the lamplight and her nipples tighten with pleasure and the slight chill in the air.

Taking her hips in a firm grip, I ease her down the last couple of inches.

“Look at you,” I breathe. “Just perfect for me, Holly.”

As if on command, she peels her eyes open and glances down. Her gaze darkens with satisfaction and hunger as she sees where I have her spread wide, where I’m sprawled

out below her, completely at her mercy.

She plants both her hands on my chest, nails biting slightly into my skin as she gasps with the change in angle, and lowers her mouth to mine.

I growl into the kiss, hips bucking up to meet her. “You want to ride me, sweetheart?”

Holly lets out another gasp, meeting my thrust. “Yes.”

“Let me see, then. Lean back.”

She obeys, bracing her hands on my thighs behind her, putting herself on full display for me.

And then she starts moving.

Lifting herself almost all the way off my cock, she sinks back down with a hard, brutal snap of her hips, making both of us groan. Once, twice, again, she finds a rhythm that suits her, rolling her body against mine, grinding, driving me out of my godsdamned mind.

It’s all I can do to stave off the climax that’s already tightening in my balls, gathering low in my belly, so fucking overstimulated by the sight and the feel of her—the tight grip of her cunt and the unimaginably erotic vision of her moving on me, taking her pleasure, claiming me, owning me.

I find the swollen bud of her clit with my thumb, giving it a firm press and growling my satisfaction at the cry it elicits from her. I do it again, moving in slow circles with a steady, unyielding pressure. I feel her cunt tighten around me, and watch pleasure and desperation break over her face as her climax builds.

“Irving,” she gasps. “Irving, god. Yes. More.”

Gods, I’ll never tire of it. I’ll never tire of hearing Holly demand what she wants, of being the one to give it to her.

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Holly comes with a strangled sob on her lips and her head thrown back, her whole body stretched and arched and straining with the power of her release. She cries my name, and I've never heard a sound so sweet.

While she's still trembling with the last aftershocks of her climax, I wrap my arms around her and shift her off me. I ease her down to the soft nest of blankets and pillows so she's laying on her belly. Moving behind her, I take her hips and pull them up and back, drawing her to her knees. Her face is still down, buried in the pillows, and I lean all the way over her to murmur into her ear.

"Is this alright?"

She nods, and I stroke a hand down her back. "I'm going to need the words, sweetheart."

"Yes," she groans. "Yes, Irving. If you don't get the fuck back inside me, I'm going to—"

Her words cut off on a broken cry as I line my cock up and thrust deep, sheathing myself in one stroke.

Buried in her incredible warmth, leaning over her and pressing myself close so I can feel all of her against me, I stay that way for a few long moments. I breathe through my threatening orgasm, not wanting it to be over so soon, and let Holly adjust to the new position.

She wriggles her hips and moans softly as she finds where she's comfortable, and it's

not long before she's shifting restlessly against me, trying to move herself on my cock.

I take her hips in a firm grip and pull back before thrusting deep once more. It's good, so fucking good, too fucking good, and after a minute or two I lose whatever scraps of control I was still holding onto.

I catch her chin in a rough grip and turn her face toward mine, devouring the gasp from her lips as I claim her mouth.

It's too much, the taste of her pleasure, the feel of her beneath me, the grip of her body and the eager press of her hips as she demands more.

I come with a low groan against her lips. I thrust deep and empty myself into her until it feels like there's nothing left of me she doesn't own.

All of it, everything I am, belongs to her in this moment.

It might just be the orgasm talking, but somewhere deep in the furthest, deepest, most primal and instinctual parts of my brain, my grizzly roars his agreement.

Hers.

Hers to claim, hers to keep.

She's all I ever wanted. All I'll ever want.

The intensity of that last thought draws me up short. It makes me wonder if I can trust myself.

I probably can't. Not where she's concerned.

I can't trust myself to be anything but desperate and greedy when it comes to Holly. And all that desperation, all that greed, whispers temptation into my mind. It weaves impossible wants and bright, sunshine futures and other pretty fantasies I can't look at too closely.

It's only going to leave me heartbroken if I do.

Though, at this point, maybe that's inevitable.

With a bit of gentle prodding and encouragement, Holly and I both take our turns to clean up in the upstairs bathroom before coming back to bed.

Holly shivers a little as she curls up against me.

The air is cooler now than when we came up to bed, and I shift to get up, intending to go back down and build the fire up, but I barely make it an inch before she's draped over me again.

"Stay," she grumbles, already half-asleep and adorably disgruntled.

"I'm just going downstairs to add some logs to the—"

"Uh-uh," she says, resolutely not letting me leave.

And... oh, well.

I can keep her warm enough.

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Shifting Holly so her back is pressed up against my front, she lets out a contented sigh and wiggles her hips at the prod of my surprisingly still-hard cock against her ass.

“In?” I murmur into the tender skin just below her ear, and Holly nods, limbs lax and accommodating as I grab her thigh and spread her open, lining myself up at her core.

I savor every soft, damp, yielding inch of her as I slide myself back inside, every flutter of her around me, the tight, perfect fit of our bodies as I bottom out and she groans.

We fall back asleep just like that.

Warm and safe. More intimately connected than I’ve ever been with another living soul.

15

Holly

Whatever dam broke between Irving and me last night released a flood, a torrent of want and need as we spend the next day tangled up in each other.

We can barely keep our hands off each other from the moment we wake in the morning, fucking twice in bed before we finally drag ourselves downstairs for breakfast. Even then, it doesn’t take us long to end up tangled together in front of the fire.

“Gods, just look at you,” Irving breathes.

Straddled across his lap, I follow his gaze to where he watches himself disappear inside of me, eyes dark at the sight of his fat cock stretching me. Irving takes my hips in his hands and lifts me up, then lowers me, feral fire burning in every inch of his expression.

“Beautiful,” he murmurs. “So beautiful, sweetheart.”

It is beautiful. Beautiful and obscene and so many other wonderful things to be here with him like this. Held by him like this. Fucked and cherished and touched with such wild tenderness as he moves me on him again and again, lifting and lowering, controlling the pace. His lips find my neck, teeth pulling at my skin in a sucking bite.

I hope he leaves a mark.

I hope he leaves something physical to match the marks he’s already made on my heart, my soul.

It’s insanity. All of this is insanity. I’m sure once I leave here and get back to the real world, outside of this wonderland where everything is heightened and intense and so terribly perfect, I’ll snap back. I’ll be able to cherish this for what it was—a beautiful impossibility that was never meant to last—but right now, that doesn’t matter.

Right now I’m in the thick of it, and I want him.

I want his cock inside me and his mark adorning my throat. I want his arms around me and his sweet words whispered into my skin. I want today and tomorrow and forever.

I want all of it.

And even though it's impossible, even though it's not real, just for now I let myself have it all. Everything I want, everything I was ever too afraid to ask for, I take it and savor it and forget the rest.

Irving's thumb finds my clit, pressing down firmly, and I let out a low, ragged scream and bury my face into the side of his throat. I drag my teeth over his skin, cry my pleasure against him, and surrender to the orgasm he draws out of me with masterful precision.

He follows a few seconds later, gripping my hips almost hard enough to bruise as his cock swells and he pours into me, coating my insides in a warm rush.

Irving grips the back of my hair and pulls my mouth to his for a desperate, messy kiss, both of us panting and groaning and entirely spent.

A few long minutes later, I lift off him and, completely unable to hold myself vertical, sprawl out onto the couch. I'm naked, fully exposed in the bright daylight shining in through the window, but I'm also so far from self-conscious right now it barely even registers.

At least not until I catch Irving watching me. His focused gaze devours me, and a satisfied flush breaks over my entire body. It's a flush that deepens when he reaches between my spread thighs and runs a thumb up the length of my slit.

I don't realize what he's doing until he pushes it inside with a slow, wet slide.

He's pushing his come back into me.

Still watching with a keen, possessive gaze, he uses his other hand to keep my thighs spread when I instinctively try to snap them shut. He gives me a squeeze and lets out a low growl, pinning me in place.

“Embarrassed, sweetheart?”

I give my head a hard shake, cheeks still burning, but also... really, really into this.

Who even am I?

I would have never, in my entire life, expected to find something so earthy, so carnal, to be so incredibly hot. I relax into his touch and he growls again, the sound of it echoing all the way through me.

“Good,” Irving says, voice warm with praise. “There’s nothing you ever have to be embarrassed about with me, Holly.”

He crawls over me, big body pressing me back into the nest of blankets on the couch, mouth taking mine in another long, slow kiss.

We spend all day just like that, lounging and fucking and scavenging from the kitchen when we get hungry, then collapsing into each other again.

Like we’re both well-aware of the ticking clock and trying to make the most of this time we have, neither of us holds a single thing back.

And even when we have to take a breather and let our bodies rebound, that closeness doesn’t ebb. It’s there, in the way we stay cuddled up together on the couch and in the softly spoken conversation in the fire’s light.

Irving tells me about the garden he grows in the summer and the plans he has for expanding his woodworking business. I tell him about my frustrations with my current job and my dreams about where my career might take me outside the bounds of corporate life. We talk about our families, our pasts, anything and everything and nothing at all.

We lose ourselves together in his bed as the sun sets over the mountains, and for a moment I can almost convince myself that it might last forever, this little slice of heaven we've found.

But I know it's a dream, a fantasy, and reality comes crashing back in all too soon.

When we wake the next morning, the change in the air is almost palpable.

Even inside the cabin, the slight humidity from the melting snow and the rising temperatures are apparent, a fact that's only confirmed when I slide out of bed and glance to the window.

All around the cabin, the snow is melting. Sun shines bright through the surrounding trees, and glistens off rivulets of water sliding down the snowbanks the storm left behind.

My stomach clenches.

Soon enough, the roads will be clear and there won't be any excuse for me to stay.

The logistics of it all are still a mystery given what Irving mentioned about his truck being out of commission, and it still looks like it'll be a little while before things have melted enough to be passable.

So we don't talk about it.

We start the day just like we did yesterday, with a round of frenzied fucking in bed followed by a breakfast that includes a whole lot of excuses for touching and kissing. And even though it's all still so painfully wonderful, I think I can see it in Irving's eyes, too, the looming specter of what's coming next, the inevitability of it.

All morning, I think I'm going to get the courage to say something.

But I can't find the words.

What can I say?

Irving, I don't know how you're feeling, but I think I've fallen half in love with you, maybe more. I've never met anyone like you. I think all I want is to...

What?

Stay here with him? I barely know him, certainly not well enough to move myself in like some kind of love-struck idiot.

Ask him to come to Seattle? I can't imagine he'd ever want to leave this place, especially when I remember what he told me about not being a fan of living in the city.

Try to make things work long distance? I feel vaguely nauseous just thinking about it, about only having little bits and pieces of him. Stolen weekends and long phone calls, the eventual taper as I get busy or he realizes I'm not worth the headache or we both decide it's just not working out.

I don't say anything, because nothing seems like enough to fully explain how I'm feeling, to make this magick between us make sense.

Or maybe it's because some part of me fears giving voice to that magick is going to ruin everything. Once we start talking about what a future between us would look like, maybe it will all fall apart. Maybe this is all we were supposed to be—a few enchanted days in a forest over Christmas.

Maybe, maybe, maybe...

In the end, all those maybes prove to be too much, so I take the coward's way out.

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I don't say anything at all, and neither does Irving.

And maybe that's more confirmation I'm not so far off the mark. Maybe he knows just as well as I do that this thing between us can't last.

It's all a tangle, so I make myself push it aside and savor these last few hours, minutes, seconds I have with him, heart growing heavier and heavier as the day wears on.

Sometime late in the afternoon, Irving and I are tangled up on his couch, dozing in front of the fire. The light outside is already getting low and long, and even more snow has melted throughout the day, though we've both stubbornly remained silent about what that means for us.

I rouse from a light sleep and stretch my arms over my head, every single one of my muscles aching in the most delicious way. A small smile turns up the corners of my lips as I survey the wreck we've made of the room around us, though it dies immediately when I catch sight of the world beyond the windows.

My eyes widen, and my mouth falls open on a gasp.

There, in the middle of the clearing outside Irving's cabin, is an enormous wolf.

It's at least twice the size of a normal wolf—huge and hulking with gray and russet fur, beautiful and terrifying at the same time.

And clutched in its jaws is...

“My pack.”

I whisper the words, and Irving stirs where he’d been dozing on the couch with me. He tightens his grip around my waist and tries to pull me back down beside him, but my attention is still wholly fixed on the wolf as all that fur starts to ripple and distort.

Between one blink and the next, there’s another incredibly hot, incredibly naked man in the middle of the snow-covered forest.

He looks younger than Irving, with a lanky build, rich brown skin, and a head of messy black hair. Scooping up the pack from where he dropped it during his shift, he lopes forward through the melting snow, apparently as unbothered by the cold as Irving.

I lose sight of him as he approaches the back door, but a rap on the wood and a muffled voice from the other side quickly follow.

“Irving, you home?” the shifter calls out. “I found some hiker’s pack washed up on the river a mile or so from here and caught a scent trail back to—oh.”

His words cut off in surprise as I swing open the door. His gaze sweeps up and down my blanket-wrapped body, and he takes a quick inhale before a wolfish grin spreads across his face.

“Hi,” I say brightly. “That’s mine.”

“So it would seem,” he says, and glances into the cabin. “Is the big guy around here some—”

“Vic,” Irving grumbles. “What the hell are you doing here?”

He's somehow managed to get his boxers back on, and pulls his tee haphazardly over his head as he steps between me and Vic, holding out his discarded pajama bottoms.

"If you wouldn't mind, I've got company."

"I can see that," Vic says, accepting the pants as his eyes dance with mirth. He hands over the pack, and I keep my gaze tactfully averted as he slips on Irving's pants and cinches the waist tight to keep them up.

"Thanks for bringing this back to me," I say, hands immediately searching for the outside pocket where I keep...

My keys.

Right where they're supposed to be, my ticket down off this mountain once I make it back to where I parked at the trailhead.

Perfect.

Just great.

"Of course," Vic says with a wide, endearing smile. "I'm just glad that you're safe. When I found the pack, I was worried something bad might have happened to whoever it belonged to, but..." He glances to Irving, that smile growing even wider. "Looks like you're just fine."

I flush, but Irving saves me from having to explain what exactly it is we've been doing up here for the past few days.

"She is," he grunts, something strangely husky in his voice as he rests a hand on my hip.

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“What happened?” Vic asks, looking between the two of us.

One glance at Irving’s face makes it all too clear he’s not thrilled with being interrupted and ready to send the wolf on his way, but I cut in before he can keep being all grumbly.

“I fell in the river.”

Giving him the cliff-notes version of the story, Vic’s eyes widen, and he barks a laugh when I get to the part about a huge, naked man appearing in the woods to save me.

“So I’ve been stranded up here,” I finish with a small, chagrin smile. “We’ve been waiting for the snow to melt and to find a way to get me back to my car at the trailhead.”

“Oh, that’s no problem,” Vic says helpfully. “I can bring my truck around and give you a ride.”

Problem solved.

It’s incredibly kind of him to offer, and gives the perfect solution, especially now that I’ve got my keys back and have nothing stopping me from climbing in my car and driving back home.

But...

My stomach sinks to somewhere near my feet, then drops all the way through the floor when I glance up and find Irving nodding, a grim, determined expression on his face.

16

Irving

I can barely hear what Vic is saying over the roaring in my ears.

I've got no idea what my body's doing, my thoughts too much of a tangle and my entire being thrumming with the wrongness of it, the idea of Holly leaving.

Dimly, I feel myself nodding.

Nodding?

No.

I can't be agreeing to any of this.

"It would have to be today, though. I'm headed out of town for the next week, so I won't be around to do it otherwise."

Vic is my best friend, his offer is more than generous, and he's still wearing that wide, friendly smile on his face, but even with all of that considered, I feel the immediate urge to slam the door in his face.

Holly can't be leaving.

Somewhere in the deep, shadowed corners of my mind, my grizzly rumbles his

agreement.

We're not letting her go.

Not now.

Not so soon.

Only... it's not soon, is it? We've been dancing around this ending ever since the snow started melting. Even if I haven't been able to fully face it, I knew this was coming.

I knew she wasn't going to stay forever.

Holly gives Vic a tentative smile. "Yeah, I guess... I guess that would work."

She turns back to me, and the look in her eyes is just more confirmation of that fact. Hesitant, but also a little relieved, maybe, to have her pack returned to her and a ride back to her car and her life waiting for her in Seattle.

"Great," Vic says cheerfully, and again, my hand twitches toward the door.

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It's not his fault. I know it's not his fault, even if I have to stop the roaring, unwarranted instinct to tell him to get the hell out of here.

I'd had it in the back of my mind to call him, anyway, once the road cleared. Knowing my truck is going to be out of commission until I can get someone up here to look at it, or some way to tow it down to town, Vic was my best bet for getting Holly back to her car.

But I never called him. I never let myself make those plans, never let it in, the very real fact that Holly is leaving.

He catches my eye, and his smile fades at whatever it is he sees on my face.

"Give us a little time?" I ask, and he nods.

"You got it, I'll come back with the truck," he says with a mock-salute, before turning and stripping off my pajama pants. He saunters off into the clearing before shifting back into his wolf, giving a brief howl of farewell before dashing into the trees.

It leaves Holly and I alone, and the silence between us is thick enough to cut with a knife. We retreat into the cabin, and as I shut the door behind us, that silence grows even deeper, more all-encompassing and absolute.

Holly pauses in the middle of the room, and I meet her there, resting a hand lightly on her shoulder and turning her to face me.

I still can't entirely read the look in her eyes, something conflicted and uncertain, though she tries to hide it with a smile.

"I could find someone else," I murmur. "I'm sure there's someone else around here who could come and give you a ride, or a way I could get my truck—"

"It's alright," Holly says brightly. Too brightly, with a smile that feels forced and false. "This is... this is a good solution. Right? And I should be getting back to... to..."

Her words trail off, her smile falters, and for one heartbreaking moment I almost lose my composure and pull her into my arms, bury my face in her hair, and beg her to stay.

Before I can, she turns and starts scanning the room. Her eyes land on her discarded clothes by the fire, and she walks over to grab them, still wrapped up in the blanket we'd been snuggling under just fifteen minutes ago.

She straightens, turns back to me, and there's a new resolve on her face. It's just as bright and shiny and forced as her smile, and I want to pull her close and kiss her until that look shatters, until she gives me a clue to what she's really feeling.

But I don't get a chance as she disappears into the bathroom to change.

It leaves me alone in the middle of the room, with no idea what to do with myself, what to say, how to fix this.

We haven't talked about any of it.

What comes next, what we are to each other, if we're going to be anything to each other, and the speed with which this reckoning has arrived makes my head spin. As a

minute passes, then two, then five, and Holly still doesn't reappear from the bathroom, I go up to the loft to change, all the while trying to sort my racing thoughts and figure out what to say to her.

If I'm estimating it right, we probably have less than a half-hour until Vic shows back up with his truck, and as I come back downstairs, each second of that time seems to slip away in fast-forward.

Only to pause into one endless, crystalline moment when Holly steps back out into the living room.

Gods above, but she's beautiful.

The most beautiful thing I've ever seen.

So beautiful it's impossible to imagine her leaving, impossible to imagine what it will be like to be alone here again when she does.

But my tongue is tied and none of the words will come out right.

I want to say something like don't go, or stay right here with me, or please, Holly, give me just a little more time.

But I can't.

I can't say a damn thing as I take in the way her face scrunches up with worry and she shifts nervously from one foot to the other, as her eyes cloud with hesitation and regret, and when I know I just might shatter if I hear her say it.

I can't stand to hear her say it.

I can't stand to hear the truth that this is over, not when I can see it written clear as day on her face.

It's already enough of a gut punch without the words to make it permanent, so I swallow whatever it was I might have said to her.

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I can't ask for more than she wants to give.

Making her feel guilty or burdening her with my own heartache won't help anything. Not when she's always been used to putting others' wants and needs over her own, not when I know she's got a full, wonderful life waiting for her, and not when this thing between us was always meant to be a beautiful, temporary impossibility.

So I do the only other thing I can think of.

I walk over and pull her into my arms, savoring the warmth of her, the scent of her, the last few minutes we have together.

17

Holly

I was right.

Irving's hugs are the softest, warmest, best hugs in the world.

Not that it changes a damn thing as he holds me in the cabin's silence and doesn't say anything, doesn't ask anything, just runs his hands up and down my arms, my back, my hair. Soft, gentle touches that feel like goodbye.

When he finally speaks, it's in his oh-so-Irving way of making sure I'm taken care of.

"Do you... do you need to clean up before you leave? Take a shower, or—"

“No,” I interrupt, shaking my head. “No. I’m fine.”

It’s a long drive back to Seattle, but I can’t bear the idea of washing away his scent on my skin before I go.

“Are you hungry? I could—”

“No,” I say again, softer this time. “I’m... I’m alright.”

A long moment of silence passes between us. Another moment where I could say something, where he could say something.

But whether because we’re both too afraid to find the words, or because we’re both well-aware of what those words would be, we don’t.

“Sit with me?” Irving asks, a murmur against the top of my head.

I nod, and he takes me by the hand and leads me over to the couch. He sits first and then pulls me into his lap, settling me against him with a low, contented rumble that draws a sharp sting of tears to the backs of my eyes.

“Can I see your phone?”

I pull it from my pocket to hand it over, then watch as he enters his own name and number into my contacts before giving it back to me.

“If you run into any trouble on the road, you can call me and I’ll find some way to get to you and help.”

I nod, and he lets out another low rumble of approval.

Irving presses a kiss to my forehead before tucking me into his chest, one big hand cradled around the back of my head and the other moving in soothing strokes up and down my back.

“Vic will get you back safely to your car,” he says, voice low and gruff. “I trust him completely, and I know he’ll be careful with you.”

“Okay.” I try to ignore the waver in my voice, the way it cracks slightly on the second syllable.

I nestle into him, and we stay just like that for a few long minutes, or maybe hours, with the way time warps and compresses. I breathe in his scent and bask in the warmth of him, desperate to make each second last a lifetime.

A few of those lifetimes later, the crunch of gravel under tires snaps us both to attention, and the unmistakable flash of headlights through the windows sends my stomach plummeting to my feet.

Vic is back, and time is up.

Rising slowly from Irving’s lap, I find myself frozen as soon as I get on my feet. Irving is, too, and the only part of him that doesn’t seem to be made of stone is the burning intensity of his gaze as he peers down at me.

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For one breathless second, I think he'll ask me to stay.

Would I say yes?

It would be insane to say yes.

We've known each other for all of four days. This isn't... real. It can't be real.

I don't know if I can even trust my own judgment here.

I spend a few days with a guy who's nice to me and incredibly good in bed, and now I'm... what? Head over heels for him? As broken as I might be when it comes to relationships, I should have a little more skepticism than that.

Only...

Even at my most jaded, I can't make myself believe that's all this is.

Irving isn't just nice, he's one of the most naturally kind, caring, thoughtful people I've ever met.

And good in bed might just be the biggest understatement known to man.

But I can't make sense of it.

My nervous system feels entirely overwhelmed, my thoughts are fried, I can't trust my own wobbly instincts, and Irving still hasn't said anything.

But Vic is waiting, and the seconds are still slipping by faster than I can process.

Desperately, I reach for any last excuse to stall.

“Can I see yours? Your phone?”

Irving nods silently and grabs it from the end table. I give him my number just like he gave me his, handing it back with a small, shaky smile.

“There. Now you can call me, too.”

He nods again, something unsettled and unreadable in his eyes. My chest swells with hope, with one last wild, desperate moment of belief he’ll be brave enough for us both.

But in the end, Irving doesn’t ask, and I don’t say anything, either. I just do my best to keep that smile on my face as I press one last kiss to his lips.

It’s meant to be gentle, a goodbye, but a moment after our lips meet, he lets out a low growl and tangles a hand into my hair, gripping hard. I gasp, and he deepens the kiss. His other hand finds my lower back and he crushes me against him, keeping me held firmly in place.

Outside, Vic taps on his horn, and I pull away from the kiss with panic and denial and sadness and a million other emotions welling up in my throat.

“I should go,” I whisper, not knowing what else to say and not quite able to make my feet start moving toward the door.

Irving nods, slow and reluctant. “You’ll drive safe? You’ll be careful on your way home?”

“Yeah. I will.”

Another pause, seconds ticking by, and Irving strokes one last gentle touch against my cheek.

“Goodbye, Holly.”

“Bye,” I whisper, and then I’m finally moving.

Out the front door, across the wet, muddy gravel on the driveway, to the passenger door of Vic’s truck. I open the door and climb in, and only then do I look back.

Irving stands in the open doorway, backlit by the warm light from inside the cabin.

He stays there as the truck pulls away. He doesn’t move an inch as we reach the end of the drive, as the cabin disappears into thick pines at the bend in the road, never taking his eyes off me.

18

Irving

The silence Holly leaves behind is deafening.

I wander into the living room, drifting like a ghost through the space that's too quiet, too empty, horribly still and somber after how bright it's been for the last few days.

Her scent lingers in the air, and the shirt of mine she was wearing last night lies crumpled on the floor where I took it off her.

I should have told her to take it.

Because I'll be damned if I'll ever be able to wear it again without thinking of her.

I'll be damned if there will ever be one single day I won't think of her.

My phone is a lead weight in my pocket, and I'm half out of my mind with the urge to call her, tell her to have Vic turn the truck around and bring her back here. I want to ask her to stay, to be with me, to...

The thoughts stop right there.

In what world would Holly want that? She's got a career and a life and friends back home. All I've got to offer her is a lonely, small life all the way up here.

Sitting down on the couch is another mistake.

Holly's scent is all over it, and so are the memories of being tangled up with her in the firelight, losing myself in her, the unimaginable pleasure—

Biting out a low curse, I throw an arm over my eyes and slump back against the cushions, willing myself to stop thinking about her.

It's no use.

Holly's in my blood, in my bones, in my soul, and I can't get the image of her leaving to fade from where it's seared into the backs of my eyelids.

Letting her leave like that makes me a godsdamn coward.

I trust Vic more than almost anyone I know, and I'm certain Holly's in good hands with him, but...

I should have gone with her.

I could have guilted Vic into bringing me back up here afterward. It probably only took one look at me for him to understand how gone I am for this woman, and how his very helpful offer also meant our time together came to an abrupt end.

But seeing her get in her car and drive away just might have broken me.

Who am I kidding?

I was going to be broken either way.

With no idea what to do with myself, no idea what might make all of this stop hurting

so fiercely and my disappointment in myself stop cutting so deeply, I push up off the couch, pull my boots on, and head for the door. Swinging it wide, I let myself out into the winter dusk, happy for the bite of cold against my skin and fresh air that doesn't scent of everything I've lost.

My eyes land on the woodpile at the edge of the yard. Holly and I burned through a good bit of what I'd already chopped for the winter keeping the cabin warm and cozy and festive for the last few days, and I suppose cutting some more is as good a way as any to do some penance. With any luck, I can tire myself out completely with a few hours of chopping and stumble inside to pass out. A night of dreamless, exhausted sleep sounds pretty damn good right now.

So I get to work.

The wood on top of the pile is from a tree that fell last spring at the edge of my property, and the cross-sections of its trunk are huge, dense, a real pain in the ass to split, which is perfect. More work for me to lug the heavy logs from the pile to the stump I have set up for cutting, more swings of the ax to be my punishment for letting who might be the best person I ever met walk out my front door.

One after the other after the other, I savor the ache in my arms, the sting of my hands gripping the handle, the frigid rasp of air in and out of my lungs.

Only, after splitting twenty or thirty logs, after I'm too damn tired to keep up the pretense of my own bullshit, something in me snaps, too.

It leaves me weak-kneed and shaking, clear-headed enough after all that exertion for the weight of my mistakes to nearly topple me into the snow, with my answer right in front of me.

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I'm going to call her.

Not now, when she could be driving and all I'd do is distract her and put her in danger, but tomorrow.

I'll call her first thing tomorrow morning.

It's nowhere near what I'd like to do, but I don't think convincing Vic to come back, pick me up, and drive me all the way to Seattle after her would be the right move here.

So I'll settle for my second best idea. I'll call her tomorrow and tell her I don't want this to be over.

Not to guilt her, not to pressure her if she wants to leave these few days we shared right here and forget about them. But just to let her know that if she wants me, I'm hers.

I'll come to Seattle every damn weekend if I have to, or as often as she wants me there. Hell, if it means the difference between having her and spending the rest of my life regretting losing her, I'll pick up and move. I can get over my hangups about living in a city if it means having her in my life.

But I'm getting ahead of myself.

For once in my life, I don't want to wait. I want everything to happen now, right now, and the fact that I can't just jump in my truck and go after her makes my gut twist

with dread. Maybe tomorrow will be too late. Maybe each mile stretching between us will just give her more time to make up her mind and put all of this in her rearview.

There's nothing I can do about that now, though, no way to fix the colossal mistake I made tonight by letting her leave without telling her how I feel. So I pick up the ax and grab another log, resolve growing firmer and firmer in my chest with each exhausted beat of my heart.

19

Holly

All the way back to the trailhead, the lump in my gut grows heavier, the gnawing feeling of wrongness, the sinking suspicion I might have just made the biggest mistake of my life.

"You alright?" Vic asks after a few minutes of weighted silence, obviously not oblivious to how miserable I must look.

"Yeah," I croak, then clear my throat to chase away the thickness there. "Yeah. I'm alright."

He nods, though the look of concern doesn't totally leave his eyes as he turns them back to the winding road in front of us.

A pang of guilt lodges itself right alongside that lump in my throat.

It's not Vic's fault I'm such a mess. It's not his fault that Irving and I couldn't have gotten our shit together and talked about everything before he so helpfully offered to bring me down the mountain.

So I try again. “Have you and Irving been friends for a long time?”

Vic glances over, a smile spreading on his lips. “Yeah. Ever since he moved up here a decade or so ago. He was a bit skeptical at first, and he took some wearing down, but I sold him on me eventually.”

I have to laugh a little at that. “Maybe you’ve lightened him up. He didn’t seem all that hard for me to convince.”

“Well, I can think of a reason or two you might have had an easier time,” Vic says, and a bit of color climbs my cheeks. “But he’s always been a big softie at heart.”

“Yeah,” I murmur as I peer out the window at the passing forest, trying to ignore the stinging at the backs of my eyes.

“Not always the best at communicating though, or making it clear how he’s feeling.”

The comment is too pointed to be entirely innocent, and when I glance over, Vic’s brow is furrowed, the corners of his lips turned down in thought.

“I hope... I hope the two of you can stay in touch. Seems like you might have had a good thing going, even if you only knew him for a couple of days.” He catches me looking, and his smile returns, a little rueful this time. “Sorry. I’m not being a very subtle wingman, am I?”

“No, you’re not,” I say with another laugh, but before I’m able to press him for any more information, we’re rounding one last bend in the road, and the trailhead parking area appears ahead.

It’s empty except for my Outback, and as we pull up, Vic reaches for his door’s handle.

“Let’s make sure everything starts up alright.”

He follows me over, grabbing my pack before I can reach for it, and carrying it for me. The back hatch pops open with a flick of the button on the fob, and when I slide in the driver's side to start it up, the ignition turns over immediately.

Perfect. All in working order.

Vic sets my pack in the back of the car, closes the hatch, and we both spend a couple of minutes clearing away the snow that's piled up on the roof and windshield over the last few days.

When we're finished, I slide back into the driver's seat and Vic stops just beside the car with his hands in his pockets. He hovers there for a moment, hesitating before he leaves.

"Thanks for the ride," I say softly. "I'm good to take it from here."

He nods. "Roads should be better the rest of the way down."

I nod, too, and am just about to reach for my door when he speaks again.

"Drive safe, Holly. And... don't write the big guy off, alright? I don't want to pry or insert myself where I shouldn't, but... just don't write him off. Even if he did something as monumentally stupid as letting you leave."

"I won't," I whisper.

"Alright," Vic says, satisfied, like he's said his piece and done his duty to his friend.

After insisting I take his number in case I run into any trouble on the road, he climbs back into his truck and drives off. It leaves me alone, idling at the trailhead with my heart in my throat and no idea what to do.

I rest my forehead on the steering wheel.

My lungs are too tight, and it's hard to get a full breath in. Indecision and doubt and that same cloying feeling of wrongness crowd in until I can barely think around them.

I tap my forehead against the wheel once, twice, again, like that might knock some sense into me.

God, what did I just do?

If I was panicking, maybe Irving was, too.

Maybe he didn't know what to say, how to process all of this. Maybe he freaked the hell out just like I did and froze up.

Maybe leaving was a gigantic mistake.

My hands are moving before I've fully registered making a decision. I throw the car into reverse, pulling out of the parkinglot and heading for the winding mountain road I just came down with Vic.

Reckless, idiotic, impulsive, are just a few of the words that come to mind as I navigate the narrow, steep route back up into the mountains, but none of them are going to stop me.

I have to know.

Even if the answer is a resoundingno, I have to know.

It's what Irving has been making me feel bold enough to do since the night he brought me to his cabin, isn't it? Ask for what I want. Let go of any guilt I might feel

about accepting what's offered to me.

For the first time in a long time, I'm going to do just that. And even if I don't get the answer I'm hoping for, I won't apologize for being brave enough to make my own wants known.

Now all I can do is hope my kind, wonderful, handsome bear shifter feels the same.

20

Holly

I white-knuckle the steering wheel all the way back to Irving's cabin.

The roads are passable, but it's still more treacherous driving than I'm used to. By the time I make it back, I'm painfully glad to be out of the car with solid ground beneath me.

It's almost fully dark out as my boots crunch over the gravel of the driveway, and with a deep breath to steady myself, I reach up and knock on Irving's door.

Only to get no response.

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I knock again, and strain my ears, but I can't hear anything from inside the house. The only thing I can hear is...

The heavy thwack of something hitting wood sounds from the other side of the cabin, followed by a pause, and then another hard thwack that splits through the silence of the winter night.

I head in that direction, walking slowly, not quite sure what I'm going to find.

A floodlight mounted on the side of the house casts a wide pool of light over the yard, and I catch sight of Irving at the far edge of it.

All around him, dozens of split logs litter the ground. A whole winter's worth of firewood.

Irving is alone in the midst of it, ax resting blade-down on a stump and big body curled inward on itself. His forehead is braced against the end of the wooden handle, and his shoulders rise and fall in long, ragged breaths.

"Vic," he says when he hears my approaching footsteps, and he sounds exhausted. So weary and defeated that it makes my throat tighten. "I'm really not in the mood for—"

"It's not Vic."

Irving's head snaps up, the ax falls from his hands, and for a few long seconds he stares at me like he can't quite believe what he's seeing.

“Hi.” My voice comes out thin and hopeful, a puff of steam in the chill of the air.

Irving strides across the clearing toward me, stopping just a couple of feet away, still looking at me like he’s not entirely convinced I’m real.

“Did you drive up here?”

I choke out a startled laugh, because of course that would be the first thing he asks.

“I did. It was fine. I wasn’t in any—”

“Holly,” he groans, closing the last of the distance between us as he throws his arms around me and hauls me up against him.

I bury my face in his neck, and my eyes burn with just how right it feels.

“I shouldn’t have left,” I rasp against his skin. “I’m so sorry. I shouldn’t have left without saying something, without—”

“Holly,” he says again, even more broken this time. “Sweetheart. Don’t apologize. I shouldn’t have let you leave without saying something. I shouldn’t have been so afraid of how much it would hurt to lose you to not even try. I’m sorry.”

I’m shaking my head before he’s even finished speaking, tears pooling in my eyes, but when I open my mouth to speak, I can’t make any words come out. All I can do is hold him even more tightly, inhale his familiar, comforting scent, and let myself sink into the moment—the near-painful relief and the joy at being back in his arms.

Irving seems to be feeling at least a little of the same, because he falls silent, too.

We stay that way for a few long minutes, alone in the snow and the peace of the

woods, the evening's darkness falling more firmly around us.

He recovers his ability to speak first. He pulls back a few inches and glances down at me, the sparkle of lights from the pine that's still shining brightly in the center of the yard reflected in his deep brown eyes.

"Let's get out of the cold and we can talk."

I nod, taking Irving's hand when he releases me from his embrace and following him back to the cabin.

"So, uh," I say as I glance at the carnage of wood around us. "Needed to take out a little frustration over me leaving?"

"No," he says, looking faintly horrified. "It's not that. I just thought if I could make myself so damn tired I couldn't see straight, then maybe it wouldn't hurt so much. Maybe I wouldn't do something insane like chase after you and—"

"Show up uninvited on my doorstep?"

Irving's laugh is low and hoarse. "You're always invited here, Holly."

I laugh, too, and it comes out just as shaky as his, then squeeze his hand again and let him lead me out of the cold.

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Irving

My grizzly roars his approval from that deep, instinctual corner of my psyche where he likes to take up residence while I'm in this form, and for once I'm in total agreement with him.

I'd roar my own approval if I didn't worry it would make Holly look at me like I've lost my mind, so I settle for the next best thing.

I lead her into the house and pause by the door so I can take off her jacket, drop to a knee and help her with her boots, then remove my own before I scoop her up into my arms.

I carry her into the living room and set her down on the couch while I build the fire back up, then join her there. Wrapping my arms around her, I tug her into my lap, into the place that will be hers for just as long as she wants it.

For a few long minutes, we sit just like that. Silent, basking in the warmth and the glow of the flames, in the flush of calm and comfort after what we both went through over the last hour.

Gods above, has it only been an hour?

I feel like I might have aged a decade in that time, but those years' worth of stress and grief melt away with each beat of my heart and each moment I have this brave, strong, wonderful woman in my arms.

“I thought...” Holly says haltingly, breaking the silence. “I thought maybe I could stay a few days longer. I don’t have to go back to work until after the new year... and, I mean, if you wouldn’t mind...”

“Of course you can stay until then.”

You can stay forever, if you want.

I make myself swallow the words. There will be time for that. Later.

I’m a patient man, after all, and all good things come with time.

“Alright,” Holly breathes, nestling closer to my chest.

Is it possible for a heart to burst from sheer tenderness?

“And after that,” she goes on, “maybe we could figure something out. Some way the two of us could... make this a thing. Keep seeing each other. I don’t... I don’t want this to be over.”

I’m so damn proud of her, in awe of her, ready to fall to my knees in front of her and thank her for having the courage to come back and fight for what she wants.

And because of that courage, I’m more than ready to meet her halfway, to figure this out and find some way forward together.

“I want that, too. I was going to call you and tell you just as soon as you got home. Whether that means me coming to Seattle to see you, or maybe even looking for a place there some—”

“I wouldn’t mind moving up here.” Holly’s cheeks flush deep pink. “I mean,

eventually. I can work from anywhere with an internet connection, and I like it up here. I... I love it up here. I'd love it even more if it meant being here with you."

My heart feels too big in my chest, and I suddenly find it impossible to speak.

"God," she says with a self-conscious laugh. "I'm probably getting way ahead of myself and scaring you, aren't I? You know what, I can just get back in my car and—"

She leans away from me, and even though I know she's not serious, I let out a low growl.

"You're not getting ahead of anything, sweetheart." I shift her in my lap so she's straddled across me. A little shiver of pleasure races through her as she gets comfortable. My cock responds immediately, hardening against her, and she shivers again. "We can take our time to figure out where we go from here, but the one thing I know is that having you here, with me, is the least scary thing in the entire world."

Holly winds her arms around my neck, burying her hands in my hair and pressing soft kisses to my jaw, my cheek, brushing her lips against mine before she whispers her reply.

"It doesn't scare me, either."

She kisses me deep, and I taste the certainty on her lips. I feel it in the way she melts into me. I hear it in the sparkling laugh she breathes into the kiss when I tighten my grip on her ass.

I know that certainty, because I feel it too.

Impossible, unbelievable, but I'm not going to question it anymore.

I'm not going to do anything but hold her and keep her close for as long as I can. For the rest of my life, if she'll have me.

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Holly moves her hips on me while we kiss, grinding against the ridge of my erection. She's restless and demanding, working herself up while she does the same to me, and when she pulls back, panting, I'm done for.

"Sweetheart," I say, low and rough, as I lean in to press my teeth to her throat. "Tell me what you want."

Anything. Anything she wants, it's hers.

"You. I want you."

With another satisfied growl, I stand from the couch, keeping Holly held firmly against me and swallowing the surprised little squeak she lets out against my lips. I carry her to the stairs and then up into the loft, sprawling her across my bed.

I join her there, pressing her into the mattress as I get to work sliding off her layers, exploring every inch I lay bare. Kisses pressed to her throat and clavicle, hands mapping the slender curves of her hips, teeth rasped lightly against the taut peaks of her breasts, the underside of her ribs, just above her navel. I take all the time I want.

She lets out another breathless laugh—effervescent with her joy—and the reality of it hits me all at once.

Time.

Holly and I have time.

Time to get to know each other more deeply. Time to figure out where this might lead. Time to savor slowly and enjoy.

With that in mind, I get back to work taking her apart bit by bit.

I taste and tease, kiss and nip, make a study of every glorious inch of her. And, when she's good and riled and ready to combust, Holly surges up and rolls me over so she can do the same. Hands threaded through my hair, lips pressed to my skin, body warm and eager against mine.

We end up on our sides, facing each other. We're both breathless, straining, desperate for it as I catch her leg around the back of the knee and hitch it up over my hip. Lining myself up at her entrance, I take her chin in my hand and kiss her deep as I thrust into her, devour her moan as we start moving together.

Holly shatters first, and I follow just a few short seconds later, spilling into her with a force that whites out the edges of my vision and narrows my entire world down to her, only her.

Even then, in the glow of the aftermath, there's no rush.

There's nothing to do and nowhere to be, nothing that matters more in this moment than savoring the connection between us.

It's later, much later, when the moon shines brightly through the skylight and the fire burns low in the fireplace downstairs, when we're cleaned up and tucked back into bed, that those moments slow even further.

Sleepy touches and even breaths, the steady beat of her heart as I rest my head on her chest and she runs her fingers through my hair.

We fall asleep just like that. Together. With all the time and all the peace in the world wrapped securely around us.

22

Holly - One year and eight months later

“Beautiful weather we’re having, isn’t it?”

I look up, startled, from where I’d been taking in the view of the sun just beginning to set over the mountains.

Beside me, an unfamiliar man who looks like he’s in his late twenties smiles down at me. There’s something expectant in his eyes, something flirty, and I fight the urge to roll my own.

Why anyone thinks the middle of the Pacific Crest Trail is an appropriate place to hit on someone, I’ll never understand.

I give him a small, tight-lipped smile that I hope reads as ‘not today, buddy’ before turning back to the view.

“Yeah,” is all I say, but he’s undeterred.

“So, you doing the whole PCT, or—”

His words cut off abruptly. When I look over, his eyes are wide and his mouth hangs open in shock. I follow his gaze and have to bite back a startled laugh.

Irving ambles out of the trees in his grizzly form, and the man at my side stumbles back, reaching for the can of bear spray on his belt loop.

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“Don’t you dare,” I say, stepping to put myself between him and my grizzly.

“Wh-what are you doing?” he stutters, shoes skittering over the rocky ground as he takes a few more steps backward. “We gotta get out of here.”

“I’m good,” I say breezily. “But be careful going down the ridge. It’s a little steep.”

The other hiker looks at me like I’ve lost my mind, eyes going even wider when Irving steps forward, plunks down beside me, and gives me a nudge with his big, furry head.

“What the fuck?” the hiker sputters. “What—what the hell is—”

Irving growls, showing off the set of truly terrifying teeth he has in this form, and the hiker trips over his own feet as he dashes off down the trail.

“Careful on the ridge!” I call after him, then turn to Irving. “Was that necessary?”

In a flash, he’s back in his human form. He hauls me up against his broad, naked chest.

“Yes.”

“Why? You scared the hell out of that poor guy.”

“He was looking at you like you’re some kind of meal to salivate over,” Irving grumbles. “And we both know the only one who gets to feast on you is me.”

I let out a huff of breath, but before I can retort, Irving nods toward the path he just appeared from.

“Found something I want to show you.”

I roll my eyes, but don't protest when he grabs his pack from where he left it next to me before he went exploring, then takes my hand and leads me forward. He's still bare-ass naked, but after a year and a half with my big, burly mountain man, I hardly bat an eye at seeing him in the buff out in the woods. I'll keep a lookout for any other wayward thru-hikers, and toss him some pants to cover up if need be, but otherwise I'm not bothered by it in the slightest.

It's just part of the grizzly shifter package, and it's a package I very, very much enjoy looking at as he heads down a narrow trail and tugs me along with him. We hike for a couple of minutes before the trail opens up and a mountain stream comes into view.

I grin at him. “Perfect.”

It's been a couple of days since we last bathed, and while it's all part and parcel of this long, incredible trip we've been on all summer, I always relish the chance to splash some water on myself to chase away the worst of the grime.

Irving and I do just that, taking turns dipping into the freezing cold stream. When we're done freshening up, we get dressed and trek back to the trail. We use the last of the daylight to make it to the small, secluded spot we had marked on the map as a possible campsite.

It's empty. Mr. Nice-Weather-We're-Having apparently decided he didn't want to stick around and risk another run-in with a huge, snarly grizzly.

Irving and I get to work setting up camp as the sun sets over the mountain.

It's a perfect evening, one of the dwindling number of days we have left as we approach the end of our hike.

This summer has been absolutely incredible, and the year of training and prep we did beforehand is more than worth it as I breathe the mountain air deep and savor the beauty of the moment.

And, as always, that appreciation also includes the beauty of the man I've fallen so very deeply in love with since that day he rescued me from the woods.

I moved up to Irving's cabin almost six months to the day after we first met, and while that might be fast in some people's books, it felt just right for us. I haven't regretted it for a second, and each new season on the mountain has brought something new to be grateful for. It's a slower, quieter life than I had before, but one that suits me perfectly.

Just before we left on this trip, I quit the biotech company I worked for in Seattle. I'd been working remote since I moved up to the cabin, but at the end of the day it was just... enough.

Enough grind. Enough striving. Enough of always trying to measure myself by someone else's ruler and someone else's definition of success.

It was one of the scariest things I've ever done, but I've already got some freelance programming and consulting work set up for when we get back from our hike, and the exhale of leaving corporate life behind was more than worth the risk.

It's just one more thing to be grateful for as I draw the fresh mountain air deep into my lungs and meet Irving's eye where he's getting something from his pack, all the love in the world shining back at me.

Irving

My heart beats fast and heavy in my chest the whole time Holly and I set up camp, and that beat nearly doubles when she glances over and smiles at me.

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Her face is lit by the setting sun, and my chest clenches at the sight. Love and tenderness and soul-deep certainty wash over me as I return her smile before turning back to my pack.

The damn thing has felt like it weighs about a thousand pounds this whole trip, though it's got nothing to do with the gear I've brought.

No, that weight is entirely because of a small velvet box I have tucked into the safest, most secure inner pocket of my pack, just waiting for the perfect moment.

And here, now, with the sun setting over the mountains and painting the sky in a wash of brilliant pink and orange, with just a few days left in this incredible summer we've spent together, it finally feels right.

While Holly's busy straightening one of the tent poles, I sneak a hand into my pack, fingers already shaky as I draw out the box and tuck it into my pocket.

"Sweetheart," I murmur, and she turns.

"Yeah?" she asks, and for a moment all I can do is stare at her, heart still hammering in my chest.

I'm fairly certain what her answer will be, but a wave of last-minute nerves settles over me.

Not because of Holly or because I'm doubting in the slightest this is what I want, but simply because I know there's nothing I'll ever want more.

Nothing. Not one single thing.

There's never been anything more important to me than her.

So I hope I don't fuck this up. I hope it's what she wants, too.

I offer her my hand. "Come here."

She gives me a bemused little smile, but takes my hand and lets me lead her a few steps away from camp, where the view opens up through a break in the trees and the splendor of the world stretches wide around us.

"Meeting you was the best thing that ever happened to me."

Her smile softens, grows wider, though she still looks a little confused as she squeezes my hand. "I could say the same."

Gods above, she's beautiful. The most beautiful thing I've ever seen.

I take a deep breath.

"Every single day of the last year and a half has been better than the last. Every single one. Everything I learn about you and every day we spend together only makes me love you more, and makes me more certain the two of us were meant to be together."

Holly's eyes widen, like she's realizing this isn't just a casual evening chat at camp, but I press on.

"I want to make you happy for the rest of your life. I want to take care of you and grow old with you and spend a lifetime with you. And that's why I wanted to ask—" I fall to a knee and pull the ring box from where I stashed it in my pocket. "Will you marry me, Holly?"

There are tears sparkling in those brilliant blue eyes of hers, but I'm pretty sure they're tears of joy as a heart-stopping grin spreads across her face and she lunges at me.

"Of course I will!"

Holly topples into me with a force that nearly knocks me on my ass, but I manage to stay upright as I catch her left hand. I pause for a moment, ring poised at the tip of her finger.

"I love you so much, sweetheart."

The first of those tears slips from the corner of her eye, and I wipe it away with my thumb, cradling her cheek.

"I love you, too," she says, and kisses me.

I kiss her back—long and thorough—sealing the sacred promise we've just made as I slide the ring onto her finger.

The kiss tastes like certainty, like forever, like everything we'll ever need.
