



# Shift Faced

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**Category:** Romance, New Adult, Paranormal

**Description:** Billie Ann grew up in Shift Faced, the rough-and-rowdy Shifter bar her stepfather ran with a firm hand and a watchful eye. After his sudden and suspicious death, the bar and all its secrets are now hers.

As the only human in the bar overflowing with supernatural beings, Billie Ann must navigate old loyalties, new enemies, and Rafe, the dangerously sexy Jaguar Shifter, who was sent to “help.” The deeper they dig, the more they realize Davey’s death wasn’t an accident... and neither is her return.

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## CHAPTER 1

The old neon sign buzzed like it always had, SHIFT FACED, blinking unevenly against the cloudy April sky. Billie Ann Carter stood just outside the bar's entrance. Her breath came slow and shallow. Not because she was cold, but because stepping through that door meant admitting the truth.

Davey wouldn't be there to greet her like he had done hundreds of times before.

Billie Ann's throat tightened as she stared at the crooked sign that once made her laugh. The place hadn't changed. The windows were still tinted to keep prying human eyes out, and the iron "No Fang, No Fur, No Problem" sign Davey hung beside the entrance still made her lips twitch. He had put it up for her because she was human. Of course, with the bar being in Assjacket, no humans were allowed, only her. The bar was barely more than a local watering hole. But it had become something more, a neutral ground for paranormals. It was a safe place for Shifters, Witches, and other paranormal beings

Davey had been a Crow Shifter with a heart too big for his own good. A man who'd fallen in love with a human woman, Billie Ann's mother, Angie, and then stepped up when cancer took her far too young. Billie Ann had only been nine when she lost her mom, and Davey didn't hesitate. He adopted her, raised her, and loved her like she was his blood.

Now, she was walking into the bar he'd built, and he wasn't there...all because of a fight that shouldn't have turned deadly.

The details were still murky. Supposedly, an altercation at the bar, a pack of out-of-town shifters looking for trouble. That was the story that was being told, but Billy Ann wasn't sold on that story. Something about it just didn't add up.

What broke her heart more than anything was that Billie Ann hadn't even gotten to say goodbye.

The funeral was tomorrow. She hadn't been back for almost a year because of her job, but she talked to her stepfather almost daily via FaceTime, but that was no more. She had loved him so much. He was her rock, and now he was gone.

She took a shaky breath and pushed the bar door open.

The scent of Shift Faced hit her like a wave. It smelled familiar of aged whiskey, cedar, and Davey's Old Spice Cologne. Tears filled her eyes at the memories of smells that assaulted her senses.

Her boots echoed against the wooden floorboards as she walked inside, each step a reminder of the girl she used to be. She had loved this place and still did.

"Billie Ann," Mac said, voice low, warm, and familiar.

Turning, she saw him enter from the back. He was tall and broad-shouldered, with chocolate-brown hair and a presence that made people instinctively straighten up. He was King of the Shifters and had been the one to call and tell her of Davey's death.

"Mac," she whispered. Her voice caught, and she thought she might break for a moment.

Mac, who was like an uncle to her, wrapped her in his arms. "I'm so damn sorry." His voice was rough with emotion as he held her. Then he pulled back, looking down

at her.

“What happened, Mac?” Her throat felt tight. “How did this happen?” All Mac had told her when he called was that her stepfather had been killed and there was an investigation.

“We don’t know for sure.” Mac frowned, his eyes turning angry. “Billie, we are still investigating, but I swear to you we will find out who is responsible for Davey’s death.”

“I know you will, Mac,” Billie replied, knowing that Mac would find Davey’s killer. She trusted him. “I just can’t believe this is real. Davey didn’t have any enemies, did he?”

“Not that I know of.” Mac shook his head. “We’ve been talking to everyone who was here that night. I’m bringing in someone who will find the one responsible.”

Billie Ann nodded, her fingers absently rubbing the old wood of the bar top, worn smooth by years of use and spilled drinks. She could almost feel Davey watching her, a familiar warmth lingering in the shadows. The silence stretched for a beat before she spoke, her voice soft and thick with emotion.

“Thank you for setting up the funeral arrangements.” Her throat tightened as the words left her. “My boss is a real asshole. He only gave me three days off.”

“Zelda did everything,” Mac replied gently, reaching for a yellow envelope he’d placed on the bar. “She wanted to be here today, but something came up.”

“Witch business.” Billie Ann smiled with a knowing chuckle.

Yeah, Witch business.” Mac grinned back, shaking his head. Zelda was one of a kind.

“She asked me to tell you she wants you to stay at our place while you’re in town.”

Billie Ann gave a faint smile. “I bet those twins keep you two running wild.”

Mac let out a soft chuckle. “They do. You probably won’t recognize them. Henry’s trying to shift already. Zelda’s convinced he’s part squirrel with how he climbs everything.”

That brought a real smile to Billie Ann’s lips. “I can’t wait to see them.”

No one said anything for a second. Billie was doing her best to keep her shit together. Sitting here seemed unreal without Davey behind the bar.

“Listen, I really appreciate the invite,” she said, voice steadier now. “But I’m going to stay in the trailer tonight. I need a little time to figure out how the hell I’m going to get through tomorrow.”

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“I don’t know, Billie.” Mac frowned. “With this guy still running around, he might come back.”

Billie’s eyes narrowed. “That would be a big mistake.” Billie Ann growled. “I know where Davey kept his shotgun and how to use it extremely well.”

Mac’s expression softened, his eyes steady on hers. “You don’t have to face this alone.”

“I know.” Billie’s chin trembled, and she blinked fast, refusing to let the tears fall. “You and Zelda... you were everything to Davey. He talked about you both like you hung the damn moon.”

“He was special,” Mac said quietly. Then he cleared his throat and held out the envelope again. “This is for you.”

Billie Ann hesitated, then took it slowly, its weight strangely heavy in her hands. “What is this?”

“The bar is yours, Billie.” Mac nodded toward the envelope. “Davey left everything to you. Shift Faced, the land, and the trailer.”

Her mouth fell open in shock. “What? Are you serious?”

Mac nodded solemnly. “All you have to do is sign the papers.” He reached into his jacket pocket and pulled out the key ring, which was thick, worn, and unmistakably familiar. He then held it out to her.

Billie Ann took it with trembling fingers, her breath catching as the keys pressed into her palm. She stared down at the ring, its weight familiar. She couldn't remember a time Davey hadn't had it clipped to his belt loop, the jangle of keys announcing his every step. He used to joke that they were magic...“Not for spells,” he'd say, “but for keeping the peace.”

Now they were hers. She blinked, her vision blurring with tears that welled too fast to stop.

Mac's hand covered hers gently. “Billie, you don't have to run the bar if you don't want to,” he said, voice low and kind. “You can sell it. We'll help you. Whatever you decide, we've got your back.”

She sniffed, trying to keep her chin from trembling. “You're a good friend, Mac.”

Her eyes drifted around the bar. The dented jukebox sat in the corner like an old friend. The scarred wooden floor she once skidded across in socked feet brought back so many memories her heart hurt. This place was her childhood, teenage hideout, and refuge when things got too loud at school or too quiet at home. It was Davey's heart, and part of hers.

“I love this place,” she whispered, almost to herself. “But... what if I'm not cut out for this? What if I fail?”

Mac's gaze didn't waver. “You won't,” he said simply, firmly. “Because Davey didn't choose you out of obligation. He chose you because he knew you could do it.”

Her throat tightened.

“You've got his fire, Billie Ann,” he added. “And your own kind of magic.”

She let out a soft, shaky laugh, her fingers tightening around the keys. Maybe she couldn't hear Davey's voice, but in that moment, she could feel him in the creak of the barstools and the scent of aged wood.

"I'll do it," she said finally, quiet but certain. "For him."

And just like that, the keys were no longer heavy with grief. They were a promise for a future...her future.

## CHAPTER 2

The funeral was over. The last handful of dirt had been tossed onto the casket, and the final words spoken beneath a sky too bright for grief. Billie Ann stood there longer than the others, her hands cold despite the sunshine and her heart aching with a hollowness she hadn't known was possible. But now, like Davey always said, it was time to head back to the place that had been his home as much as anyone who walked through the doors of...Shift Faced.

He'd joked about it so many times over the years. "When I go, just put me in the ground and get your asses back here for a drink on me. That's how I want it."

And so, that's exactly what they did.

The bar was full, the air thick with stories and laughter too loud for a day like this, but exactly how Davey would've wanted it. Everyone from Assjacket had shown up. They were elbow to elbow, raising glasses and telling tales.

Billie Ann stood behind the bar, her black shag-cut hair tucked behind one ear as she wiped a glass out of habit more than need. Her eyes scanned the room, her chest tight but full. It didn't feel right, and yet... it did.



Mac gave her a slight nod from his spot near the jukebox, a beer in his hand. Radiantly and composed in a dark velvet dress, Zelda caught Billie's eye and gave her a sad understanding wink.

Her eyes continued to sweep across the bar, taking in the familiar faces she'd grown up around, people who had laughed with Davey, fought with him, and even leaned on him. The place was packed, full of stories, memories, and quiet grief disguised with raised glasses.

Davey had been loved. Fiercely.

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Her heart tugged painfully as she continued to scan the crowd, the weight of the loss pulling her chest tight. She dropped her gaze to the worn floorboards, swallowing hard, fighting back the tears that threatened to spill again. Not here. Not now.

“Billie.” A soft voice cut through the noise, and Billie looked up.

Macy stood on the other side of the bar, trying to smile but already losing the battle. Her chin trembled, her eyes red and watery as she pulled herself onto a stool like she had a hundred times before. But tonight, everything felt different.

“Hey, Macy,” Billie said gently, managing a small smile.

“I’m so sorry,” Macy whispered, her voice cracking as the tears spilled over.

Without thinking, Billie dropped the towel she’d been nervously wringing, walked around the bar, and pulled Macy into a tight hug. The kind that didn’t need words.

“Davey loved you like a daughter,” Billie said softly, her mouth close to Macy’s ear, just loud enough for her to hear over the hum of the bar. “And I loved that, because I always wanted a sister.”

Macy broke, burying her face in Billie’s shoulder as sobs shook her small frame. “I miss him so much,” she cried. “I just can’t believe he’s gone. It doesn’t feel real.”

Billie held her tighter, her own tears finally slipping free. “Me either,” she whispered. “But he’s still here. In this place, in us and every stubborn, sarcastic, kind thing we do.”

They stood like that for a long moment, two women wrapped in loss and love, surrounded by the very legacy Davey had left behind. Macy had worked at Shift Faced ever since she was old enough to be in a bar. She didn't have a family. She was also a Crow Shifter who Davey took under his wing, so to speak, when her parents had been killed.

"What's going to happen to this place?" Macy pulled away, asking, but before Billie could say anything, Mac walked to the middle of the bar, calling for everyone's attention.

The door to the bar opened, but Billie Ann didn't look at first, figuring it was someone late from the cemetery or someone trying to sneak in unnoticed. But then a strange energy shifted the room, subtle but unmistakable, and her eyes lifted to the entrance.

A tall, dark, and undeniably handsome stranger stepped through the doorway. There was a calm, quiet power in the way he moved. His long, dark hair was tousled, wind-swept from the mountain air, and his sharp jaw was shadowed with stubble. He wore a black worn leather jacket that stretched overbroad shoulders, and his boots thudded softly against the old floorboards.

He was a stranger. But not just any stranger. Something about him crackled in the air, something not quite human. Billie Ann's breath caught. Her heart gave a little start.

Before she could look away, his eyes found hers. Dark, unreadable, and intense. She forced herself to blink and turned her attention to the stage where Mac, King of the Shifters, stepped up and raised his hand.

The crowd quieted instantly.

Mac's chocolate-brown hair was pulled back at his neck, and even though his broad

frame looked solid as ever, there was grief etched into his expression. Zelda, his delicate mate, stood just off to the side, her presence radiant and strong.

Mac cleared his throat. “Thank you all for being here today. Davey didn’t want a funeral full of tears and long speeches. He wanted this.” His arm stretched toward the crowd. “Family. Friends. Drinks. Stories. Laughter. I know he is smiling down at us today.”

A soft murmur of agreement rose.

“This bar meant everything to him. It was more than a business to him. It was a safe haven for those like us. A place where everyone, no matter what they were, could be themselves. He protected it like he protected all of us.”

Billie Ann’s eyes stung, and she glanced down, fighting the rush of emotion clawing up her throat.

“And now,” Mac continued, his voice softening, “he’s passed that torch.”

He turned his eyes to her, and everyone followed.

“This bar now belongs to Billie Ann Carter,” he said, pride and sadness threaded in his tone. “Davey left it all to her. And there’s not a soul here who would disagree that there’s no one better to carry on what he built.”

Applause broke out, gentle at first and then stronger. A few whoops followed, and a couple raised glasses. Zelda beamed at her.

Billie stood frozen as the reality sank in all over again. It was hers. The place that held her childhood, her love for the man who’d been more of a father than anyone ever had, and now her grief at losing him.

She glanced up through the mist of tears and found the stranger again. Still watching her. Who was he?

“The bar is staying open?” Macy’s eyes were wide with hope.

Billie Ann tore her gaze from the stranger to smile down at Macy. “Yes, Shift Faced is staying open.”

Wicked stepped forward first, her long, wild black hair cascading down her back like an untamed river. There was a fire in her magic, mixed with mischief and wrapped in grace. Wicked was a powerful witch who had always radiated confidence, even when she pretended she didn’t care. Billie Ann had always admired that about her.

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Thorne stood close, tall and steady, a quiet storm behind dark eyes. A Panther Shifter through and through. He was dangerous when provoked, but fiercely loyal to the ones he loved. The way his hand found the curve of Wicked's back was unconscious, instinctive. They were tied together by more than just affection. There was history, a bond that couldn't be broken, and it showed.

"You've got no idea how good it is to see your face," Wicked said, pulling Billie Ann into a hug that smelled of herbs, ink, and something uniquely her. "You've been gone way too long."

"It has been way too long," Billie Ann murmured, holding on just a bit longer. When she pulled back, she grinned through the mist in her eyes.

"We're sorry about Davey, Billie." Wicked sniffed. "If you need anything at all, we are here for you."

"Thank you. That means a lot." She replied and meant it. "Where's Bruce?" she asked, glancing around. The odd cat had always been more than just a pet. He was Wicked's familiar and had somehow wormed his way into Billie's heart too.

"Brooding in the tattoo shop," Wicked replied with a roll of her eyes. "Said funerals make his fur fall out. He's dramatic like that. The truth is, he's a mess about Davey, just as we all are. He and Davey had a special friendship."

Billie let out a soft laugh, tears returning anyway. "I missed that weird little pain in the ass."

“Thorne,” Mac called out, lifting his chin and motioning him over to where he stood with Zelda and the stranger.

“I’ll be back,” Thorne said, kissing Wicked’s lips quickly before heading their way, his presence quiet but commanding as always.

Billie Ann’s gaze drifted immediately to the tall man beside Mac. He stood just slightly apart, like he wasn’t sure if he belonged or didn’t care. Long dark hair brushed his shoulders, and his features were rugged in a way that made her breath hitch. He looked like trouble and comfort all rolled into one.

“Who is that?” she asked, leaning closer to Wicked. “I’ve never seen him before. Is he new in town?”

“I don’t know,” Wicked replied, one brow arched as she gave a low, appreciative whistle. “But he’s definitely looking at you.”

Billie Ann’s eyes flicked up, and sure enough, the stranger’s eyes were locked on her. His gaze was intense and unapologetic, like he already knew her somehow. Heat crept up her neck as she quickly looked away, her fingers brushing the side of her neck where her pulse thudded.

“Macy, do you know him?” she asked, hoping for some kind of explanation.

“Unfortunately, no,” Macy sighed wistfully.

Both Billie Ann and Wicked looked at Macy, who was staring at the stranger, then glanced at each other before bursting into laughter.

“What?” Macy asked, clearly flustered. “He’s freaking hot.”

“God, I’ve missed you,” Billie Ann said with a soft chuckle, pulling her into a quick, heartfelt hug. It felt good to laugh and feel normal again, if only for a second.

But even as they shared that moment, her thoughts wandered back to the man across the room... and the way his eyes hadn’t left her.

### CHAPTER 3

Rafe’s sharp eyes swept the room the moment he opened the door. The buzz of voices and clinking glasses faded beneath the low hum of instinct that kicked in the second his boots crossed the threshold. The scent of grief still lingered in the air, tangled up with old wood, spilled whiskey, and something else—something unmistakably hers.

His gaze landed on her instantly. Her dark shag-cut framed wide, blue eyes that didn’t know she was being watched... yet. But his Jaguar instincts told him, without a shred of doubt, she was the reason he was here.

Mac hadn’t said much over the phone. Just that an old friend had been murdered, and he needed someone who could hunt without being seen. Track without losing focus. Eliminate threats without leaving a trace. Rafe hadn’t hesitated.

Davey Carter. The name struck a chord, even though he’d only met the Crow Shifter once. That night had been brief; a beer was shared with Mac in this very bar, and Davey cleaned glasses behind the counter with a smile that made everyone feel like family. Mac didn’t call in favors lightly. And Rafe didn’t ignore a call for justice, not when it was this personal.

He hadn’t planned to return to Assjacket, not when his home and sanctuary lay far south of the border in the dense forests of Mexico. But when Mac called, Rafe didn’t ask questions. He just packed a bag and crossed the border.



And now here he stood in a bar that held echoes of loss, facing a woman who had no idea her world was about to change again.

And somewhere out there... was someone who had taken a life they shouldn't have. Rafe's jaw clenched as he stepped fully inside. The hunt had begun.

After Mac finished the speech he was making, Rafe made his way through the crowded bar. It was like the air shifted around him. Conversations stuttered, backs straightened, and bodies moved—some subtly, others not so much—to clear a path. Shifters sensed danger, and Rafe wore it like a second skin, not out of arrogance but truth. There were few in their world who could match his precision, his skill, or his capacity for lethal calm.

Only Mac stood his ground, his gaze steady and welcoming. The only one in the room who didn't flinch when those Jaguar-sharp eyes locked onto his.

“Rafe,” Mac greeted, gripping his hand in a firm shake, brotherhood and history between them. “Glad you made it. I wasn't expecting you until tomorrow.”

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Rafe gave a small nod, his expression unreadable but respectful. There weren't many men he trusted, even fewer he considered friends. Mac had earned that long ago. Not because he wore the crown of King of Shifters, but because he carried it without ego. His word meant something, and if Rafe ever called, Mac would show up, no questions asked, and with no hesitation.

"Wrapped up a job early," Rafe said, his voice a low rumble. "Figured I'd get a head start."

Then he turned to Zelda, a slow, rare smile tugging at the corner of his mouth as he leaned in to hug her. "Still the prettiest Witch north and south of the border," he said warmly.

Zelda hugged him back with a laugh, her delicate arms surprisingly strong around his shoulders. "Flatter me all you want, Rafe. I'm still married."

Rafe pulled back and nodded toward Mac, his expression shifting into mock severity. "You treating her right?"

Mac smirked. "Every damn day."

"Good," Rafe replied, his voice clipped but meaningful. "I'd hate to make you look bad and take you down."

The three of them chuckled softly, but beneath it, the weight of why he was there crept in again like a shadow stretching long behind them.

Zelda's smile faded as she touched Rafe's arm gently. "Thank you for coming."

His jaw tensed slightly. "I didn't know Davey well, but I know what he meant to this town. You said he had a stepdaughter. Is that her?" His eyes drifted to the beautiful woman who carried her grief like a cape.

"Yeah, that's Billie," Mac said, his voice gentling as he also looked to where she stood near the jukebox, talking quietly with a few of the locals.

"Billie?" Rafe repeated, his brow pulling together as he glanced between Zelda and the woman. His gaze lingered on her. That name didn't quite fit the image before him. There was something too soft, striking, and quietly fierce about her. "She doesn't look like a Billie."

Zelda gave Mac a light smack on the arm, accompanied by a look that said, "Men and their cluelessness."

"It's Billie Ann," she corrected gently, her voice rich with affection. "Davey always called her Billie. And since she basically grew up in this bar, most folks just followed suit."

Rafe looked back at the woman, Billie Ann, and watched as she smiled, her expression both brave and shaky. He noticed how she leaned in to hug a friend, as if she were holding on for both of them. A flicker of something settled in his chest, his Jaguar stirred.

"Did I hear she is now the owner of this place?" Rafe finally pulled his eyes away from her to look at Mac.

"Yeah, I just found that out myself when Davey's lawyer contacted me," Mac said, then frowned, seeing the concern on Rafe's face. "Why?"

“After you called, I thought about what you told me, and this doesn’t seem like a regular bar fight gone bad. From what you told me, he had no enemies, was well loved, and owned the place outright.” Rafe informed Mac. “There are bidding wars happening all over this part of the country, especially with mining making a comeback. Did Davey ever say anything about someone approaching him about this property?”

“This whole area is pretty much hidden from the human eye.” Zelda broke in. “I made damn sure of that. It’s not, nor will it ever be for sale. We just had a developer come here trying to buy up different areas. Wicked’s tattoo shop and the property of my cousin Talon’s mate, Piper. But that turned out to be a dirty politician. No, I think this might have been more personal.”

“What makes you think that?” Rafe asked, knowing that Zelda’s power was unmatched, so when she said something, you’d best listen.

“I’m not sure.” Zelda frowned. “And if it was the property and bar, then it was an inside job, meaning not anyone from the outside world.”

“Have you talked to the Alpha of the Crow Shifters?” Rafe frowned, not liking the sound of this, as his eyes returned to Billie Ann, who was now watching them all closely.

“No. Most of them have gone to a migration meeting. Thorne was going to try to get hold of him,” Mac said, then called Thorne over.

“Damn, Rafe.” Thorne shook his hand. “It’s been too long, friend.”

“It sure has.” Rafe nodded, noticing Wicked, he gave her a wink. “See, you finally won over Wicked. She sure took you on one hell of a ride.”

“That she did.” Thorne chuckled with a huge grin. “But she was worth the chase.”

Rafe’s eyes flickered to Billie Ann and then back to Mac. “Does she know why I’m here?”

“No,” Mac frowned. “Not yet.”

“What’s going on?” Thorne became serious.

“Do you think this is related to a property dispute?” Rafe asked Thorne since he was in real estate.

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“I told him about Piper’s ordeal,” Mac informed Thorne.

“If it is, it is a totally different situation because it was the mayor of that town who was up to no good. The well-known developer’s name was being used in the scam.” Thorne replied with a frown. “Even though I don’t think this situation is connected with what happened with Talon and Piper, we can’t be sure this incident wasn’t someone wanting the bar.”

“How profitable is this place?” Rafe asked, looking around at the crowd, who were obviously there because of the funeral and not the regular bar crowd.

“Very,” Mac answered with a frown. “But if what you’re thinking is true, then this is not someone from Assjacket. They wouldn’t dare.”

“Another thing we need to take into consideration is that mining is coming back. This area is part of coal country. Thorne tossed out. “Shady dealings with properties aren’t new, but with mining becoming a prominent thing once again, we probably shouldn’t rule that out.”

“I want her to know exactly who I am and why I’m here.” Rafe nodded toward Billie Ann, who was watching them closely. “She has a right to know what she could be walking into.”

“Is Billie Ann in danger?” Zelda’s worried voice held a tinge of protectiveness.

At the mention of her name, his eyes slid across the room again, right to her. She was watching him now, a furrow in her brow, worry dancing just beneath the surface. She

knew something was up. Smart woman.

Rafe didn't hesitate. "Not while I'm around." And he meant it. He took his job seriously, and he had a feeling that this job was going to turn very personal.

## CHAPTER 4

Billie Ann slipped behind the bar, her steps quiet, almost instinctual. This had been her second home for so long that movement around here was like muscle memory. Without making a fuss, she reached for a bottle of whiskey she knew Davey had always kept tucked just behind the register. She didn't usually drink, especially not alone, but today wasn't usual.

Her fingers trembled slightly as she poured the amber liquid into a shot glass. The weight of everything—Davey's funeral, the flood of condolences, the eyes watching her like she might break—was too much. She lifted the glass and knocked it back without hesitation.

The burn was immediate and harsh, coiling down her throat like fire. She winced, coughing softly. "Damn," she muttered under her breath. "That was awful." But the sharp edge of it helped dull the ache inside her, if only for a heartbeat.

A sharp whistle broke her focus, and her brows furrowed as she glanced around. The crowd had thinned, people slowly filtering out, their faces tired and tear-worn. She looked toward the sound but saw nothing; maybe she imagined it. Grief had a way of playing tricks on your senses.

Still holding the glass, she sighed and poured another. She didn't care if it burned twice as much. It was better than letting herself unravel. She tossed it back with a bit more grit this time, then rinsed the shot glass in the sink behind the bar.

And that's when she felt it...that stare.

She looked up, and her eyes locked with his. The stranger. Tall, dark, and very handsome like he'd been carved out of danger and silence. His gaze didn't waver, and for a split second, Billie Ann forgot how to breathe. There was something in his expression that was like a magnet, making her want to get closer to him.

Her stomach fluttered uneasily. Something about him made her feel exposed, like he could see through her bravado and right into the tangled mess she was trying so hard to keep buried.

She turned away quickly, trying to shake off the feeling, but she couldn't help it. Her mind circled back to the small group he'd been standing with earlier. Mac, Zelda, and Thorne. All of them huddled in low conversation, glancing her way more than once.

She wasn't stupid. She knew when people were talking about her.

The question was...about what?

"Billie."

She froze, eyebrows furrowing as she heard her name echo from the direction of the kitchen. The bar was nearly empty now, shadows creeping in from the back as the night wore on.

"Billie Ann, down here, dammit! Are you blindanddeaf? I've been whistling like a damn canary trying to get your attention!"

Her brow lifted. "Bruce?"

"No, it's God. I've descended in feline form to pass judgment on your terrible drink



choices.” Bruce snorted and motioned for her to follow him with his head. “Keep the lights off.”

Rolling her eyes, she stepped inside and promptly cracked her knee against the edge of a metal prep table.

“I’m going to kill myself,” she groaned, grabbing her knee as pain shot up her leg. “Why the hell can’t I turn on the lights?”

“Because I don’t want anyone to know I’m here,” Bruce’s voice came from somewhere near the back. “I’ve got a reputation to uphold. Can’t have anyone seeing me...like this.”

Still rubbing her leg, Billie Ann squinted and carefully made her way through the kitchen, following his voice. Her eyes slowly adjusted to the gloom, and there he was, perched on the stainless steel counter near the sink, tail tucked tight around his body, his black fur slightly ruffled, and his ears drooped more than usual.

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Her heart squeezed. Sighing, she hopped up on the counter and sat next to him. “You okay?”

There was a long pause. Bruce stared off toward the far wall, not meeting her eyes. “The Bruce doesn’t cry in public. Ever. Especially not in front of Fat Bastard. He’d never let me live it down.”

Billie Ann grinned at that.

“But dammit, Billie.” His voice cracked, low and rough. “Davey’s gone. Just like that. No warning. No time for a goodbye. I... I didn’t even get to tell him he still owed me two cans of tuna.”

Her throat tightened. “Yeah. It doesn’t feel real, does it?”

Bruce shook his head, eyes still locked on nothing. “He made the best fried catfish, never skimmed on snacks, and always let me sleep on the good chair, even when he pretended to be annoyed about it. He let us hold our poker games here when Wanda threw us out of the Assjacket Diner.”

“Why did you get thrown out of Wanda’s place?” Billie Ann glanced over at him. A talking cat who played poker would freak most humans out, but being raised here in Assjacket, she had met all kinds of paranormals. To her, this conversation was totally normal.

Bruce sighed, shaking his head. “Fat Bastard and I got into a fight. Claws came out, and fur was flying because he said I was cheating.”

“Were you?” Billie Ann cocked her eyebrow. She knew Bruce well.

Bruce finally looked at her. “You wound me.” He said, then shrugged as much as a cat could shrug. “And for your information, I wasn’t cheating... that time.”

“So, Wanda tossed you guys out,” Billie said, swinging her legs back and forth on the counter.

“Yeah, said it was unsanitary.” He snorted in disgust. “I’m the cleanest cat you’ll ever meet. I lick my balls daily.”

“Too much info, Bruce.” Billie Ann said, shaking her head.

“Yeah, well, if you don’t want to know all the tea, don’t ask.” Bruce shot back. “Reach behind that container and grab that bottle.”

Frowning, Billie Ann reached behind it and felt the bottle. “Was Davey drinking a lot?” She heard the worry in her own voice as she asked that question. Davey took a few shots and drank a beer or two, but she never knew him to have a problem.

“Nah, he kept that back here for our poker games,” Bruce said as she sat up. “Open it up and give me a swig or two.”

Billie Ann realized her life had been extraordinary compared to other humans as she enabled a cat with booze.

“He loved you. You know that, don’t you?” Bruce said, wiping his mouth with the back of his paw.

She did know that. Billie blinked rapidly, pressing her lips together as she looked around the kitchen, imagining Davey’s heavy footsteps, the jingle of his keys, his

low, grumbly humming as he prepped for the day. The silence now felt deafening.

“I keep expecting to hear him banging around back here, yelling about how I stacked the glasses wrong,” she whispered, her voice trembling.

For a while, they sat there in silence, in the dark. One grieving woman and one proud, heartbroken cat. She was finding quiet comfort in the company of someone who loved Davey just as much as she did.

“Yeah, I’m going to miss him,” Bruce said, clearing his throat. “Even when the old bastard tried to give me cat treats.”

“The Bruce doesn’t do cat treats?” Billie Ann teased with a half grin.

“The Bruce doesn’t do cat treats.” He agreed with a nod. Then he used his paw to push the bottle in her hand toward her. “Go ahead. I don’t have germs. You probably need that more than me.”

“You just told me you licked your balls daily.” Billie Ann eyed him. “I think I’ll pass.”

They stared at each other for a second, and then burst out laughing. It was the kind of laughter that comes when you’re holding too much inside and need something, anything, to crack it open. For just a moment, the weight of grief lifted enough to let in a little light.

It was right then that the kitchen lights clicked on, flooding the space and making them both wince.

“Dammit,” Bruce muttered, throwing a paw dramatically over his face. “Turn the lights off, man. We were having a moment.”

Billie Ann blinked against the harsh brightness, squinting as her eyes adjusted. She caught Mac eyeing the whiskey bottle still clutched in her hand. With a sly glance toward Bruce, she held it out toward him.

“You want a swig?” she offered with a mischievous grin.

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“If that’s Bruce’s stash, hell no,” Mac said with a dramatic shudder. “I’ve seen him lick his balls.”

Billie Ann lost it. The laughter bubbled up and burst out of her before she could stop it. The two shots she'd thrown back must've kicked in, loosening the edges of her grief just enough for the giggles to take over. She covered her mouth, shouldershaking as Bruce mumbled something about "double standards" and "feline hygiene."

When she finally caught her breath, she looked up and her laughter quieted the second her eyes met the stranger’s intense stare.

He stood just beyond Mac, tall and still, watching her with a look she couldn't quite name. He didn’t smile fully, just a small curve of his mouth that made her pulse skip for no good reason. His eyes held hers, steady and unflinching, and for a moment, the rest of the room faded away.

Mac cleared his throat, breaking the silence as he gestured between them. “Billie Ann, this is Rafe. He’s the one I called in to find out who did this to Davey.”

Rafe stepped forward, giving her a respectful nod. “I’m sorry for your loss,” he said quietly, his voice deep and masculine.

Billie Ann straightened, still holding the whiskey bottle, her gaze never leaving his. “Thank you,” she said, her voice softer now. “Davey... he was everything to me.”

“I know,” Rafe replied. “That’s why I’m here.”

His words sent her heart racing, but she didn't know exactly why. The kitchen went quiet again, not heavy this time, but full. Full of unspoken words, shared understanding, and the strange spark of something new and unexpected.

Bruce, never one to let a moment settle, let out a dramatic sigh. "Well, this just got all kinds of Hallmark real quick. Anybody got tissues?"

"I see you still think you're funny," Rafe said to Bruce with a smirk.

"Good to see you, Rafe," Bruce replied, then stood and stretched. "And I've always been funny, you just don't have a sense of humor."

Billie Ann shook her head, a smile tugging at her lips as she glanced down at the grumpy furball beside her. She passed the bottle back to him and hopped off the counter.

"You okay?" Mac asked gently, his voice full of brotherly concern.

"No," she admitted, then glanced at Rafe before looking away. "But I'm working on it."

## CHAPTER 5

They all walked out of the kitchen toward one of the larger tables in the bar. Rafe quietly pulled out a chair for Billie Ann. She blinked, surprised by the small gesture. No one had ever done that for her before. It was such a simple thing, but it hit her somewhere deep. She offered him a soft smile and murmured her thanks, feeling a strange flutter low in her belly.

Rafe didn't say much as he took the seat across from her, falling easily into conversation with Mac and Thorne. That gave her the perfect excuse to really look at

him without drawing attention.

He was big with broad shoulders and was built like someone who knew exactly how to handle himself. There was something wild and untamed in his appearance, like a man who'd spent more time under the open sky than inside. His jaw was strong, his features rugged, with a faint scar cutting through one eyebrow that only added to the dangerous edge he wore like a second skin. He had an exotic look about him, but it was his eyes that held her.

His eyes were a deep blue, the color of twilight just before nightfall. Eyes that should've felt sharp and assessing, but didn't. There was something else there...kindness, even concern. As if he saw too much, but never used it to hurt others like he might actually care, even when he didn't want to. Okay, the whiskey shots must be working because those thoughts were deep.

His gaze met hers across the table as the conversation shifted to her. She held it, just for a beat, before looking down, suddenly self-conscious.

"Billie Ann, would you please consider staying with us?" Zelda's gentle voice pulled her attention away from Rafe, whose deep blue eyes had been quietly studying her from across the table.

Billie blinked, caught off guard. "Oh...it's okay. Really," she said, offering a small smile. "The trailer's fine. Davey kept it just as spotless as the bar. Besides, it used to be my home too."

Zelda didn't look convinced, but before she could press the issue, Rafe spoke up. "Is there an office here in the bar?"

Billie turned to him, surprised by the sudden question. "Yes, it's upstairs. Davey called it his home away from home. I spent half my childhood up there, waiting for



him to finish the books so we could head to the trailer.”

“Good,” Rafe said with a nod, firm and matter-of-fact. “I’ll be staying there.”

Billie’s brow furrowed. “Wait—why?”

The question came out a little sharper than she intended, but Rafe didn’t flinch. He just met her gaze with calm resolve. “To keep you safe.”

She blinked again. “Safe?”

“Until we know who killed Davey and why,” he said, his voice low but steady, “we can’t assume you’re not a target too.”

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There was a pause, tension settling between them like thick fog. Then Billie huffed softly, reaching for a bit of humor to lighten the weight in the room.

“Well, I got Clint Blastwood,” she said, crossing her arms with a stubborn tilt of her chin.

Bruce, sitting on the edge of the table like he owned it, gave a solemn nod. “Damn straight. That shotgun’s been defending this place with a positive track record.”

Rafe raised a brow, glancing at Mac, then back at her. “Clint... Blastwood?”

Bruce snorted. “Davey’s shotgun. Old, reliable, and mean as hell when it needs to be. That baby’s ended more than one bar brawl with a single warning cock.”

“Clint Eastwood fan, I take it.” Rafe grinned with a nod and understanding.

“He could recite every single line from every Clint Eastwood movie.” Billie Ann’s voice trembled before she cleared her throat. “And as much as I’ve watched them with him, so can I.”

Rafe’s eyes flicked to Billie again, and for a moment something unreadable passed through them, part amusement, part concern, and part admiration. “As badass as that name is,” he said quietly, “a shotgun doesn’t stand guard while you sleep. I do.”

Billie’s lips parted slightly, but no words came. She wasn’t used to men pulling out her chair, let alone staking claim to her safety like it was the most natural thing in the world. His wild, untamed presence still held a quiet gentleness, and that made it even

more dangerous.

Billie Ann wanted so badly to ask him outright—Who are you to care what happens to me? The words hovered at the edge of her tongue, bitter and confused, but she swallowed them down. It didn't make sense. He didn't know her. Not really. So why did he keep looking at her like she mattered?

Before she could voice anything, Bruce spoke up, casually filling the heavy silence like he always did, half-smartass and half-mind-reader.

“Rafe isn't just a smooth talker with a broody stare,” Bruce chimed in from his perch on the table, tail flicking like a metronome. “Not only is he a private detective, but also guards the bodies of some pretty high-profile folks. Clint Eastwood's got nothing on him, except maybe a slightly cooler squint.”

Billie Ann blinked, caught off guard by the cat's casual bragging about the man she barely knew. Her eyes shifted to Rafe just in time to see a faint grin tug at the corner of his mouth. It was quick, fleeting, but real and made him even more handsome.

“Appreciate that, Bruce,” Rafe said dryly, his voice low and warm, but he didn't take his eyes off her. The amusement in his face melted away a heartbeat later, replaced by something far more serious in its intensity.

Billie Ann's breath caught, her chest tightening under the weight of his gaze.

“You're a bodyguard?” she asked, trying to sound casual, though her voice came out softer than she intended. Her eyes flicked over him without shame now. His broad shoulders and coiled strength, as he sat with an easy confidence, fit the bill. Too well, actually.

“More or less,” Rafe replied, his voice a slow rumble. His eyes dropped briefly to her

lips before climbing back up to meet hers, sending a flush up her neck. There was a flicker in his gaze...interest, maybe, or something heavier.

Her curiosity overrode everything else. “Who?” she asked, unable to stop herself. Billie Ann was curious by nature and a bit nosy. She blamed it on the bar scene where gossip ran rampant.

Rafe paused. A moment of silence stretched between them as if he were weighing how much to give her.

“Mostly a few billionaires too paranoid to breathe without a shadow nearby,” he finally said, his tone even, almost indifferent. “But none of them mattered as much as this does.”

She blinked. “This?”

“You,” he said simply. It wasn’t flirtation. It wasn’t even about charm. He said it as if it were a fact, as plain and solid as the table between them.

Billie Ann’s pulse thudded in her ears. She looked down for a second, unsure what to do or say. She was accustomed to being underestimated and overlooked. Not... this.

“I’m as far as you can get from a billionaire or high-profile.” Billie Ann glanced up, meeting his gaze. “I’m just...me.”

He stared at her for a long moment, his deep blue eyes steady and unreadable. The air between them felt thick, stretched taut with something unsaid. Then, in a voice low and unwavering, he spoke.

“You and Davey are important to Mac and Zelda,” Rafe said. “Which means you’re important to me.”

The words were simple. Direct. But they hit her like a gut punch. Billie Ann's breath caught. Her fingers curled around the edge of the table as her heart gave a painful thump. She wasn't used to hearing things like that, especially from handsome men.

Davey had always been her protection, her steady place in a world that didn't always make sense. From the time she was a little girl, waiting for him to finish the books upstairs while she dozed on his worn-out couch, to the woman she was now, he had always been there. A safety net with a side of sarcasm. And now... now there was a gaping hole where that safety used to be.

She swallowed hard, the ache in her throat rising fast. Rafe wasn't trying to be charming. He wasn't trying to win her over. He was simply stating a fact, as if it were the most natural thing in the world to protect someone because of who they mattered to.

And that somehow made it worse. Or better. She couldn't tell. Because for so long, she had done everything to avoid needing anyone. She'd taught herself how to stand on her own two feet, even when they were shaking. But in that moment, with her world still off its axis, the weight of grief pressing in, and the trailer behind the bar feeling more like a ghost of her past than a place to rest, his words settled deep. They wrapped around the part of her that was still splintered from losing Davey and held tight.

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She blinked rapidly, forcing back the tears that threatened to rise. Her voice barely found its way out.

“Thank you,” she whispered, her throat thick.

It didn’t feel like enough. But maybe it didn’t need to be. When she looked up, Rafe was still there, watching her with quiet certainty, as if he knew she was holding on by threads and was willing to stand in the gap where Davey used to be for the moment. And for the first time since the world shifted under her feet, Billie Ann didn’t feel quite so lost.

“Told you,” Bruce gave a low, knowing grunt. “Broody stare. Big heart. Tragic past. Total book boyfriend material.”

## CHAPTER 6

By the time the sun had disappeared behind the trees, casting long shadows across the parking lot, everyone had gone.

Zelda and Wicked had offered to stay, gently insisting they didn’t mind helping her settle in. But Billie Ann had shaken her head with a quiet, tired smile. She appreciated it, but this was something she had to do alone.

She needed to face it. The stillness. The silence. The fact that the man who’d filled every corner of this place with life and laughter and whiskey-soaked wisdom was gone. Plus, she hated to cry in front of people. Davey had always told her never to let anyone see your fear or see you cry. It made you look weak in front of others. That

stuck with her. He had also said she was an ugly crier. That thought made her grin, but the grin faded as she stopped in front of the trailer.

She stood there, keys in hand, as the sound of tires faded down the road, and the familiar creak of the trailer steps groaned beneath her boots. Last night, instead of staying in the trailer, she had stayed in the office inside the bar. The porch light flickered, just like it always had, and that dumb wind chime made from old spoons still clinked softly in the breeze.

Davey never fixed things unless they were bleeding or on fire. She used to gripe about this, but now she was glad for every untouched, imperfect detail.

Her hand hesitated at the door. Then she pushed it open.

The scent hit her first. Faint tobacco, motor oil, and the clean soap Davey used that somehow always smelled like pine. She pressed a hand to her chest as emotion surged. The living room was exactly the same. His boots were still by the door. His hat hung on the hook he'd carved himself. A plate with a half-used stick of butter sat on the counter, covered with foil.

It wasn't just a space. It was him. Frozen in time.

She moved slowly, trailing fingers over worn armrests and picture frames. She stopped at one of her favorites. It was a photo of her, age ten, sitting on Davey's shoulders at the fair, both of them covered in powdered sugar from too many funnel cakes. His eyes sparkled in that picture.

Her own room was tucked in the back, a tiny thing with light purple paint still clinging to the walls and stickers on the mirror she'd never bothered to scrape off. It was dusty, untouched since she'd left, but otherwise the same. Her old quilt, faded with time, still covered the twin bed. A few books lined the shelf above it.

She sat on the edge of the bed, running her fingers over the cover, and her eyes scanning her room as memories flooded her. Davey yelling at her from the tiny kitchen that her food was getting cold. Or hearing him cursing at a baseball game from his favorite worn-out chair.

Feeling the tears clog her throat and burn the back of her eyes, she stood up quickly. She was afraid that if she started crying, she would never stop. Suddenly, the thought of Rafe hit her. He was staying in the office above the bar. A worn-out couch, no shower, a battered mini fridge, and whatever comfort he could scrape together between four walls. Guilt stirred, followed by something deeper—something softer she didn't want to name just yet.

Rushing to the small closet, she found a fresh set of sheets, a pillow, and an extra blanket. Bundling them in her arms, she made her way back through the trailer, past the ghost of the life she used to know.

The night had deepened, the chill of it brushing her bare arms as she crossed the lot toward the bar. But before she could step inside, she spotted him.

He was outside, leaning against the railing near the entrance, arms crossed, his head tilted slightly toward the stars like he'd been standing there a while. The light from the nearby lamppost hit his face just right, making him look wild and untamed. Her heart pounded as she stared at him.

She stopped short, her voice caught somewhere between her chest and throat.

He turned slowly, as if he'd known she was coming.

"You okay?" he asked, voice low.

She nodded, swallowing against the lump that still hadn't gone away since walking



into the trailer.

“I brought you some pillows and blankets,” she said, her voice smaller than she wanted it to be. “The office couch isn’t exactly the Ritz.”

A ghost of a smile tugged at the corner of his mouth. “You didn’t have to.”

“I know,” she said, meeting his eyes, “but I wanted to.”

Rafe pushed off the railing and took a slow step toward her, the porch light catching the blue of his eyes. They were the kind of eyes that could turn cold if they needed to—she didn’t doubt that—but right now, they looked anything but. They were steady, warm, and kind. Yeah, okay, she was infatuated by this man’s eyes.

“Thank you,” he said softly, reaching out to take the blankets from her arms. His fingers brushed hers, rough and warm, and it sent a jolt straight through her chest.

She quickly stepped back, folding her arms as if she needed the barrier.

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He didn't press. Just held the bundle under one arm and tilted his head slightly, studying her in that way he did. It was almost like he could see past her brave face and right into the aching part of her that had been hiding since the moment Davey died.

"I really hope you find out who did this to Davey." Billie Ann whispered, glancing around.

"I will." His short, to-the-point answer had her eyes shooting back to his. The confidence in his voice had her believing that he would, in fact, find Davey's killer.

"Thank you," she said, then sighed, looking away to gaze around the property and then up to the bar. The emotions of the day hit her hard and suddenly. "Everything still smells like him. His boots are still by the door waiting for him to come home. It's not fair. I shouldn't be here." The tears burned again, sneaking up fast. She blinked up at the sky, trying to fight them off. She really didn't know why she just confided that information to him.

Rafe set the covers on the steps, then reached out and pulled her into his arms, and Billie Ann let him. This complete stranger was offering her comfort, which she so desperately needed, and she was going to take it. He didn't say a word, just held her tightly against his large body.

"He was my home," she whispered. "No matter where I went, I always knew I could come back to him."

"You're not alone, Billie Ann," he said, voice low. "Not anymore. I meant what I said

earlier. You and Davey mattered to Mac and Zelda. Which means you matter to me.”

Billie Ann swallowed hard. The words struck deep, carving into the space where grief resided, where fear and uncertainty had taken root. Even though she had just met him only hours ago, something about this man calmed her.

Bruce’s voice broke the moment from somewhere behind them. “And here I thought I was the emotionally available one.”

Billie let out a laugh that cracked a little at the edges. Rafe smirked.

“I’m just saying,” Bruce continued, leaping onto the railing beside them. “Here I thought I was coming to cheer her up with my wit and humor, but what do I find? Her in another one’s arms.”

Billie Ann wiped at her eyes, feeling lighter somehow. Still broken in places, still uncertain—but not alone. Not tonight.

“I’ll let you get settled,” she said softly, stepping back. “Let me know if you need anything.”

“I will.” Rafe’s eyes stayed on hers as she nodded, then turned toward the trailer. He then glanced at Bruce, motioning for him to stay.

“Leave the door open, Billie,” Bruce called out. “I’ll be there in a second.”

“Will do,” Billie Ann called over her shoulder, then slipped through the door.

She stopped just inside, heart thudding. She hadn’t meant to listen in. It wasn’t like her to spy, but her instincts kicked in the second she walked away. Something told her this was a conversation she needed to hear.

The porch behind her was dim, the kind of still that made your skin prickle. She stayed quiet, listening.

“What’s up?” Bruce asked, his voice casual.

“What do you know about the Crow Shifters here?” Rafe’s tone was different now, low and serious.

Billie Ann held her breath. She didn’t know what she was expecting, but this definitely wasn’t just a friendly conversation.

Bruce let out a soft huff. “Other than the fact that they can literally shit bomb your ass in mid-flight? They’re alright. Weird as hell, but not dangerous. Why? You think they had something to do with Davey?”

“I don’t know,” Rafe said, and there was something tight and controlled in the way he said it. “But I’m not ruling anyone out.”

Billie Ann’s stomach twisted.

“Who’s their Alpha?” Rafe asked.

“Jack Crow,” Bruce replied after a beat. “Real pain in the ass. Power-hungry, got a temper, and thinks he’s smarter than everyone. But I don’t see him going after Davey. I mean, yeah, Jack’s an asshole, but Davey was respected around here.”

That tugged at Billie Ann’s heart. Davey had kept to himself, but people had liked him. He was solid. Honest. The kind of man who helped when no one else did.

“But if you think Jack’s involved,” Bruce added, his voice dropping, “you better be ready to come at him smart. He doesn’t react well to accusations, and he sure as hell

won't hand over answers just because you ask nicely."

Rafe let out a quiet sigh, frustration bleeding through. "This doesn't feel random, Bruce. It feels... personal."

There was a long pause.

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“Then maybe it is. As long as I’ve known you, I’ve never known you to be wrong.” Bruce finally said. “Glad you could make it. Billie Ann deserves to know who killed her stepdaddy.”

“Yes, she does.” Rafe agreed.

Billie Ann felt the tears fill her eyes again as she made her way deeper into the trailer just before Bruce walked inside. Turning, she quickly went and shut the door with a smile at Bruce. “Thanks for hanging with me tonight.”

“What are friends for?” Bruce made his way toward the chair that had always been Davey’s. “You think he’d mind if I slept in his chair?”

“No, he wouldn’t mind,” Billie said with a sad shake of her head. “Goodnight, Bruce.”

“Night, Billie,” Bruce said as he curled up in Davey’s chair.

Walking into her old bedroom, Billie collapsed on the bed, shoving her face into the pillow, and let the tears overtake her. She deserved a good cry, but after this she needed to get her shit together. She had a bar to run. A legacy to protect. And a lot of Shifters, drunks, and smartass talking animals to wrangle.

And she’d be damned if she failed.

## CHAPTER 7

The old bar was quiet, its wooden bones creaking in the morning hush. He'd found an old coffee pot in the back and managed to coax it into working. It groaned like a grumpy elder but started brewing, the rich scent curling into the air like a promise. After the long night he'd had, he needed it strong enough to punch him in the face.

Stepping out onto the porch, Rafe leaned against the post and let his gaze sweep over the land. It was all familiar and yet distant, like looking at a childhood home through someone else's eyes. That's why earlier, before the sun had risen, he'd let his Jaguar out. He had shifted completely and moved through the woods in silence, re-learning every tree, every breeze, and every unfamiliar scent that now mingled with the past.

But nothing pulled at him like the trailer did.

His gaze drifted there now. He'd passed it before his shift, just after he'd slipped into the trees, and through one cracked window, he'd heard the soft, broken crying. Her crying.

It had nearly brought him to his knees.

He had felt her pain as if it were his own. Something inside him had surged at the sound of her sorrow, a deep, primal urge to fix it... no, to destroy whatever had caused it.

Rafe's jaw tightened.

He couldn't take away her grief. But what he could do and what he would do, was find the son of a bitch responsible for it. Or the whole damn pack of them, if that's what it took.

Rafe had known the moment he stepped onto the property yesterday that his mate was here.

It wasn't a scent, or a sound, or even something tangible, just a low, deep certainty in his bones that his mate was close. The kind of knowing only a Shifter truly understood. That soul-deep click that said, That's her.

Her being human had thrown him, but just for a moment. Not because it bothered him, hell no, but because it meant he had to move carefully. Gently. She didn't know what they were to each other yet. Didn't feel the full weight of fate pressing them together like he did.

But he felt it. Oh, did he fucking feel it.

That truth anchored him even now, stronger than anything he'd ever known. And after the initial jolt of realization, a sense of quiet certainty settled over him. He'd been waiting a long time for this, long enough to know you didn't fight fate when it handed you the one person you were meant to protect, love, and hold through whatever storms came.

The moment he'd stepped inside the bar, his eyes had gone straight to her. Like his soul already knew where to look. She'd been standing by the counter, talking to someone, unaware of the seismic shift happening in his world. His Jaguar had growled its approval, low and primal, pacing just beneath the surface. The man in him wasn't far behind.

He'd felt everything all at once. The possessiveness, awe, and something dangerously close to hope had nearly knocked him on his ass. It was too much, too fast, and he'd had to step back and get himself under control before speaking to Mac. His beast had wanted to get to her, speak to her, be near her, but Rafe had forced himself to hold the line. She was human. She didn't know him. And she sure as hell didn't know what she meant to him.

Yet.



Now, standing outside in the cool morning air, Rafe wanted nothing more than to check on her. He knew she was safe. It wasn't that. It was the need to be near her.

"Fuck," Rafe muttered, running a hand down his face. He hadn't slept, the weight of everything still sitting heavy on his shoulders. Too late, he sensed he wasn't alone.

"Not a morning person, I take it?"

Rafe's head snapped to the right.

Bruce. The damn cat was perched on the porch railing like some smug gargoyle, tail flicking, eyes narrowed in amusement.

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“You’ve got to be kidding me,” Rafe muttered, narrowing his eyes. “How the hell do you sneak up on a Jaguar?”

Bruce shrugged—or at least gave the feline version of one. “Clearly, you’re slipping. I could’ve sliced you to ribbons with these.” He held up a paw dramatically, flashing his not-so-impressive claws. “Lethal weapons, my friend.”

Rafe gave him a flat stare. “You come at me with those toothpicks, and I’ll chew you up and spit you out.”

Bruce snorted. “Easy, killer. I’m just saying...get your head out of your ass. I’m counting on you to watch Billie Ann’s back when I’m not around. She’s strong, yeah, but she’s also the type who runs into a burning building to save a drunk raccoon.”

Rafe didn’t reply right away, his jaw tight, eyes going distant as they drifted toward the trailer. “No one’s going to touch her. Not while I’m breathing.”

“Good,” Bruce said, sitting back like he’d just concluded a business meeting. “Glad we’re clear.”

Before Rafe could respond, the front door of the bar swung open behind them, and Billie Ann stepped outside.

Both males turned as Billie Ann stepped out onto the porch. She was barefoot and still tugging her hair into some kind of messy bun, wearing a threadbare T-shirt with a faded band logo and a pair of old cut-off shorts. It wasn’t some sexy outfit designed to make a man drool, but damn if it didn’t short-circuit Rafe’s brain on sight.

There was nothing deliberate about the way she looked. No makeup, no effort, just raw, natural Billie Ann, and it hit him harder than any woman ever had in a cocktail dress and heels.

It wasn't about the clothes. It was her. All of her.

And Bruce was right. His head was so far up his own ass, it was a miracle he could still breathe. He dragged a hand down his face and muttered under his breath, "Get it together, man."

Behind him, Bruce made a soft coughing sound that suspiciously sounded like a chuckle.

"Oh, good, you're both up," she said cheerfully, brushing her wild hair out of her face. "There's bacon and eggs if you want some before I start on the inventory."

Rafe blinked. "Uh-yeah. Sure. Ah, thanks."

"Good answer," Bruce snorted, giving Rafe a side-eyed glance. "Real smooth, Romeo."

"Shut up, Bruce," Rafe hissed, giving him a burning glare that said he would kill him without a second thought.

Bruce stretched with a purr, ignoring Rafe's warning glare. "No bacon for me, but I'll take some scrambled eggs, light on the scramble."

She rolled her eyes fondly. "I remember how you like your eggs, Bruce. It hasn't been that long."

As she disappeared back into the bar, Rafe watched her go, his eyes glued to her ass

in those cut-off shorts. Fuck!

Bruce snickered. “You didn’t even realize she left the trailer, did you?”

Rafe scowled not answering that question because he was pissed at the answer. He hadn’t noticed and that was a fucking problem.

Bruce flicked his tail. “Damn, man. You’ve got it bad. I saw those googly eyes you were giving her. Better sharpen those instincts before someone else sneaks up on you. Like love. Or worse...feelings.” Bruce made a gagging sound.

“Shut the fuck up, Bruce,” Rafe snapped, throwing the door open so hard it banged against the wall. His boots hit the floor like warning shots. “Do you ever stop talking, or is your mouth on some kind of dark magic loop?”

Bruce didn’t flinch as he followed Rafe inside. “What can I say? I’m gifted. Also, you’re welcome. Someone’s got to provide commentary for the brooding, lovesick hero vibe you got going on.”

Rafe stopped dead in his tracks, his body going rigid. The low, guttural sound that rumbled from deep in his chest wasn’t human. It was his Jaguar—pure, primal, and not amused.

Bruce, mid-step with one paw comically raised like he was sneaking through a cartoon, froze in place. His eyes went wide, tail puffing out slightly as his gaze snapped to Rafe.

“Do you want to die?” Rafe growled, his voice a lethal rumble that vibrated through the floorboards.

Bruce blinked. “Not particularly,” he squeaked, then cleared his throat and tried for

casual. “I mean, I’ve got nine lives, but I’m trying not to waste them all in one day.”

Rafe turned toward him fully, eyes glowing just enough to make Bruce take a slow, silent step backward.

“Was it something I said?” Bruce asked carefully, as if approaching a bomb with a butter knife.

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Rafe's eyes narrowed as he growled again in warning.

Bruce raised both paws. "Whoa, whoa. Okay. Message received."

The low growl subsided slightly as Rafe exhaled, shoulders still tense, but his animal retreating enough for his brain to re-engage.

"Not to self: Don't fuck with the Jag before noon," Bruce said then gave Rafe a nod. "Check."

## CHAPTER 8

After clearing away the breakfast mess, Billie Ann rolled her shoulders and made her way to the back, clipboard in hand. She figured the inventory would be a disaster with half-empty shelves, missing supplies, and forgotten orders, but to her surprise, everything was stocked. Fully and meticulously stocked. She let out a quiet breath, the corners of her mouth twitching with something between a smile and a sigh. Of course it was.

This bar had been Davey's whole life. Every inch of it held his energy, his care. He'd kept it running like a tight ship, even when his body had started giving out. That was Davey through and through, loyal to the last breath, and too proud to let things fall apart, even for a second.

Some of the food had expired, like the typical perishables shoved to the back of the fridge, but she tossed those without hesitation. It wasn't a big deal. The regulars didn't come for the food, anyway. They came for stiff drinks, stronger stories, and the

comfort of being surrounded by others who didn't quite fit in anywhere else.

Truth be told, she could open tonight if she wanted to. The thought made her pause. Excitement fluttered low in her stomach, tangled with a thread of fear. Was she ready for that?

Her gaze drifted to the front of the bar, where Rafe sat alone in one of the booths, talking on the phone. He hadn't noticed her watching him, and she took the opportunity to really look at him. His dark hair fell in loose waves around his face, his voice low and steady, even when she couldn't hear the words. There was something about him that unsettled her in the most unexpected way, as if he could see through all her walls without ever asking a single question.

Bruce had taken off not long ago after licking his plate clean of scrambled eggs. He'd muttered something about needing to get back to his Witch, then leapt gracefully from the booth and disappeared.

Billie Ann stood and looked around the bar again. There wasn't much left to do. Everything was in place, waiting. She pulled her phone from her pocket and sent off two texts, one to Macy and the other to Frank, who had bartended here for as long as she could remember. He hadn't made it to Davey's funeral, citing a family emergency, but he'd called her the same day. His voice had cracked when he told her how sorry he was.

When she told him she now owned the bar and asked if he still wanted to work, his answer had been immediate and certain: Yes.

She hoped he meant it. She needed someone who knew the rhythm of this place—someone who felt like part of its bones.

Then, with a sigh, she stared down at her phone again, thumb hovering over a number

she didn't want to call. Brian Norris. Her boss back in Lexington. She was due back at the office tomorrow, but there was no chance in hell she'd be making that drive. Not now. Maybe not ever.

Brian was handsome. There was no denying that. Sharp jaw, expensive suits, and a polished, confident charm that worked on just about everyone. But not her. He wasn't her type, not even close. Where others saw charisma, she saw control. He owned a chain of real estate offices, including the one where she'd been working, trying to get her footing in a career she never expected to fall in love with.

Thorne had changed that.

He'd been the one who first got her interested in real estate, years ago, back when she'd still been figuring herself out. He'd taken her to open houses, let her shadow him on small flips, and taught her the thrill of finding possibility in forgotten places. She'd loved it. But not just the homes, it was the people, the stories, and the second chances built into every closing deal that she enjoyed the most. It was something she could build a life on.

But Brian had ruined that, piece by piece. Ever since she'd turned him down, because no, she wasn't interested in dating her boss, no matter how many times he asked, he'd made her life at the office unbearable. Petty power plays, late assignments, and withholding opportunities she'd earned. All of it with that smug, fake-friendly smile. Just enough to make her miserable without giving her grounds to quit and collect unemployment.

Now, standing in Davey's bar. Herbar. The thought of going back to that job felt like trying to force herself into a life that no longer fit. Here, surrounded by wood and whiskey and the echoes of someone she loved, she felt closer to herself than she had in a long time.



Maybe real estate wasn't out of the picture. Maybe it just looked different now. And maybe, just maybe, this old bar was more than a place to pour drinks. It could be the foundation of something new.

Something uniquely hers.

Billie Ann stepped out the back door of the bar like she was stepping into a storm. The heat pressed against her skin, but it did nothing to calm the cold knot twisting in her chest. Her fingers trembled as she scrolled to his name.

Brian Norris.

Her soon-to-be former boss. The man who'd made every day at work feel like a chess match she was destined to lose unless she played by his rules. She hadn't played. And now, it was time to make that official.

She hitcall,clicking her speaker.

One ring.

Two.

"Annie," he answered smoothly, her name dragging out like silk over sandpaper. He refused to call her Billie Ann or Billie. Said her name was unprofessional. "I hope you're not calling asking for more days. I have appointments set up for you starting tomorrow."

"It's Billie Ann." Her jaw clenched, hating being called anything other than her true name.

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Brian sighed long and loud. “Now, Annie...we’ve talked about this. Your business cards and letterheads have already been printed. It’s best you get used to Annie because as long as you work here, that’s not going to change.”

“I’m not coming back, Brian.” Billie Ann’s voice turned hard. She was so sick and tired of having to suck up to this asshole.

“Excuse me?” Brian’s voice lowered to a hiss.

“I’m staying here,” she said, forcing steel into her voice. “I inherited the bar, and I’ve decided to run it. So yeah, this is my quitting call.”

The silence that followed was deafening.

“You’re not fucking serious.” The anger behind those words came loud and clear over the phone.

“I am,” Billie said and even nodded, though he couldn’t see her.

Another pause. When he spoke again, all charm was gone from his tone, replaced with that sharp edge she’d come to dread. “You’re giving up a career in real estate for a rundown bar in the middle of nowhere, Virginia?”

Her throat burned. “It’s not just a bar. It’s mine. And it meant everything to Davey.”

Brian laughed, but it was bitter now. Ugly. “This is about your dead stepdad? You’re going to throw away everything because your drunken stepdaddy left you his wasted

dream. What about whatwebuilt, Annie?”

“We didn’t build anything, Brian,” she said, her voice tight, ignoring the fact that he called her Annie again. “I worked for everything I earned. You only helped when it made you look good. And when I didn’t want you, turned you down over and over again, you made sure I paid for it.”

“Bullshit,” he snapped. “You wanted me, and everyone knew it. You wore those skirts...led me on like some goddamn tease?—”

“Don’t,” she hissed, her voice cracking. “Don’t you dare try to turn this around on me.”

“You’ll regret this, Annie,” he said, venom curling around every word. “You’ll call me in a week, maybe two. You’ll be begging for your job back. And I’ll be there. Waiting.”

She swallowed hard. “I’d rather scrub toilets in this bar...my bar...for the rest of my life than ever work for you again.” She growled, her eyes narrowing dangerously. “And my stepfather was more of a man than you will ever be, asshole. And my fucking name is Billie Ann!”

She hung up.

Her whole body trembled as she lowered the phone, her chest heaving, her eyes burning with unshed fury and too many years of silence.

Behind her, the screen door creaked again.

She turned to find Rafe standing in the doorway, one shoulder braced against the frame, arms crossed over his chest. He didn’t speak right away, just watched her with

a look she couldn't quite read.

"How much of that did you hear?" she asked quietly, her cheeks heating with embarrassment.

"Enough," he said, his voice low, rough. Rafe stepped forward, the screen door groaning as it swung shut behind him. "Your boss, I take it?"

"Ex-boss." Billie Ann snorted with a shrug.

"Ex anything else?" Rafe cocked an eyebrow at her.

"He wishes," She frowned, then shook her head. "We never dated; he tried, but something was off with him. I did my job and went home. Plus, someone who changes my name is a big red flag." She snorted in disgust.

"He sounds like the kind of guy who gets turned on by his own reflection," Rafe muttered. "I bet he flexes when he walks past windows."

A startled laugh burst out of her then, quick and unexpected. She slapped a hand over her mouth. "God, don't make me laugh right now. I want to stay pissed."

"Why not? That prick doesn't get to be the last voice in your head today." Rafe replied with a smile that didn't quite reach his eyes.

"He said I'd come crawling back for my job. There were so many times I wanted to quit, but it was a great job...just a lunatic boss." Her smile faltered, just a little as she looked at the bar. "I can't fail."

"Yeah, well, he also sounds like the kind of guy who thinks 'no' is just a challenge and 'independent woman' is a personal insult. So, excuse me if I don't put much

stock in his prophetic vision.” Rafe stepped in closer, his expression shifting into something fierce, like fire behind his eyes. “You won’t fail.”

She blinked, heart tightening at the way he said it, like he meant it.

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Rafe's voice dropped, softer now, without losing that rough edge. "Good job or not, you don't owe him anything. Not your time. Not your talent. And sure as hell not your body or your loyalty. That man wanted a trophy, not a partner. You made the right call walking away."

Billie Ann's chest ached in that way it did when you realized how long you'd been holding your breath. She looked up at him, really looked, and for the first time in a long time, she didn't feel small under a man's gaze. She felt...seen.

"Thank you," she whispered.

Rafe gave her a nod, then frowned. "What is the chance of him coming here?"

She looked confused. "Who? Brian?" She asked, then shook her head when he just stared at her. "Why would he come here?"

"For you," Rafe replied without hesitation.

Billie Ann actually laughed at that. "Zero chance." She replied, then shrugged. "He will find someone to replace me, probably by Monday." When Rafe just cocked his eyebrow at her she cleared her throat not knowing what else to say. She knew there was no way Brian would show up here for her. His ego wouldn't allow that.

## CHAPTER 9

Rafe had a bad feeling in his gut, and he trusted that more than most people. He had heard the whole conversation and didn't like what he heard. Never having met the

man on the other end of the phone call, Rafe instantly disliked him. He knew his type.

He didn't need to meet the guy to know exactly who he was. The voice on the other end of that call had told Rafe everything he needed to know. Her ex-boss was entitled and controlling. One of those smug sons of bitches who mistook power for charm and silence for consent. The kind of asshole who used his position and influence, to trap someone like Billie Ann. He had a proud moment listening to her stand up for herself.

Billie Ann said she had never evendatedhim. She had been smart enough to steer clear, but from what Rafe could tell, it had cost her.

He did know one thing for certain. If this bastard did show up atShift Facedwith a smug smirk and false concern, he'd find out quickly that this bar had a new bouncer. And his name was Rafe.

"I think I'm going to open tomorrow," Billie Ann said, her voice soft but sure, the kind of quiet strength that came after a storm.

Rafe nodded once, doing his best to rein in the anger still simmering low in his gut. "Sounds good," he said, careful to keep his voice steady and casual, like he wasn't still thinking about how close he'd come to smashing her phone against the wall after hearing the tone that asshole was using with Bilie Ann. Do you have everything you need to open?

She gave him a small smile, a smile he wanted to see more of. "Yeah," she said, then let out a quiet laugh that didn't quite reach her eyes. "I should've known better. Davey took better care of this bar than he did himself."

Rafe's mouth quirked at that, but his heart clenched. "He'd be proud," he said, voice low. "Of you."

“I hope so,” she murmured, looking down at her hands. “I was shocked when he left this place to me... I didn’t understand why. But now...”

Rafe watched her closely as the emotions played across her face. “Now what?”

She looked up, eyes meeting his, wide and full of something raw and real. “Now it feels like maybe I was meant to be here all along.”

“Why did you leave in the first place?” Rafe wanted to know more about this woman, much more. She paused for so long he didn’t think she was going to answer.

“I’m different. If it weren’t for Davey, I never would have been accepted here.” She finally said. “Don’t get me wrong. Never once has anyone treated me as if I were, but in my heart, I know I’m different. I’m human. As naïve as it sounds, I never thought anything would happen to Davey, that he would always be here if I fell on my face in the big world.”

Rafe remained silent, waiting for her to continue. He felt she needed to talk, to have something to say, and he was more than happy to be there for her.

“Thorne had gotten me interested in real estate. I started pursuing online schooling and submitted applications to various agencies at a beginner level online. That’s how I ended up in Lexington.” She said, her gaze roaming the property.

“Is real estate something you still want to do?” Rafe asked gently, his voice low, steady. He didn’t take his eyes off her, like her answer might carry more weight than she realized.

Billie Ann’s shoulders lifted in a small, half-hearted shrug. “I don’t know, honestly.” Her words were quiet, but laced with frustration. “I was never good enough in Brian’s eyes. No matter how hard I worked, it was never enough. He strung me along, made



promises about helping me get my license, about mentoring me—hell, he even said he'd put in a good word with the board. But it was all bullshit. Just another way to keep me where he wanted me. Dependent...on him."

Rafe felt an angry growl rolling in the back of his throat, but controlled it.

Her voice cracked with the bitterness of it, her jaw tight as the anger she usually kept bottled up broke the surface. "I spent every day trying to prove myself to a man who never intended to let me grow." She said with a hiss. "The more I refused to be just another woman in his bed, the worse it got. I felt stuck."

Rafe's hands clenched at his sides, but he didn't speak right away. When he did, his tone was low but fierce, filled with a primal intensity. "You don't have to prove anything to anyone, Billie Ann. Especially to that controlling jackass back in Lexington." Rafe leaned closer to her. "And any man who uses his position to get a woman into his bed is not a real man."

"I don't know why I'm telling you this," She whispered, looking down in embarrassment.

"Everyone needs someone to talk to, Billie Ann." He stepped closer, his frown deepening as his eyes locked on hers. "What do you want?"

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The silence hung between them like a held breath. Then Billie Ann turned, her gaze drifting to the bar behind her, with its old wood, worn floors, and crooked stools. Her whole chest rose with a deep breath before she looked back at Rafe, something soft and certain blooming behind her eyes.

“This,” she whispered. Then stronger: “I want this.” She lifted her arm, sweeping it out toward the bar. “It’s not glamorous. It’s not what I thought I’d end up doing... but it’s real. It’s mine. Being back here is hard without Davey, harder than I ever imagined, but it’s the first time in years I feel like I can actually breathe.”

She stared at the bar, her gaze distant, as if she were seeing ghosts in the grain of the old wood. Rafe didn’t move. He just watched her in the quiet, soaking in the curve of her jaw, the way her shoulders held a weight she hadn’t asked for.

And even though she hadn’t said much, he could feel her unraveling—softly, silently.

“I didn’t realize it until I walked back through those doors,” she said, her voice fragile with emotion. “This is where I belong. I just... I needed to lose everything. To lose the only person who ever really cared for me... to see it.”

The words broke from her like a confession she hadn’t planned to speak aloud. Her eyes left the bar and rose to his, filled with unshed tears and a grief she’d tried too long to carry alone.

Rafe didn’t hesitate.

He stepped forward and wrapped his arms around her, pulling her tight to his chest.

She stiffened for just a moment—just long enough for him to feel how deeply she resisted comfort—but then she melted into him like she'd been waiting for it all along.

His hand slid up to cradle the back of her head, fingers threading through the soft strands of her dark hair. “You didn’t lose the only person who cared for you,” he murmured, his voice low and fierce against her temple. “You’ve got people now. You’ve got me.”

“But you hardly know me,” She whispered, her voice shaking.

“I know enough.” He whispered back.

She trembled in his arms, and he felt her fingers curl into the fabric of his shirt like she needed something or someone to anchor her.

“I don’t know what I’m doing,” she whispered into his chest. “I’m scared, Rafe.”

“I know,” he said softly, holding her tighter. “It’s okay to have a little bit of fear, but you can do this, Billie Ann.”

She leaned back just enough to look up at him, her eyes glassy, searching his face like she was waiting for him to vanish.

“Thank you,” she whispered.

“For what?” he asked, brushing his thumb over her cheek.

“For this,” she said simply. “For being here... for seeing me.”

Rafe’s gaze dropped to her lips, then back to her eyes.

“You make it impossible not to,” he said, and before she could reply, he dipped his head and kissed her, soft and slow, like a promise for things to come.

## CHAPTER 10

The moment Rafe’s lips touched hers, Billie Ann’s breath caught in her throat. Her heart didn’t just flutter, it stuttered, as if unsure whether to race forward or stop entirely. His kiss was gentle, unhurried, but there was something deep beneath it.

Her first instinct was to pull away, but not because she didn’t want it. No, it was because she did.

But then her body leaned in, betraying any hesitation her mind still held. Her fingers gripped the front of his shirt, anchoring herself in the warmth of him. The ache in her chest, the one she’d carried since learning of Davey’s death, eased just enough for her to breathe again.

This shouldn’t be happening.

That was her first clear thought when the kiss broke and Rafe’s forehead rested against hers, his breathing ragged. They’d only just met. It had barely been a few days. But even as that logic echoed in her mind, it couldn’t drown out the memory of Davey’s voice.

“Shifters don’t waste time when they find their person, baby girl. When it hits, it hits hard and fast—and it’s real. You’ll know when it’s right. You’ll feel it,” he’d said one night after his third beer, wagging a finger like he was passing down sacred knowledge. “If some Shifter comes sniffing around you, don’t panic. They catch feelings fast. Real fast. Like ‘I met you Tuesday, let’s mate for life by Friday’ kind of fast.”

She had rolled her eyes, laughing, thinking it was just another one of Davey's weird warnings sandwiched between advice on bar fights and how to spot a fake ID.

"I'm serious," he'd grunted, pushing a handful of peanuts around the counter. "They don't mess around. One good whiff and boom. So, if some rugged, too-handsome-for-his-own-good Shifter comes around all broody and intense... just, y'know... don't freak out. Call me first, and if I'm not around, you know where ol' Clint Blastwood is."

At the time, it was funny. Now?

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Now it felt like prophecy. Because as she stood there, Rafe's arms still around her, the heat of that kiss still burning softly on her lips, she wasn't freaking out. Instead, she felt wanted, and it felt amazing.

"I'm not going to apologize," Rafe said, his voice low and rough.

"I didn't ask you to," Billie Ann replied, her voice soft but steady as their eyes met. His golden gaze held hers like a tether, and for a moment, the world stopped.

Rafe didn't pull away completely, just enough to look at her. His hand came up, callused fingers gently brushing a loose strand of hair from her cheek, the touch so tender it made her breath catch.

"Did Davey ever talk to you about our ways?" he asked, his eyes scanning hers, like the answer meant everything. "The ways of Shifters?"

She nodded, suddenly shy, a flush rising to her cheeks. "Yes. He did."

A smile tugged at the corner of Rafe's mouth, but it wasn't teasing. It was full of something deeper. Something raw. "Then you probably know we don't tiptoe around things. We don't take years to decide how we feel. We know. It hits like lightning, and once it does, there's no going back."

Her heart beat harder, her mouth going dry as her brain tried to process what was happening.

Rafe leaned in slightly, his forehead nearly brushing hers. "The second I saw you,

Billie Ann, I knew. Before you even spoke a word, something inside me said, There she is. My instincts, my soul, my Jaguar recognized you before my brain had a chance to catch up.”

She stared at him, caught in the intensity of his gaze, in the certainty of his voice. Her hands curled slightly against his chest, trying to hold onto something that already felt bigger than both of them.

“I know it’s fast,” he murmured, “and I won’t rush you. I won’t ask for anything you’re not ready to give. But I need you to know this... you’re not just some passing moment to me, Billie Ann. You’re it.”

“I’m human, Rafe.” The words came out before she could think them through, almost like a warning.

“I know,” he said softly, brushing his thumb across her cheek. “And it doesn’t matter. Not to me. Does it matter to you that I’m a Shifter?”

“No,” Billie Ann said without hesitation, her brows drawn tight. “It doesn’t... but what if you find your Mate?”

“I have,” Rafe replied simply, his golden eyes locked onto hers, unflinching.

She blinked. Once. Twice. Her brain scrambled for understanding, for logic, for something to make this moment make sense, but all she found was him, standing there so sure, so steady, while her world tilted on its axis.

Billie Ann wasn’t a dumb woman. She’d been through enough to sharpen her instincts and her doubts. But this? This was something else entirely. She stared at him, trying to force him to see her point, to grasp the magnitude of what he was saying.

“If you found your Mate,” she started slowly, her voice hushed, still not grasping what he had just exposed, “then it wouldn’t matter how much you liked me. A Mate trumps everything. That’s how it works, right? That’s what Davey taught me. Shifter bonds are forever.”

Her words hung in the air, heavy with fear and doubt, but also laced with something softer... something almost hopeful.

And then it hit her like a punch to the chest. Her breath caught as her eyes widened. “Oh.”

Rafe’s smile curled, warm and amused, and then he chuckled at her stunned expression. “There it is,” he murmured, clearly pleased with her dawning realization. “I don’t pull punches, Billie Ann. I don’t play games. You’re mine. From the first second I saw you, I knew.”

Her lips parted, breath trembling as she tried to keep up with the avalanche of emotion inside her.

“But,” he continued, his voice lowering, roughening with something tender and raw, “I also know this might be too much for you. If you feel nothing for me, if this is one-sided, I will walk away. I’ll make sure you’re safe, that the bar’s settled, and that you have what you need. Then I’ll be gone. You’ll never hear from me again.”

Her heart clenched so hard it hurt. Rafe was giving her a choice. An escape. Even though it was clearly the last thing he wanted to do. She looked up at him, really looked, and saw the storm he was holding back.

Her voice cracked when she spoke. “I do feel something. I’ve felt it since that first night. I just... didn’t trust it. I didn’t trust myself.” She pressed a hand to her chest, her eyes bright with unshed tears. “I lost the one person who ever really cared about



me, and I didn't think I'd ever be seen like that again. Then you walked in. And it terrified me."

Rafe stepped closer, his hand wrapping gently around hers. "Does it still?"

"A little," she whispered. "But not enough to push you away."

Rafe's smile returned, slow and warm, the kind of smile that could melt defenses she didn't even know she had. "Good. Because I'm not going anywhere."

Billie Ann narrowed her eyes, the corners of her mouth twitching. "But you just said you'd leave if I didn't feel anything."

"I lied," he said without an ounce of shame, his grin widening.

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She huffed and rolled her eyes. “Seriously?”

Rafe chuckled and pulled her into his arms without hesitation, wrapping her so tightly against his chest it was as if he could shield her from everything, as well as her past, her grief, and even her doubts. “Okay, okay... I’m kidding,” he murmured into her hair. “Sort of. We’ll take this as slow as you need to, Billie Ann. I’ll follow your pace. But just know this...”

She tilted her head back to meet his eyes. “Know what?”

“You are mine,” Rafe growled softly, like a vow pulled straight from his soul. Then his mouth came down on hers, claiming her with a kiss that was as intense as it was tender, raw and soul-deep, a little rough around the edges but honest in every way that mattered.

When he finally pulled back, his gaze searched hers for a reaction.

She didn’t speak. Just stared up at him, her breath caught somewhere between wonder and disbelief.

Rafe’s brow furrowed. “Billie Ann, what is it?”

“I just realized...” she whispered, her lips tugging upward slowly. “I didn’t just inherit a bar. I inherited a man too.”

For a beat, he blinked. Then his head dropped back as a deep, roaring laugh burst from his chest. He laughed so hard, it shook them both.

“That you did, sweetheart,” he said, still laughing, eyes shining as he looked down at her like she was the only thing that mattered. “That you definitely did.”

And for the first time since everything had happened, she felt at home in Assjacket.

## CHAPTER 11

Suddenly, the sky darkened above them.

Rafe’s head snapped up just as a low whoosh cut through the air. Crows, dozens of them, flying in a tight formation overhead. Their black wings cast flickering shadows across the ground, the sound of their feathers slicing through the silence like a warning.

“Fucking Crows,” Bruce muttered behind them, his voice flat with disdain. But Rafe didn’t answer. His attention stayed locked on the sky as his instincts sharpened, going razor-edged with the familiar prickle of danger.

The Crows dove.

Rafe moved instantly, stepping in front of Billie Ann, shielding her with his body as the birds twisted in mid-air. Then, in a blur of movement and cracking bones, they shifted. Human forms hit the ground with practiced precision.

At the front stood Jack Crow.

Rafe’s jaw tightened.

Jack’s dark eyes scanned the area briefly, then landed on Billie Ann. His entire expression shifted as he opened his arms wide.

“Billie,” he said, his voice rough with emotion.

Before Rafe could react, Billie Ann darted around him and threw herself into Jack’s waiting embrace like a daughter coming home. The sight hit Rafe square in the chest. He didn’t move. Couldn’t. His Jaguar roared, furious and possessive, pacing just beneath his skin as the woman he’d only just claimed buried her face against another man’s neck.

Jack held her like she belonged there.

“I’m so sorry I wasn’t here,” Jack murmured, pulling her back just enough to search her face. “We had our annual migration meeting, and most of us were out of range. We didn’t know.”

“He’s gone, Jack,” Billie Ann said, her voice brittle and so full of pain that Rafe felt it echo in his bones. “Davey’s gone.”

“I know, Billie,” Jack said, wrapping his arms around her tightly again. “I know. I should’ve been here. He was family, like a brother to me.”

Behind Jack, the rest of the Crows stood quietly, some bowing their heads in respect. One of them, a tall man with storm-gray eyes, stepped forward and gently pulled Billie Ann into his own arms, whispering something that made her nod in response.

That was when Rafe nearly lost it. It wasn’t until he witnessed her quickly pulling away that he calmed, somewhat.

He’d been doing his best to stay back, to give her space, but watching her in the arms of another man, no matter who the hell he was, lit something violent inside him. The kind of heat that burned low and lethal. His muscles coiled, fists curling at his sides, and his Jaguar pressed against the inside of his skin, snarling for release.

Then Jack moved, stepping into his line of sight, cutting him off from the scene like he knew exactly what Rafe was thinking.

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“It’s been a long time, Rafe,” Jack said, voice even, hand outstretched.

Rafe stared at it for a heartbeat too long before finally clasping it. “It has. Congratulations on the Alpha status.”

“Well, that tells you how long it’s been. Thank you,” Jack said with a half grin. “I take it Mac called you in?”

“He did.” Was all Rafe responded.

“We appreciate the assistance, but we are here now and will take care of it,” Jack said as if his words meant anything to Rafe. They did not.

The words were diplomatic. The tone wasn’t. Jack was drawing lines in the sand, and they both knew it.

Rafe didn’t blink, but did give a sinister grin, stepping over the line. “I’m staying.”

Before the tension could boil over into something primal and territorial, Bruce’s voice rang out, slicing through the heavy silence with the sharpness of sarcasm honed to a fine edge.

“Well, isn’t this a touching little drama?” Bruce drawled, leaping gracefully onto one of the outside tables. He sat with his tail curled around his paws, completely unimpressed. “All this puffed-up chest energy and brooding stares make me feel like I walked into a deleted scene from Shifters of Our Lives.”

“Bruce, shut the fuck up,” Rafe growled, not even bothering to look at him.

Bruce ignored the warning, tail swishing lazily like he was the only sane creature in the yard.

Jack, however, narrowed his eyes at the cat. “You’re Wicked’s furball.” The disdain in his voice dripped like tar, but Bruce just gave an exaggerated sigh.

“I’ll show you furball, you overgrown Edgar Allan Poe reject,” Bruce snapped, hopping to his feet on the table. “Say that again and I’ll cough up a hairball in your boots. Maybe even enchant it to sing show tunes.”

Jack arched a brow. “You even come near me with that witchcraft shit I’ll skin you alive.”

Bruce sniffed indignantly. “In your dreams, birdbrain.” Bruce glanced back at Jack, eyes gleaming. “You know, for a guy who turns into a giant crow, you sure do strut like a damn peacock.”

“Bruce,” Billie Ann warned, of course, he ignored her.

Jack opened his mouth, but Bruce cut him off with a dramatic paw wave. “No, no. Save it. Let’s just agree I’m fabulous and you’re tragically feathered, and move on before someone lays an egg.”

Billie Ann let out a snort, quickly covering her mouth, and even Jack seemed momentarily thrown off, blinking like he wasn’t sure if he’d just been insulted.

Rafe was starting to like Bruce more and more. His gaze landed on Billie Ann, who was walking away from the man who glared at him. This made Rafe very fucking happy, and the man Rafe didn’t know very lucky.

Bruce curled back down on the table with a smug little smile. “You’re welcome, by the way. The tension is broken. Carry on with your territorial pissing matches.”

With one last sharp glare at Bruce, who was currently grooming his paw, ignoring everyone, Jack turned his attention to Billie Ann. The hardness in his face softened a fraction, though his voice still carried the weight of old Shifter ways.

“What did Davey decide to do with the bar, Billie Ann?” Jack asked, his dark eyes locking on hers.

Billie Ann didn’t even blink. “I’m staying and going to run the bar.”

“He left the bar to you?” Jack’s tone was even as he stared at her.

“Yes,” Billie Ann replied with a nod.

Rafe didn’t move, didn’t breathe. His gaze shifted from Billie to Jack, watching every twitch of the Crow Alpha’s posture. This wasn’t just small talk. In their world, such a declaration could have consequences.

In the old ways, the Shifter ways, when a Shifter died, their business, land, anything of value didn’t just go to family. It reverted to the Alpha, who would then decide its future: pass it along, sell it, or burn it down if they saw fit. That was their law. But Davey hadn’t followed the law. He’d followed love.

He gave everything to his human stepdaughter. And now everyone was watching to see what Jack Crow would do about it.

The other Crows stood silently behind their Alpha, still as stone, eyes like black glass as they waited. Rafe didn’t miss the flicker of surprise in a few of their expressions, but it was the expression of the man who had pulled Billie Ann to him that piqued



his interest. He had the same surprised reaction as the others, but there was also a narrowing of his eyes that Rafe zeroed in on. A human, claiming what belonged to one of their own? It was a challenge to the old order, and whether anyone liked it or not, the line had been drawn.

Billie stood tall, shoulders squared despite the grief still heavy in her eyes. "I'm not leaving," she added, voice clear and sure. "This bar was Davey's life. And now it's mine."

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Jack stared at her for a long moment before he finally nodded, slow and deliberate. “He loved you like you were his own,” he said, his voice rougher now. “Told me more than once you were the best decision he ever made.”

Billie’s chin trembled, and Rafe watched her eyes shimmer with unshed tears. “He was the only one who ever believed in me,” she whispered.

Jack stepped forward and placed a hand on her shoulder, his expression firm but kind. “Then you don’t owe anyone an explanation. Not even me.”

He turned to the others behind him. “This bar belongs to her. That’s Davey’s will—and mine, too.”

Rafe’s shoulders loosened just a hair, but he didn’t stop watching the man who was now staring at Billie Ann, and Rafe didn’t like the look he was giving her. He didn’t trust Crow Shifters, especially when it came to Billie Ann.

“Thank you,” Billie Ann said to Jack when he turned back around. “I plan on opening tomorrow. You’re all welcome to come.”

“I’ll be here.” The man Rafe didn’t know, but planned on knowing real fucking soon, gave Billie Ann a wink.

“Thanks, Frisco.” Billie Ann gave him a half smile, but Rafe also noticed it didn’t reach her eyes. There was a story there, something he needed to flesh out.

Frisco gave her a nod, then his gaze swung to Rafe, his eyes narrowing as if in

challenge. Rafe's eyes narrowed back as accepting that challenge.

"I'm going to have one of my men here during opening hours to keep you safe," Jack informed her.

"I volunteer," Frisco announced without hesitation.

"Not necessary," Rafe said, his eyes not leaving Frisco. "I'm staying here."

"More manpower won't hurt." He gave Rafe a measured look, then stepped back into the shadow of his crows, and just like that, they shifted in a burst of feathers and were gone, leaving the wind stirred and the air lighter than before.

Bruce snorted. "You know what they say about Crows...never trust a bird who brings roadkill to a gathering and calls it a family recipe."

"I've never heard anyone say that," Billie Ann said, rolling her eyes as she looked at Bruce, who sat proudly like he'd delivered the quote of the century.

Rafe caught the way her lips twitched, like she was fighting a smile.

"Why don't you do me a favor and go tell everyone that Shift Face is opening tomorrow?" she added, brushing invisible lint off her jeans as if steeling herself for what was to come.

Bruce stretched, his tail curling in a lazy arc. "You sure you're ready for that? Because once I run my mouth, it's like tossing meat into a wolf den. You'll have Shifters crawling out of the woods, witches teleporting in, and don't get me started on the gnomes. They drink like fish and tip like raccoons."

Billie Ann laughed, just a soft breath of sound, but it was real. Rafe felt something

warm catch in his chest when she glanced at him, like the sun breaking through storm clouds. He could see the nervousness in her eyes, but also the fire of determination.

He gave her a quiet nod, solid and steady.

“Yeah,” she said, her voice stronger now. “I’m ready.”

She offered Rafe a small, grateful smile before turning and heading back into the bar, shoulders a little straighter and spine a little firmer.

Bruce watched her go, then shot a look at Rafe. “Break her heart and I’ll break your ugly face, Jaggie.”

Rafe didn’t dignify that with a response. He just watched the door swing shut behind her, his heart already following where she’d gone.

He stopped Bruce before he could walk away. “Bruce, what do you know about the Crow, Frisco?”

“Not much other than he used to bartend when Frank was scheduled off. He also did odd jobs. He was around a lot, did some bouncing when things got out of hand. Whatever Davey needed done, he did.” Bruce said, then looked deep in thought. “Why? Didn’t like that he had his hands on your girlfriend.”

The way Bruce said girlfriend made Rafe want to punch him. “Did they date?”

“Damn, didn’t know Jaguars were more of the jealous type than Panthers. Color me shocked.” Bruce snorted. “But no, not that I know of. Davey was pretty strict where guys were concerned with Billie Ann. All I got from Billie Ann was that they were friends. Seriously, why? Are your spidey senses working overtime?”

Rafe ignored his question. “Was he working here when Davey was killed?”

Bruce turned fully around and walked up to Rafe. “Damn, you’re on to something aren’t you, Jag?”

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When Rafe didn't answer, but glared at Bruce, he sighed.

"Fine, I heard that he just quit and found another job." Bruce turned back around and walked away. "Maybe if you gave me more information, I'd have more to say, but until then...taa taa."

Rafe sneered at Bruce, but he knew it was a bluff. That was all Bruce knew because if it weren't, he would have blurted it out. Bruce liked to hear himself talk. Glancing at where the Crows had disappeared, Rafe frowned. He was definitely on to something because right now, Frisco the Crow Shifter was his only suspect, and his gut told him there was more here than meets the eye, and his gut was never wrong.

## CHAPTER 12

The scent of lemon oil and old whiskey lingered in the air as Billie Ann wiped down the tables, humming along to the song crackling from the battered jukebox in the corner. It was an old tune, the kind that tugged at memories. Her voice followed the melody, quiet and unpolished, but real. She wasn't singing to impress. She was singing because it made her feel good.

She didn't hear the door open. Didn't feel the shift in the air behind her until she turned, cloth in hand, and nearly jumped out of her skin.

"Jesus, Rafe!" she gasped, pressing a hand to her chest. "You scared the hell out of me."

He stood just inside the bar, arms crossed over his chest, a look in his eyes that made

her feel like the only thing in the room worth looking at.

“Sorry,” he said with a low chuckle. “Didn’t mean to startle you.”

Her cheeks flushed. “How long were you standing there?”

“Long enough,” he said, voice warm and rough. “You’ve got a hell of a voice, Billie Ann.”

She laughed, brushing a loose strand of hair behind her ear. “It’s just something I do when no one’s around. Helps me not think.”

“Well, you might want to reconsider keeping it to yourself,” he said, stepping closer. “That was... something.”

Before she could think of something clever to say, the song changed. Another slow one. Bluesy. Intimate.

He held out his hand. “Dance with me.”

Her heart skipped. “Are you serious?”

“I wouldn’t ask if I wasn’t.” his reply was said in a husky tone that had her heart skipping beats.

There was a slight hesitation on her part, but then her hand slipped into his, and she let herself be pulled gently into his space.

He was warm and solid. He smelled like cedar, leather, and something wild she didn’t have a name for. One of his hands rested at her lower back, the other clasping hers. They began to sway, slow and easy, like they’d done this before.

“You don’t strike me as the dancing type,” she murmured, eyes flicking up to meet his.

“I’m not,” he said, his gaze steady on hers. “But I couldn’t pass this up.”

Her stomach flipped. She looked away, focusing on the feel of his hand, the way their bodies moved together like a lazy river finding its current.

“I didn’t think I’d end up back here,” she said softly, looking around as they swayed together.

“You don’t sound too broken up about it,” he replied, his thumb brushing along her back.

“I’m not.” She replied, then whispered. “I wouldn’t have met you.”

There was a pause—comfortable, but charged. She could feel his eyes on her, and it made her skin tingle.

“One way or another, we would have met.” His voice was deep and solid. “Fate has a way of working things out.”

“Fate?” she echoed, her voice tight with uncertainty.

She tilted her head up to look at him. God, he was handsome with his messy dark hair that begged for her fingers to tangle in it, gorgeous blue eyes that seemed to see through every defense she had, and that maddening, sexy smirk that somehow set her on fire and calmed her all at once.

“I don’t believe in fate,” she added, the words sharper than she meant them to be. “You’re here because Mac asked you to come. That’s not fate. That’s an assignment.”



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Her tone had more bite than she intended, but she didn't pull it back. She was scared, plain and simple. What if this was all in her head? What if this man, this stranger, was just spinning some Shifter fairytale to get close to her?

And yet... she hadn't been able to stop thinking about him from the second he'd stepped into her life. Her body reacted to him like it had been waiting for his touch. Her heart, which she hadn't trusted in a long time, beat just a little differently when he was near.

Rafe's smirk faded slowly, replaced by something deeper. His hand came up to cup her jaw, his thumb brushing just beneath her cheekbone with a gentleness that contradicted the wild power she sensed in him.

"You're right," he said quietly, eyes locked on hers. "Mac did ask me to come. But I stayed because the moment I saw you, something inside me told me that you were mine. That's not orders. That's not a job."

She swallowed hard, his words stirring something in her she couldn't name...hope, maybe. Or dread. Or both tangled together.

"But I'm not a Shifter," she whispered. "I'm not your kind."

"I don't give a damn what you are, Billie Ann. You keep telling me what you aren't, but I know what you are. A special woman whom I'm falling hard for." Rafe said, his voice dropping to a gravelly whisper that made her shiver. "Shifter. Human. Witch. Alien. You could come from the damn moon, Billie Ann, and I'd still want you. Everything in me says you're mine."

She stared at him, breath caught somewhere in her chest. No one had ever said anything like that to her before. No one had ever looked at her as if she were both a mystery and a miracle.

“I don’t know if I can believe in fate,” she murmured. “But I believe you believe this.”

“That’s enough for now,” he said, stepping closer, his forehead resting gently against hers. “We don’t have to name it. We don’t have to rush it. But don’t pretend you don’t feel this too. I see it in your eyes.”

She closed those very eyes, letting herself breathe in his cedar scent and warmth, which were wild and comforting at the same time.

Her voice was barely a whisper when she finally looked at him again. “I do feel something for you, Rafe.”

She wasn’t the kind of woman who said things like that easily, especially to a man she’d only just met, but something about Rafe made her want to lay it all bare. Maybe it was his eyes, steady and unflinching. Maybe it was the way he listened without judgment. Or maybe it was just that deep-down, bone-deep pull toward him she couldn’t explain or deny.

She glanced away, her cheeks flushing with color. “Davey used to tell me all these stories about Shifters and their Mates. Said it was this... instant connection. A knowing. I always thought it was just him, drunk and sentimental, talking out his butt.” She let out a soft, self-conscious laugh. “But he believed it. And I guess... part of me wanted to also because who wouldn’t want a love like that?”

Rafe stayed silent, letting her talk, his hand warm and still against her cheek. She leaned into it, needing his touch.

“I mean, I knew some of it was true. I’ve seen things in this town that would make most people question everything. But this—us—” Her voice cracked, and she drew in a shaky breath. “I’ve been burned before, Rafe. Bad. Used and lied to. I don’t have it in me to fall for another illusion. It scares me.”

His thumb brushed along her cheekbone, his gaze never wavering.

“Good,” he murmured, voice rough with sincerity.

She blinked, confused. “What?”

“That means it matters.” He smiled softly. “If it didn’t scare you, it wouldn’t be real. You’re not crazy for feeling something so fast, Billie Ann. You’re brave for not running from it. And I would never hurt you. Never lie to you. Not now, not ever.”

“I don’t know how to do this,” she admitted, her voice barely a whisper.

“You don’t have to,” Rafe said, gently tucking a strand of hair behind her ear. “We’ll figure it out together. I’m not going anywhere.”

A long silence settled between them, comfortable and charged all at once. Then, Rafe leaned in, his forehead resting against hers.

“You’re strong, Billie Ann. You don’t even know how strong you are. And whether or not you believe in fate... I do. I believe in this, in us.”

She closed her eyes, letting the words wash over her like sunlight breaking through clouds. Maybe, just maybe... she could believe too.

And then, without another word, he pulled her in close again. They swayed to music neither of them could hear anymore, and Billie Ann let herself believe, just a little,

that maybe fate didn't need her permission to do its work.

## CHAPTER 13

Sleep came in fits and starts. Billie Ann tossed and turned, the weight of Rafe's words pressing into the quiet darkness like a warm but unfamiliar blanket. Every time she closed her eyes, she saw his face, the feel of his hands guiding her in that slow, unexpected dance. Her heart still hadn't caught up.

By morning, her pillow was a tangled mess under her arm, and the light streaming through the window only served to remind her that tonight... everything would change again. Shift Faced was reopening.

She groaned and rolled out of bed, dragging a hand through her messy hair. Her nerves had nothing to do with drink orders or keeping the register straight. It was about facing the town, facing people who'd known Davey, who'd watched her grow up, and who might not be too thrilled that a human woman was now running one of the most Shifter-centric establishments around.

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But as she stepped into the familiar warmth of the bar, all those anxieties dimmed. The air still smelled faintly of lemon oil and old whiskey. Light poured through the windows, illuminating every surface she had scrubbed clean the day before. Her boots echoed across the wooden floor as she moved behind the bar, checking the taps as well as double-checking the stock. Everything was exactly where it should be.

By late afternoon, the sign on the door was flipped to OPEN, and the buzz began. Locals trickled in, then more, and soon the low hum of voices, laughter, and clinking glasses filled the air like it had never left.

Billie Ann wiped down the bar, smiling at familiar faces. Frank was in his element, working beside her with the same easy rhythm he always had. Bruce was perched on the counter's edge, swishing his tail and tossing snide comments between sips out of a saucer full of whiskey someone had smuggled for him.

"You look like you belong here," Frank said during a lull, nodding toward her.

"I think I finally believe that," she replied, her smile confident as she looked around at the customers who seemed to be enjoying themselves.

And there, leaning against the back wall with that maddeningly confident grin, was Rafe.

Their eyes met, and something unspoken passed between them, like an electric current grounding her to the moment.

"You're looking beautiful tonight," Frisco had walked over and leaned against the

bar.

Bruce snorted, rolling his eyes. “Look who’s trying to get a beer on the house.”

“Thanks, Frisco.” Billie Ann said, ignoring Bruce. She grabbed a beer from the cooler and set it down on the bar in front of him. “But Bruce is right. You don’t have to lie in order to get a free beer.”

“I need two margaritas and two beers,” Macy said as she rushed up to the bar. “Hey, Frisco.”

“Macy,” Frisco gave her a nod, then took a drink of his beer.

“I got the margarita,” Frank said, getting to work on the drinks.

Billie Ann noticed how Macy kept sneaking glances at Frisco. Interesting. Setting two beers on her tray, she smiled at Macy, who blushed after getting caught staring at Frisco.

“Two margaritas,” Frank announced, setting them on her tray beside the beers.

“Thanks, Frank,” Macy smiled, then took off this time, keeping her eyes off Frisco. Her bright smile dimmed.

Once Frank moved down the bar to fill an order, Billie Ann glanced at Frisco. “How well do you know Macy?” she asked nonchalantly. When he gave her a sideways glance, she figured it wasn’t nonchalant enough.

“Why?” Frisco cocked his eyebrow at her.

Billie shrugged as she wiped the already clean bar. “Just wondering.” She replied,

then glanced at Rafe, who was leaning against the wall, arms crossed, watching her.

“How well do you know him?” Frisco gave a sideways nod toward Rafe.

Narrowing her eyes at Frisco, she frowned. “None of your business.” She replied, then glanced at Macy, who was laughing with a group of Crow Shifters. “She’s beautiful, sweet, and totally into you.”

“Too sweet for me,” Frisco said, setting his empty beer down. “I’m more into bartenders.”

“Frank’s married,” Billie Ann replied, gaining a chuckle from Bruce.

“She got you on that one, Crow boy.” Bruce snickered as he leaped off the bar. “Give it up, man.”

“I hate that fucking cat,” Frisco growled, glaring at Bruce, who walked casually away.

“He’s funny,” Billie Ann chuckled. Then she held up a beer toward Rafe, who nodded. She started around the bar past Frisco, who grabbed her arm, stopping her.

“Have dinner with me.” Frisco’s voice was low and coaxing as he looked down at her, his hand still wrapped gently but firmly around her arm.

Billie Ann’s smile faded. It wasn’t the first time he’d asked, and it wouldn’t be the last if he kept reading her kindness as something more.

“We’ve had this conversation, Frisco. Friends. That’s all we’ll ever be.” She lifted her chin. “Let go of my arm.”

His grip didn't tighten, but it didn't fall away either. "You say that, but the way you look at me?—"



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“I look at you like a friend,” she cut in, trying to keep her tone even, her voice calm. “A good friend. But that’s all I’ve got to give. I won’t ask you to let me go again, Frisco.”

Before Frisco could answer, another presence joined them. Rafe appeared at her side, moving with that dangerous grace that made people instinctively get out of his way.

“I suggest you do as she says,” Rafe growled, stepping in closer, his body a wall between Billie Ann and Frisco. His narrowed eyes flared with heat, and the low warning in his voice sliced through the buzz of the bar like a blade. “Or we’re going to have a big fucking problem.”

Frisco straightened, his smirk twitching into something less confident as he looked up at Rafe’s towering frame. “Didn’t realize she needed protection now.”

“She doesn’t,” Rafe said, his voice harsh and steady. “But clearly, you weren’t listening. I’m just making sure you hear her.”

Frisco’s eyes flicked to Billie Ann, and for a second, something darker passed across his face...resentment, maybe, or just wounded pride. He scoffed, but the edge of his bravado was dulled now.

Rafe didn’t move, didn’t blink. His body radiated tension, ready to explode if Frisco made one wrong move.

“She told you no,” Rafe said, voice quieter now, but twice as dangerous. “You don’t put your hands on her. Ever.”

Frisco let out a breath, backing off with a forced chuckle. “Damn, man. You act like she’s already claimed.”

“She is.” He replied point-blank with no hesitation and no explanation.

The words landed hard, and Billie Ann felt their weight deep in her soul. Her eyes flicked up to Rafe’s, startled by the calm certainty in his voice.

Frisco looked between them, clearly caught off guard by the declaration. “That changes things,” he muttered, stepping back.

“Damn straight it does,” Rafe didn’t hold back. “So, you can either leave on your own two feet or be carried out. Choice is yours, Crow.”

Frisco gave one last look at Billie Ann, then turned and melted into the crowd, his swagger gone.

Rafe didn’t relax until Frisco was out of sight. Then he turned to Billie Ann, reaching out to brush his fingers lightly down her arm, checking her. “You okay?”

She nodded, swallowing the lump in her throat. “Yeah.”

He searched her face, his thumb grazing the spot where Frisco’s hand had been. “Next time, I won’t ask so nicely.”

“That was nice,” she said, trying for a light tone, though her voice trembled slightly.

Rafe leaned in closer, his mouth near her ear. “You haven’t seen me not nice, sweetheart.”

A shiver worked down her spine, and not from fear. Her pulse thundered in her ears

as she met his gaze, heart clenching at the possessiveness simmering behind his golden eyes.

And the wildest part? She didn't mind it one bit. Frisco was a friend, but he wanted something more, and at times, became really pushy to the point it made her uncomfortable.

"Frisco isn't a bad guy," Billie Ann said quietly, watching the front door swing shut in the wake of his dramatic exit. He'd spoken to a few of the Crow Shifters near the bar before stalking out, his jaw tight. "He's just?—"

"A man who doesn't take no for an answer the first time," Rafe cut in, his voice low and edged with frustration. "Or the second, from the looks of it."

Billie Ann turned to him, folding her arms across her chest. "He means well. We've known each other for a long time. He just...misreads things."

"Misreads?" Rafe's golden eyes locked onto hers, full of heat and a hint of the wildness that lived beneath his skin. "He had his hand on you. That's not a misunderstanding. That's a man who thinks he has the right to ignore your boundaries."

She blinked, the fire in his voice catching her off guard. He wasn't yelling. He didn't need to. Rafe's anger simmered just under the surface, protective and fierce.

"He's not dangerous, Rafe," Billie Ann said, her voice quiet, trying to soothe the storm brewing just beneath his surface.

But even as the words left her lips, her mind flashed back to the way Frisco's eyes had darkened and how his smile had vanished, replaced by a look she didn't recognize. That angry glare he gave her just before Rafe stepped in had chilled her.

She had never seen that side of Frisco before.

“He was angry,” she admitted, her voice softer now. “I’ve known Frisco a long time. He’s always been persistent... sometimes too persistent. After I left for Lexington, he called, emailed, and even showed up a couple of times asking me to come back. Said this place wasn’t the same without me.”

Rafe’s jaw tightened. “That doesn’t mean he has a claim on you.”

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“I know,” she said quickly, stepping closer. “We are friends, and it’s never gone beyond that. I made sure he understood, or at least I tried to.”

“Yeah, well, maybe someone should remind him,” Rafe muttered, his glare still locked on the door Frisco had slammed behind him. “Because that look he gave you wasn’t a friend being disappointed. That was a man who thinks he’s owed something.”

She swallowed hard, her chest tight.

Rafe turned to her then, softer but no less intense. “I’m not trying to be the jealous guy, Billie Ann. But I’ve been around long enough to recognize when someone’s not hearing no.”

Her eyes met his, and something inside her ached—an old fear, wrapped in guilt and confusion. “I can handle myself, Rafe.”

“I know you can.” He reached out and gently touched her chin, tilting her face up toward him. “But you don’t have to. Not anymore. At least not alone.”

Something warm and unfamiliar moved through her chest, settling just behind her ribs. She gave a small nod, letting out a breath she hadn’t realized she’d been holding.

“Okay,” she said softly. “Not alone.”

The words lingered between them, warm and full of promise. And yet, as soon as they left her lips, her eyes flickered back to the door Frisco had stormed through. A

strange weight settled in her chest, a swirl of unease that didn't quite match the comfort of Rafe's touch.

She knew Frisco. Or at least, she thought she had. He wasn't violent, not the kind of man who snapped or made threats, but that look had been something different. It had felt possessive and dark, sending a chill down her spine that she couldn't quite shake.

## CHAPTER 14

Rafe leaned against the wall near the edge of the bar, arms crossed, his sharp gaze sweeping the room like a sentry on high alert. One eye stayed fixed on the slowly thinning crowd, and the other followed Billie Ann as she moved behind the bar with ease, chatting with customers and wiping down surfaces. Her smile was genuine, as if she wanted to hear every single word a person was saying.

He forced himself to take his eyes off her before he grabbed her and found a private place where he could make her his in all ways. Unfortunately, his gaze landed on Roger, Assjacket's one and only Rabbit Shifter, who attempted something that could be generously described as dancing. The small dance floor hadn't stood a chance. Roger bounced awkwardly in place, overly large ears twitching with the beat as he tried to hop in rhythm, nearly colliding with two drunk raccoon shifters doing something that looked like square dancing... badly.

A half-smile tugged at Rafe's mouth. This town was insane, but he had always enjoyed his visits here.

A few minor scuffles had broken out over the last hour. Nothing serious, just the usual posturing that came with too much alcohol and too many egos packed into one small space. Rafe had handled them without breaking a sweat. A growled warning here, a firm shove there, and in true Shifter fashion, most of the offenders were soon laughing and buying each other rounds again.

That was the thing about Shifters. They burned hot and fast—anger, affection, pride— was all cranked to a higher setting. But once it was done, it was done. No grudges. Just another drink and a good story to tell the next day.

Still, Rafe kept his stance by the wall, watching. Waiting. It wasn't that he didn't trust the crowd. Hell, he knew most of them, had fought beside a few in past scuffles. But Billie Ann was in the room, and that changed everything. His instincts were sharper now, protective in a way that went bone-deep.

She caught his eye again, a damp towel slung over one shoulder, her cheeks flushed from the heat of the bar and the buzz of activity. When she smiled at him, its warmth hit him like a punch. Damn, she was beautiful. And his Jaguar? The beast inside him practically purred.

Yeah. He'd handled fights, drunks, and even the occasional chaos from an over-excited moose shifter tonight. But the real challenge was not grabbing that woman, pulling her into his arms, and reminding her exactly what fate had planned for them.

And judging by the way she kept glancing back at him, her eyes flickering with something warm and curious, he wasn't the only one feeling the pull.

"Seems like opening night was a success," Mac said as he and Thorne walked up. Rafe had seen them enter earlier, making their rounds, talking to people. "Any trouble?"

"Nothing that wasn't handled with a Jaguar growl," Rafe said with a half grin, but then turned serious. "What do you guys know about this Frisco guy?"

"Crow Shifter?" Thorne asked with a frown.

"Yeah," Rafe replied, scanning the remaining bar goers before glancing at Billie Ann,

who was talking with Wicked and Zelda.

“Not much.” Thorne looked over his shoulder at where the Crow Shifters were together. “There are so many of them, it’s hard to get to know each one of them individually.”

Rafe looked at Mac, who was staring directly at him. “Did Davey ever come to you about issues with Frisco or any of the Crow Shifters?”

“No,” Mac replied, also glancing their way before looking back at Rafe. “Jack Crow takes care of all Crow Shifter business...unless?—”

“Unless there is an issue within,” Thorne said, then cursed. “Do you think this guy had something to do with Davey?”

“He has an unhealthy infatuation with Billie Ann. I saw it first-hand tonight.” Rafe shifted his gaze back to the Crows. “It was verified by Billie Ann when she told me that after she went to Lexington, Frisco constantly emailed, texted, and even showed up in Lexington trying to get her to come back.”

“What happened tonight?” Thorne asked, his eyes narrowing.



*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 4:00 am*

“I heard him ask her to dinner,” Rafe said, his voice low and edged with rage. He kept his eyes on the far end of the bar where Billie Ann was laughing with one of the regulars, but his focus was firmly on Thorne. “Even with the noise and music, I heard it all. Perks of being a predator.”

Thorne raised an eyebrow in agreement but didn’t interrupt.

“She said no,” Rafe continued, jaw tightening at the memory. “Firm and clear. But he didn’t like that. He kept pushing, then grabbed her arm when she tried to move past him.”

Thorne’s smirk faded slightly, his expression sharpening. “And she asked him to let go?”

“She did.” Rafe’s golden eyes darkened, a muscle ticking in his jaw. “Twice. When he didn’t, I stepped in.”

Thorne glanced around the bar, as if scanning for signs of a scuffle. His mouth twitched. “Well, I don’t see any blood stains on the floor, so I take it he backed down before things got messy?”

Rafe’s gaze narrowed, his shoulders tightening as his Jaguar stirred restlessly beneath his skin. “He didn’t back down right away. Not until I made it crystal fucking clear that if he didn’t let go, he wasn’t walking out of here on his own legs.”

Thorne let out a low whistle. “Damn. You went full Alpha on his ass.”

“Yes,” Rafe growled, his eyes drifting back to Billie Ann. She was still smiling, but there was a tightness in her posture that only someone watching closely, like Rafe, would notice.

Thorne nodded, thoughtful now. “You think he’s a problem?”

“I think if he touches her again, he’ll have one,” Rafe growled, then tried to get control of his emotions.

They stood in silence for a beat, both men watching the woman at the heart of it all. Rafe felt a raw, instinctive need to protect what was his. She was his. And even if she didn’t understand the depth of that bond yet, he did.

“Are you thinking he had something to do with Davey?” Mac asked with a frown.

“It’s one of the possibilities,” Rafe replied, hoping that wasn’t the case because Billie Ann would feel responsible for her stepfather’s death.

“I’ll have a talk with Jack Crow and see what I can find out,” Mac said, waving Zelda over. “We are going to head out. I’ll call you in the morning.”

“Yeah, we’re leaving also.” Thorne slapped Rafe on the shoulder. “Call if you need anything.”

Rafe nodded, watching them go. Frank yelled out “last call,” making everyone moan, but the bar emptied quickly, one by one. His gaze scanned the bar, seeing Macy cleaning up, but he didn’t see Billie Ann. As soon as Rafe approached the bar, Frank looked up.

“She’s in the kitchen,” Frank informed him as if he knew exactly what Rafe was going to ask.

“Thanks,” Rafe said as he nodded to Frank and made his way toward the back.

He pushed open the swinging door to the bar’s small kitchen and immediately froze. His eyes locked onto Billie Ann, who was on her tiptoes, arm stretched high into a cabinet. Her skirt had hiked up, revealing smooth, toned thighs and just the barest hint of her perfectly rounded ass.

“Fuck,” he muttered under his breath as heat flooded through him. He knew he should look away, he even tried, but there wasn’t a force on earth that could’ve stopped him from taking in every inch of her.

He stepped forward, slow and purposeful, until he was directly behind her. Without a word, he slid one arm around her waist, pulling her against him as he reached past her to grab the item she’d been trying to get. He heard her gasp, her body stilling under his touch.

“I’ve got it,” he said, voice rough as gravel.

“Rafe...” Her voice was a soft whisper.

He set the bowl down on the counter in front of her, then leaned in, his mouth finding the soft curve of her neck. He pressed a slow, heated kiss on her soft skin, his lips lingering as he breathed her in. She smelled like vanilla and something uniquely hers that made his head spin.

“Do you have any idea what you do to me?” he whispered against her skin.

She leaned back just a little, resting against his chest, her breath coming a bit faster now. “Probably the same thing you do to me.”

Rafe turned her gently in his arms, his hands settling at her hips. He looked down at

her, golden eyes burning with intensity. “You’re dangerous,” he said with a half-smile.

A flush colored her cheeks, but her hands came up to rest against his chest. “I don’t try to be,” she said shyly as she peeked up at him under lowered lashes.

“And that’s what makes it so fucking sexy,” Rafe growled then took her lips in a kiss that promised many things...good things.

### CHAPTER 15

Billie Ann's mind was still spinning from that kiss in the kitchen. Rafe's mouth had been hot on her neck, his arms strong and sure as he pressed her against the counter like she was the only thing that mattered. And God help her, she wanted more. No hesitation. No second-guessing. She was all in, heart and soul.

Now she waited impatiently in the trailer where he had left her. After locking up the bar for the night, Rafe wanted to run perimeter, saying he would feel better, but promised to return soon.

Running into the bedroom, she quickly freshened up and changed. Nervousness and excitement rolled through her body. Looking at herself in the mirror, she smiled at herself as she fluffed her hair. It was hard to believe she could fall so hard for someone she had just met, but that is exactly what had happened.

Before he left, Rafe kissed her again, his hands running over her body with a promise to return soon. He hadn't walked away until he heard the door lock. Besides Davey, no one had ever cared enough about her safety, and it felt nice.

With a sigh, she opened her bedroom door and walked out, a scream ripping from her throat. Standing in her living room was Frisco, and the look he had given her earlier played through her mind. Her instincts warned her that this wasn't a social visit.

"Get out, Frisco!" Billie Ann said, hoping her voice didn't sound as terrified as she felt. She knew that door had been locked.

“Yeah, that won’t happen until you and I have a talk,” Frisco replied, then turned to look at the still locked door, which her attention kept going to. “Wondering how I got in? I’m a Crow Shifter, baby. I can find the smallest areas to get in. There is no running or hiding from me.”

“I’m not running or hiding,” Billie Ann shot back, her voice sharper than she felt inside. Her heart pounded in her chest, but she refused to show fear. She didn’t recognize the man in front of her. This wasn’t the Frisco she’d worked beside, laughed with, and called a friend for years. This version of him had wild eyes and a twisted grin, like something had snapped and there was no coming back.

“You need to leave, Frisco,” she said, her tone firm but shaky. “Rafe’s going to be here any minute.”

That only made Frisco laugh loud, sharp, and unhinged. “Fuck him!” he roared, his eyes flashing with something dark and manic. “Your hero’s a little busy at the moment. I made damn sure about that.”

Her stomach dropped. “What did you do?” she asked, barely able to get the words out. A chill skated down her spine, despite the warm night air.

Frisco stepped closer, his smile spreading like oil on water. “Little distraction. I have friends who don’t like new Shifters coming into town, taking our women.”

Bile rose to her throat. “Why? You afraid of Rafe to face him yourself?”

“Bitch I will kill him without blinking an eye. I just needed him out of the picture so we could talk.” Frisco stepped closer.

Billie Ann backed up a step, rage and disbelief battling inside her. “You’re out of your damn mind.”

“I did everything right,” he hissed, ignoring her words. “I stayed. I worked that bar like it was mine. I waited. But Davey gave it to you. A human. That is not supposed to be how it’s done. Then Rafe comes strutting in like some alpha knight to take you too?” His eyes were burning now, wild and frantic. “I learned you, Billie Ann. I learned all of it!”

She stared at him, horror washing over her. “You killed him,” she whispered as the horror of that realization hit her hard.

Frisco didn’t answer, but the way his jaw clenched and his gaze darted away told her everything she needed to know. “I knew if Davey was gone, you’d come back, and I was right. I was fucking right! With him gone I’d have the bar and you, but that fucking bastard came here and ruined it. You were supposed to love me.”

Tears stung Billie Ann’s eyes, but she refused to let them fall. Lifting her chin, she stared Frisco down with every ounce of strength she had left.

“I would never have loved you, Frisco. Especially now, knowing you killed Davey.” She spat with hatred at what he had done and who he had become.

Her words lit a fuse. His face twisted, and in the next breath, his hand lashed out and struck her hard across the cheek.

“We’ll see about that,” he growled.

Before she could recover, his hand closed around her throat and slammed her back against the wall. She gasped, struggling against his iron grip, her nails digging into his wrist as he leaned in.

“You belong to me,” he snarled. “And so does Shift Faced. No one’s going to stop me from having you both.”

Just as dark spots started to fill her vision, the trailer door crashed open.

“And that’s where you’re wrong,” came Rafe’s voice, low and deadly.

Relief hit her like a wave, but it was short-lived. Frisco only grinned wider, a flash of wild satisfaction in his eyes as he reached inside his jacket.

Billie Ann didn’t think, only act. She launched herself at him, tackling him just as he drew the gun. They hit the ground hard, and the sound of a gunshot exploded in the tight space, deafening her.

“Son of a bitch!”



*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 4:00 am*

Rafe was already moving. He yanked Frisco off Billie Ann, his heart pounding so loud it nearly drowned everything else out. His eyes scanned her in a flash. No blood, thank God, but the welt on her face lit a rage inside him that was unstoppable.

He kicked the gun under the counter and grabbed Frisco by the front of his jacket, dragging him bodily out of the trailer. The bastard fought him, clawing and swinging, but Rafe didn't feel any of it. His rage was a living thing now.

Outside, Rafe let loose. The fight turned primal in an instant.

Frisco was fast, slippery, and agile like the crow he was. He came at Rafe with a wild grin, feinting left, then jabbing at his ribs. Rafe took the hit and returned with a brutal uppercut that snapped Frisco's head back.

"You should've stayed gone," Rafe growled.

Frisco lunged, managing to clip Rafe across the jaw. Pain flared, but he welcomed it. Pain always made him more focused. His Jaguar wanted to come out to play, but Rafe held him back. This was his job, his Mate he was defending.

Rafe grabbed the bastard by the shirt, slammed him against the side of the trailer, and drove his fist into Frisco's gut, then his jaw—once, twice—bone and cartilage giving under the force.

Frisco twisted free, staggering, spitting blood into the dirt. Rafe hit him again, sending him sprawling into the gravel.

“You laid a hand on her,” Rafe said through gritted teeth. “That’s all I need to bury you, motherfucker.”

Frisco surged back up, wild and desperate now, but Rafe was ready. He tackled him to the ground, fists landing in a flurry of controlled, punishing strikes.

“You don’t know shit!” Frisco roared, bucking under him. “She was supposed to be mine! Davey was going to hand it all to her, so I took it! I took him out, and she still picked you!”

“You took nothing but a life!” Rafe sneered down at him and then smashed an elbow to his face. “Davey never promised you anything did he you sick son of a bitch. You knew Billie Ann would come home, which would be your chance at owning the bar through her. You are a sick piece of shit.”

“It would have worked if it weren’t for you coming here.” Frisco sneered through the blood flowing freely from the wounds on his face.

Rafe’s smile was deadly as he glared down at Frisco. “That’s right, fucker. If, for whatever reason, you think of coming around again, remember my warning. I will kill you slowly and painfully. Better yet, if Jack doesn’t off you...watch your fucking back, Crow.”

“You just sealed your fate, Frisco,” came a deep voice behind them.

Rafe looked over to see Jack Crow and Mac standing nearby, their faces carved from stone. He had called Mac when five Crow Shifters ambushed him. He had known something was going down and needed someone with Billie Ann because he didn’t know if he would make it in time.

“You just confessed to the murder of one of your own, asshole,” Jack said coldly.

“We’ll handle it from here, Rafe.”

Frisco stilled. The blood from his nose dripped onto the dirt. For the first time, there was no cocky grin, no confidence—just realization.

Rafe stood slowly, chest heaving and fists shaking. “I can finish him now. It’s my right.”

“Go check on Billie Ann,” Mac nodded toward the trailer. “And Rafe, Davey’s death is a Shifter-on-Shifter crime, and you know that needs to be handled differently. If that weren’t the case, then you would have full rein to end him yourself.”

Rafe wiped the blood from his jaw. “If you so much as breathe in her direction, you won’t walk away next time, and no one will stop me,” Rafe growled down at Frisco before standing up and turning toward Jack. “There are five or six Crow Shifters who ambushed me. Some may still be knocked out by the creek up the hill.”

“You will never have to worry about him again. I can promise you that. And I’ll take care of the other five as well.” Jack gave him a sharp nod. Mac stepped forward and hauled Frisco to his feet, whispering something low and full of authority. Frisco didn’t fight. His cocky fire was gone.

“The gun,” Rafe said through clenched teeth, his voice still rough from the adrenaline pounding through his system. “I’m sure it’s the one the bastard used to kill Davey. It’s in the trailer. I’ll get it to you tomorrow.”

“Get her out of here. You know where to take her and where the key is.” Mac ordered, then gave him a grim nod. Jack Crow said nothing, his jaw tight, eyes locked on Frisco as he and Mac dragged the broken man away.

But Rafe wasn’t watching anymore. He turned and jogged back toward the trailer, his

blood still hot, his mind racing with images of Billie Ann pinned against the wall with her cheekbruised. It made something twist savagely within him. He wanted to rip Frisco apart, but that was out of his hands now.

What wasn't out of his hands... was her.

The trailer door hung crooked on its hinges. He stepped inside and found her sitting on the floor, knees drawn to her chest, eyes wet and wide.

Their gazes met, and in an instant, she was in his arms.

He dropped to his knees, wrapping her tightly against him as she buried her face in his chest and finally let go. Her sobs were quiet but raw, and he held her tighter than he'd ever held anything in his life.

"I'm so sorry I wasn't here," he whispered against her hair, his voice trembling from so many emotions ranging from fear to rage that anyone dared lay a finger on her.

*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 4:00 am*

She pulled back slightly, her fingers trembling as she reached up and gently wiped the blood from the corner of his mouth. Her touch was soft, reverent.

“Are you okay?” she whispered. Her eyes scanned his face, then dipped lower, her hands ghosting over his chest, his arms, looking for any sign of injury. “I was so afraid he was going to?—”

“I’m fine.” He cupped her chin, tilting her head so she had no choice but to meet his eyes. “But if you ever throw yourself in front of danger to protect me again, I swear I’m going to lose my mind. You could’ve been killed.”

“You could’ve been killed,” she shot back softly, her lip trembling. “I saw him reach for that gun, and all I could think was... not you. I couldn’t lose you to.”

Rafe didn’t answer. He just pulled her back into him, cradling her as if she might vanish if he let go. Her heartbeat against his chest was the only proof he needed that she was still here, still his.

He pressed a kiss to her temple and breathed her in.

“Let’s get out of here. I’ll fix the door tomorrow,” he said after a moment, his voice low and steady again. “You’re safe now. I’ve got you.”

And he did.

No matter what came next or how much more they had to face, he wasn’t letting her go.

Not now. Not ever.

## CHAPTER 16

It had been almost a month since Frisco confessed to killing Davey. A month since everything she thought she knew about her life had cracked open and reshaped into something new.

Most of the time, Billie Ann managed to stay busy. There was always something to do at Shift Faced, from inventory, repairs, managing Shifters and drunks, and trying to keep Bruce from stealing chicken wings off people's plates.

But tonight, after the last customer left and the doors were locked, the silence sat heavier than usual.

She stood alone in the kitchen, leaning against the counter, the overhead light humming faintly above her. The place smelled like bleach and old fryer oil, with a hint of lemon from the cleaner she'd used to wipe everything down. It was comforting in a strange way. Familiar.

What wasn't comforting was her phone.

Still nothing.

Rafe had been gone for three days, returning to Mexico to tie up the last of his affairs there. He'd called the first two nights. He had sounded tired, but still teasing and tender. But today... nothing.

And she hated how much that unsettled her.

She set her phone down and took a deep breath. "You're fine," she whispered to

herself. “He said he’d come back. You believe him so stop freaking out.”

“Hey, everything is cleaned up, so I’m taking off unless you need me to do anything else.” Macy peeked in over the swinging doors. The sparkle that was usually in her eyes was absent.

After what happened with Frisco, Macy had been unusually quiet. Not her bubbly self. Billie Ann knew she’d had feelings for Frisco. How deep those feelings ran, Billie didn’t know. She also didn’t know what had happened to Frisco after that night. Rafe told her that she never had to worry about him again. Honestly, she didn’t want to know. She trusted Rafe fully.

“You okay, Macy?” Billie watched her closely.

“Yeah, I’m good,” Macy said, smiling, but it didn’t quite reach her eyes. “Just tired, but I made a killing on tips tonight.”

“Good,” Billie Ann smiled back. “Listen, if you ever need to talk, I’m here. Okay?”

Macy glanced away, but nodded before looking back at her. “Thanks, Billie Ann.” She then looked around. “I’ll stay if you want me to until you’re finished here.”

“No, you go ahead.” Billie shooed her. “I’m almost done back here. Just lock up when you leave, please.”

“Don’t worry, I’m her protector until Mr. Tall, Dark, and Moody gets back.” Bruce walked underneath the swinging doors.

Billie Ann rolled her eyes, then grinned at Macy. “Be careful going home.”

“I will.” She gave a quick wave and then left, leaving Bruce and her alone.

*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 4:00 am*

Billie Ann glanced at her phone again and sighed.

“Lover boy still hasn’t called?” Bruce sat watching her.

“No, I’m sure he’s busy.” She replied, putting her phone away.

“What in the hell can he be doing at two in the morning?” Bruce snorted, shaking his cat head. “Only trouble happens at this time.”

Frowning, Billie Ann narrowed her eyes. “Bruce, why don’t you go to the trailer...or better yet, go home. I don’t need protection.”

She didn’t need his snarky little jabs either, or the way he stared at her like he knew something she didn’t. The truth was, she was doing her best to keep it together, waiting on a man who hadn’t called in nearly a day. Rafe had said he was just tying up loose ends back in Mexico, but her mind...yeah, her damn overthinking mind didn’t care about logic.

Bruce arched a brow, twitching his tail. “Fine. Be that way.” He hopped down from the counter with a soft thud and stalked toward the door. “But if something slinks out of the shadows to eat you, I’m gonna say I told you so.”

Billie Ann followed, opening the door with more force than necessary. “I’ll take my chances.”

“That chair I’ve been sleeping in sucks anyway,” Bruce muttered as he disappeared into the night. Rolling her eyes, she closed the door with a heavy sigh.



For another half an hour, she found things to clean. She didn't want to go to the trailer alone. She'd rather just stay all night here.

Picking up her phone again, she glared at it. "Why in the hell won't you call?"

"Why in the hell is this door not locked?" Rafe's voice made her jump with a squeal as she spun around. For half a second, she froze, heart in her throat. "And I didn't call because I couldn't this morning, and then I knew you'd be working, and I expected you to be in bed waiting for me."

"I would have answered even if I was working, and I don't like being in bed without you," she said, her voice low as she took in his messy dark hair and tired eyes.

Within a heartbeat, he was taking her in his arms in two strides, pulling her in tight. The second her body hit his, all the worry, fear, and tension melted into something deeper. He was back.

She pressed her face into his chest, breathing him in. "I missed you."

"I missed you more." He tilted her chin up. "Every mile, every hour was torture, but I'm here to stay."

His mouth took hers before she could say anything.

The kiss began softly, but quickly deepened into something desperate, something undeniable. It was need and relief, longing and love, all crashing together like a tide that had waited too long to come in. Her back hit the counter as his arms wrapped around her waist, pulling her against him. Her fingers threaded into his damp hair, fisting as she kissed him back with everything she had.

Their foreheads touched when they finally broke apart, breathless and clinging to

each other. Her chest rose and fell against his. He still held her like he was afraid she might vanish. But she wasn't going anywhere.

"I love you," Billie Ann whispered, her voice trembling from the weight of everything she felt.

His golden eyes locked on hers, fierce and unshakable. "Say it again."

A smile broke across her lips, this one real and unguarded. It had taken her longer to say those words to him, and he loved to tease her about it. "I love you, Rafe." She whispered slowly with a half grin.

A sound escaped him—half laugh, half moan—as he leaned in to kiss her again, slower this time, savoring the moment.

He pulled back just enough to speak, his voice low. "You're mine, Billie Ann Carter. I knew it the moment I saw you."

The creak of a floorboard made them both look up. Bruce stood in the doorway, tail twitching, his whiskers angled in disapproval.

"Gag," he muttered. "I knew something was going to slink in from the shadows, and I was right. That's what happens when you leave the door open."

"Bruce," They both said with warning in their tone.

"I swear I get no respect." Bruce turned back around to leave, then glanced over his shoulder. "Just heard a motorcycle and wanted to make sure you were okay, but do I get a thank you? Nope, I do not."

"Thank you," Rafe growled as he reached out and slammed the door in Bruce's face.

“Well, you aren’t welcome,” Bruce yelled through the door. “Don’t ask The Bruce for any favors, asshole.”

*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 4:00 am*

“I’m going to kill that cat one day.” Rafe hissed as he nuzzled Billie Ann’s neck.

“He did keep me company while you were gone,” Billie Ann whispered, leaning her head back against Rafe’s chest, her arms wrapped around his waist. She breathed him in—warm skin, leather, and his own special scent that made her knees weak.

“Fine,” Rafe muttered, pressing a kiss to her temple. “He can live... for tonight.”

Without another word, he bent and swept her into his arms like she weighed nothing at all.

She gasped, laughing softly. “What are you doing?”

“Carrying you to bed before he finds a way to interrupt again,” he growled, already heading toward the trailer. “Now, can we stop talking about Bruce?”

As if on cue, the familiar voice came from somewhere in the shadows, smug and loud as ever. “It’s The Bruceto you, dickhead!”

Billie Ann burst out laughing, her head falling against Rafe’s shoulder as he snorted in response.

“He says he’s got nine lives,” Rafe said with a growl, pushing open the trailer door with his shoulder. “And I swear I’m using one if he shows up again tonight.”

But once the door closed behind them, and the quiet of the trailer wrapped around them like a warm blanket, neither of them gave Bruce or anyone else a second

thought.

Rafe set her down gently, his eyes never leaving hers. No more goodbyes. No more danger. Just the two of them, in the place where it had all begun.

As their lips met again, Billie Ann knew this wasn't just the end of a long, hard chapter.

It was the beginning of everything.