



# The Bear's Mail Order Mate

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**Category:** Romance, Paranormal

**Description:** Cassia Harper had sworn off romance after catching her fiancé cheating. Determined to rebuild her life, she leaves her prestigious career behind, answering an intriguing online ad for a sommelier at Bear Creek's charming new vineyard restaurant. It seems fate has finally dealt her a winning hand—until she discovers one tiny detail: the restaurant doesn't actually exist.

Kris Thornberg loves managing the family vineyard, but his life is missing something—a mate to share it all with. When Cassia arrives at Thornberg Vineyard, suitcase in hand, expecting a job interview, Kris quickly realizes his mischievous brothers have placed a playful ad as a joke, never anticipating anyone would take it seriously—especially not someone as perfect as Cassia.

Determined not to lose Cassia, Kris and his meddling family scramble to turn their imaginary restaurant into reality. As opening night rapidly approaches, Cassia and Kris navigate chaotic preparations, humorous mishaps, and undeniable attraction.

Can Kris convince Cassia that his love for her is real, even if the restaurant was not?

**Total Pages (Source):** 65

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## Chapter One – Kris

Kris Thornberg took a sip of his latest wine blend, allowing the liquid to linger on his palate before swallowing. He frowned slightly, detecting a subtle imbalance that nagged at his well-honed senses. It was close, but the flavors were still not working in harmony.

Finding the perfect blend seems to be as elusive as finding our mate,his bear grumbled.

Ignoring his bear's comment, Kris swirled the dark liquid slowly in the glass. Too much bite, he decided, scribbling a note in his battered spiral notebook.

Maybe we could take a break and join the others,his bear suggested hopefully.

Too late.Kris looked up as he sensed his brothers returning to the vineyard after their nighttime run across the mountains.

We should have gone with them,his bear grumbled in the back of his mind.

I wanted to get this new blend perfected,Kris countered, taking another sip of wine as he tried to figure out what it was missing.

All work and no play makes Kris a dull boy,his bear replied.Maybe that includes your senses. If you got out a bit more, you might feel refreshed.

Next time,Kris promised as he methodically recorded his observations and reached

for some dried cranberries from a small wooden bowl beside him. The chewy tartness contrasted sharply with the wine, sparking a new idea he hoped would lead to the missing note.

“Still torturing your taste buds, I see.” Philip’s voice came from the doorway as he entered the building where Kris worked his magic. Kris might have been struggling with this particular blend, but he had earned a reputation for producing exceptional wines that perfectly captured the essence of Thornberg Vineyard’s unique terroir.

“Just trying to get this new red blend right,” Kris replied, not looking up from his notebook. “Something’s off, but I can’t quite put my finger on it.”

“Maybe you’re overthinking it,” Philip said, reaching for an empty glass. “Mind if I try?”

Kris slid the bottle across the wooden table. “Be my guest. Maybe a fresh palate will catch what I’m missing.”

As Philip grabbed a clean glass from the shelf and poured himself a taste, Stanley and Alfie loitered in the doorway, whispering. Kris watched as his brother swirled the red liquid around and then lowered his head to inhale the aroma before taking a generous sip.

“Well?” Kris asked with barely masked impatience.

Philip’s eyebrows rose slightly as he savored the wine. “Hmm,” he murmured, taking another thoughtful sip before setting the glass down. “It’s good. Superb, actually, as always. But I see what you mean. There’s something...missing.”

“That’s what I’ve been saying for the last three hours,” Kris said, running a hand through his hair.

It feels like three days,his bear grumbled.

More like three weeks,Kris replied. A faint tension tugged at his temples. He'd been hunched over these notes since midday, and the strain was beginning to tell.

Stanley pushed off from the doorframe and ambled into the tasting room. "Let me try. I might not know wines like you two, but I know what I like."

"Since when did running a pet store qualify you as a wine expert?" Alfie called from behind him, following his brother inside while Nero hovered in the shadows.

"Since I serve the most discerning customers in Bear Creek," Stanley replied with a grin. "Mrs. Winters' poodle won't eat anything but the finest organic treats. If that's not sophistication, I don't know what is."

Kris shook his head but couldn't suppress the small smile tugging at his lips. Stanley's irreverent humor often lightened the tension in the winery, and Kris appreciated it more than he let on. It helped that Stanley was not as emotionally invested in the wines in the same way as Kris or Philip.

"Here." Kris poured a sample for Stanley, who approached tasting wine with the same enthusiastic lack of technique he applied to most things in life.

"It needs..." Stanley took another sip, his expression comically serious. "Hmm. Something earthy. Like the smell after rain."

Kris paused, considering. "Petrichor."

"Petri-what?" Alfie asked, helping himself to a glass.

"Petrichor," Nero said as he came to join them. "The smell of earth after rain."

Kris nodded, suddenly thoughtful. “You might be onto something, Stan. Maybe a touch more of the Cabernet Franc from the north slope. It has more mineral notes from our rocky soil.”

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Philip nodded slowly. “That’s what’s missing. That subtle earthiness would balance the fruit notes perfectly.”

Kris reached for another bottle, one he’d been saving from last year’s experimental batch. “Let me try adding just a touch...” He carefully measured a small amount into his blend, then swirled it gently before taking another taste.

The moment the wine touched his tongue, he knew he had it at last.

Thank goodness,his bear rumbled with satisfaction.

“That’s it,” Kris said, unable to keep the excitement from his voice. “That’s exactly what it needed.”

Stanley grinned triumphantly. “See? And you all thought the pet store guy didn’t know his wines,” he declared, giving Kris a playful punch on the shoulder. “But you don’t have to be an expert to know what tastes good.”

“I guess it’s all those dog biscuits you have to sample,” Nero teased, but there was admiration in his tone.

“Good team effort.” Kris carefully noted the adjustment in his notebook, then sat back in his chair, the weight of the day’s tension lifting. The satisfaction of solving the puzzle pleased him as much as the wine itself.

Maybe now we should go for a run,his bear said.

That's not a bad idea, Kris agreed as he closed his notebook.

"So," Alfie said, hopping onto a stool, "now that you've achieved viticultural perfection for the evening, maybe you can help us with a little project."

This doesn't sound like something we want to get involved in. Kris's bear instantly went on alert. He recognized that tone. It was the same one Alfie had used before convincing him to "borrow" their father's truck when they were teenagers.

"What kind of project?" Kris asked cautiously.

"It's something personal," Stanley said, a little too innocently.

"Personal?" Kris repeated. Now he knew he wasn't going to like it.

"Did you tell him?" Finn came to join them, grabbing the half-empty bottle from the side before he perched on the edge of a cask. "Anyone for a top-up?"

As they poured drinks, Kris noticed the conspiratorial smiles drifting among his brothers. A sense of mild dread swirled in his gut. He could practically taste their shenanigans.

"Why do I get the feeling I'm not going to like this?" Kris held out his glass and Finn filled it nearly to the brim. But he doubted any amount of wine was going to help him through whatever his brothers had planned.

"Don't be hasty," Finn said as he emptied the rest of the wine into Philip's glass.

"Come on. Out with it." Kris took a long swig of wine, ignoring how it burned slightly at the back of his throat. He preferred sipping slowly, but his nerves told him otherwise.

“So, Kris,” Finn began, swirling wine in his glass, “we had a thought while running. About your...lack of a social life.” He traded a smirk with the others.

“My what?” Kris sputtered, nearly dropping his notepad.

Here we go,his bear muttered with gruff amusement.

Stanley cleared his throat in playful pompousness. “Yes. Your catastrophic, hopeless social life. Or non-existent social life, to be precise. You never leave these vines long enough to meet anyone, let alone find your mate.”

Heat flared across Kris’s neck. “It’s not that bad.”

“But itisthat bad,” Stanley said, leaning a hip against a barrel. “You can’t hide away in here for the rest of your life. It’s...”

“...not healthy,” Philip finished pointedly.

Kris drained the last of his glass, setting it down a bit too forcefully. “So, what, you guys have a grand plan for me? Like I can just place an order for a mate?”

A hush fell, broken only by the click of Finn’s phone unlocking. Alfie shook his head with an exaggerated sigh. “Order a mate? Huh, interesting you mention that...”

Stanley grinned as he stepped forward. “We might have drafted a littlelead. For fun.”



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An ad...?His bear instinctively tensed, a wave of disbelief and alarm washing over him.

Oh, no. They wouldn't,Kris said, equally appalled.

Finn shot Kris a crooked smile. "Yes, for a...what did you call it? A mail-order bride. One who appreciates fine wine and a good man."

Kris's eyes went wide, but the brothers were already trading glances like co-conspirators. He stifled a groan. "You guys can't be serious."

"Oh, we're serious, all right," Philip teased. "And we happen to have our first draft right here."

Kris watched as Finn tapped his phone, clearing his throat. The rest of the brothers straightened as if preparing for a performance. Kris folded his arms, half-amused, half-apprehensive.

"All right," Stanley directed, turning an imaginary baton toward Finn. "This is what we have so far."

"We worked hard on it," Philip said as he reached for another bottle of wine.

Finn took a deep breath and began, glancing at the phone's screen: "Seeking the Perfect Match at Thornberg Vineyard..."

Alfie chimed in, "Wait, I think we should mention Bear Creek right away to set the

picturesque small-town vibe.”

“Sure, sure,” Finn agreed, adjusting his phone. “How about: ‘Seeking the Perfect Match at Thornberg Vineyard: Nestled in the picturesque town of Bear Creek, the heart of Thornberg Vineyard is on the hunt for someone special. Do you have a refined palate, a zest for adventure, and dreams of pairing exquisite food with exceptional wine? Do you dream of being part of a new venture, in a charming place where flavors and warmth blend seamlessly?’ Sound okay?”

Kris rolled his eyes. “No.”

“Don’t listen to him. It’s good,” Philip said, nodding. “Continue.”

Finn resumed: “...Do you have exceptional taste, a passion for fine wines, and an adventurous spirit?”

Stanley raised a hand. “Needs more emphasis on a ‘fresh start’ angle. Like we’re genuinely offering them a new beginning. The place you can reinvent yourself or something.”

“Right,” Finn said, typing. “So we insert: ‘We’re looking for an individual who...’ Let me bullet-point this out and we can refine it later.”

“Good idea,” Stanley cut in with a soft laugh. “Don’t forget the sense of humor requirement. That is a must.”

Finn typed, then read slowly, “We’re looking for an individual who appreciates life’s finer pleasures (and excellent vintages).”

“Are you calling me old?” Kris grumbled.

“Never,” Philip replied. “But none of us are getting any younger.

“Okay, continue, Finn,” Alfie prompted.

Finn nodded. “Dreams of pairing delicious food with extraordinary wine. Is ready for a fresh start filled with warmth, laughter, and lasting relationships. Isn’t afraid of a little hard work and family chaos (sense of humor highly recommended!).”

“And then,” Stanley interjected, “some kind of closing line like...Apply today, in person! And then something like your future awaits, that kind of romantic flourish.”

Alfie snapped his fingers. “Yes, we need that final push. Something that says: ‘This is it—take the leap.’”

“A leap of faith,” Nero added.

“Or a leap of fate!” Stanley raised his glass.

Finn grinned, finalizing the text. “How about: ‘If you’re seeking to put down roots and help us turn dreams into reality, your place awaits at Thornberg Vineyard—where great wine, good company, and love always find each other. Serious inquiries, in person, only—your future awaits.’”

A chorus of satisfaction rumbled among the brothers. Kris pinched the bridge of his nose, torn between laughter and exasperation. “I can’t believe this. You’re literally writing a personal ad for me.”

His bear let out an amused rumble. It is kind of funny, even if it sounds like garbled nonsense.

Kris couldn’t deny the sense of longing that filled him. If only it were that easy. But

the days of ordering a bride through an advertisement were long gone. And even if they were not, he didn't need a mail-order bride—he needed a mail-ordermate.

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Philip took Finn's phone, scanning the text. "This actually sounds...not half bad."

"It's a good thing that no one is ever going to see it," Kris muttered, trying not to imagine some poor woman reading it and taking it seriously.

Finn tapped a few more keys, shooting Kris a wicked grin. "And...posted. That's that."

"Wait! What?" Kris stood up abruptly and reached for Finn's phone as panic gripped him.

But Finn merely held up his phone, an unapologetic shrug on his face. "It's for your own good."

"You are joking." Kris narrowed his eyes at his brother as he clenched his fists. He'd not come to blows with his brothers since they were hot-headed teenagers, but this was too much.

"I might be," Finn teased, holding his phone close to his chest. "Or I might not be."

"Finn," Kris growled, a warning to his brother.

"You should see your face." Finn chuckled as he reached for his wine glass and took a drink.

"Give me the phone, Finn," Kris demanded, his voice dropping an octave as his bear's irritation seeped through his veins.

“Fine, fine,” Finn relented, tossing the phone to Kris with a dramatic sigh. “It was just a joke. I didn’t actually post anything.”

Kris caught the device and quickly checked the screen. The draft was there, but thankfully not published anywhere. He exhaled slowly, relief washing over him as his brothers collapsed in a fit of giggles.

“You all think you’re hilarious,” Kris said, handing the phone back to Finn. “But you know what? I’m perfectly content with my life.”

That’s a lie,his bear grumbled.

“Sure you are,” Stanley said, clapping him on the shoulder. “I mean, why would you want to find your mate when it might interfere with all the time you spend with your wine?”

Kris shrugged off his brother’s hand. “It’s important to me...”

A faint hush fell as Kris mulled over how to make them understand something he barely understood himself. After their cousins over at the Thornberg Ranch all found their mates, he’d felt the emptiness more keenly than ever. Immersing himself in vineyard work helped bury the fear that the Thornberg Vineyard boys might never share in such joy.

Maybe we all need to place ads for mail-order mates,his bear said dryly.

Kris sighed heavily. “Look, I appreciate the concern, but I don’t need help finding a mate. When it happens, it happens.”

“And it has to happen sooner or later, doesn’t it?” Stanley asked hopefully.

“It does,” Nero replied, raising his glass. “Here’s to fate. May it bless us with the same luck as our cousins over at the Thornberg Ranch.”

Kris glanced down at the ad on the phone one last time, then handed it back to Finn before raising his own glass. “To fate.”

“To fate,” his brothers chorused.

Let’s just hope fate has not abandoned us,his bear said, as the brothers drank their toast, each with a far-off look in their eyes.

## Chapter Two – Cassia

What was she doing?

The right thing,the voice in her head answered.

And the voice was right, she was sure it was. How could it be wrong when, from the first moment she saw the advert for a fresh start, she’d known it was the perfect job for her? After all, she dreamed of pairing delicious food with extraordinary wine. And the Thornberg Vineyard certainly produced some extraordinary wine. And she was more than ready for a fresh start filled with warmth, laughter, and lasting relationships. If those actually did exist. And she was not afraid of a little hard work and family chaos. And with any luck, this new job would help her recapture her sense of humor.

Or was she simply trying to convince herself that the universe had aligned the stars for her? That she was meant to be here, in Bear Creek, working at the Thornberg Vineyard?

When in reality she was running away.

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Cassia mulled that thought over for a moment, her fingers tapping lightly on the steering wheel.

No, she wasn't running away from anything. Least of all her low-down, cheating ex-fiancé.

Instead, she was running towards something, a chance at a new start, in what promised to be her dream job.

Shifting in her seat, she glanced at her phone, where she'd saved the Thornberg Vineyard ad. Its whimsical phrasing still made her smile, something she had not done in weeks. "Seeking the Perfect Match." A cheesy line to be sure—but it had caught her attention in the middle of a lonely night when picking up the pieces of her broken life had felt impossible.

The only strange thing about the ad was that she had to apply in person. There were no other contact details, no telephone number, not even a name. She'd been tempted to look up the number and call ahead, but what if it was a test?

And anyway, if the job was a bust, at least the change of scenery would do her good. And what scenery it was. The tallest mountains she had ever seen, with vibrant green forests and in the distance a silvery serpentine creek.

The kind of place where people set down roots and made a home.

All she had to do was convince the Thornbergs that she was the perfect person for the job. No doubt competition would be fierce for a position like this. But determination



coursed through her veins...alongside the anxiety.

She'd found the ad by pure chance, but surely others had seen it, too. People with more experience, and better qualifications.

All she had to do was come up with a USP. Yeah. Easy. But despite the long drive, nothing had come to mind.

Cassia Harper was not unique in any way. At least, that was how she'd been left feeling after her rather dramatic breakup with Dante.

Goodness, even thinking his name made her skin crawl. The memory of finding him with her so-called best friend still haunted her. The image of their tangled limbs on the couch she'd picked out for their new apartment was forever burned into her brain.

Tears pricked her eyes, and her stomach clenched at the total humiliation she'd experienced at the hands of the two people she'd trusted the most—her husband-to-be and her maid of honor. She fought the urge to let fresh tears fall, reminding herself she'd cried too many already.

Cassia gripped the steering wheel tighter as she navigated the winding mountain road. But when the GPS announced she was just minutes from her destination, she blinked away her tears.

Goodness, hadn't she'd shed enough of them already? Enough to last her a lifetime. Or two.

She rolled down the window and sucked in a deep breath of the mountain air. The scent of pine trees warmed by the summer sun drifted through the open window. Was it her imagination, or was the air sweeter up here?

Or was that the scent of a fresh start?

Damn, she wanted this job. But she needed to compose herself. Turning up at a job interview with tear-stained cheeks, red eyes, and a blotchy complexion was not the first impression she wanted to make.

No, she needed to appear sophisticated, calm, in control, and ready to conquer the world. Or at least, the menu for the new restaurant they were planning to open at the Thornberg Vineyard. She'd heard rumors some time ago that the family-run vineyard was thinking of expanding but as far as she knew that was all it was, a rumor. Until she saw the advert.

Cassia pulled onto a gravel drive, following a wooden sign that read Thornberg Vineyard in elegant, carved lettering. As she drove deeper into the property, the landscape unfolded around her. It looked just like it had in the article she'd read about the place. Rows of vines nestled against the backdrop of mountains, a hacienda-style house with terracotta walls and a red-tiled roof, and several outbuildings that hinted at the vineyard's operations. One converted barn stood out—likely the proposed restaurant mentioned in the advertisement.

“Oh,” Cassia breathed, momentarily forgetting her nerves. It was perfect. The house, the location...everything seemed lifted from a dream.

But she shouldn't get ahead of herself. She still needed to convince the owners to put their trust in her. All she needed was the opportunity to prove herself.

Cassia parked her car in a small lot to the side of the vineyard reserved for visitors. As she checked her reflection in the rearview mirror, she hoped that by the time she left, she'd be more than a visitor. She would be a part of this place.

She turned her head from side to side, not liking what she saw. Ugh. Red and blotchy.

Oh well, there was nothing she could do about that now. She'd just have to dazzle the Thornbergs with her ideas for the new restaurant. Her fingers shaking slightly, she pulled a tube of concealer from her purse and dabbed at the worst of the blotches before adding a fresh coat of lipstick.

"You've got this," she whispered to herself, smoothing down her white blouse and navy pencil skirt. Professional but not stuffy. Perfect for a vineyard interview.

Taking a deep breath, she stepped out of the car, instantly enveloped by the rich scent of earth and grapes. The vineyard smelled alive and vibrant, and she breathed it in, letting the freshness ground her.

She was going to do whatever it took to get this job.

Shielding her eyes from the sun, she turned in a slow circle, taking it all in.

"Can I help you?"

The deep voice startled her, and Cassia whirled around to find herself face-to-face with a man who seemed as much a part of this landscape as the mountains themselves. She recognized him from her research of the vineyard. This was Kris Thornberg, a master blender of fine wines.

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And as handsome as hell. He was tall—easily over six feet—and broad-shouldered, with arms that looked well-used to physical labor. His dark hair was slightly disheveled as if he'd been running his hands through it, and his warm brown eyes regarded her with curiosity. No, not curiosity. Something more. Something deeper.

For a moment he robbed her of breath, but then she forced a bright smile. “Hi, I’m, um...Cassia? I answered your ad for the new restaurant?”

Confusion flickered across his features, but the warmth of his faint grin made her knees wobble, anyway. He tugged his brows together. “A...new restaurant, you say?”

Cassia hesitated, a jolt of apprehension spreading through her. She got the distinct impression he had no idea what she was talking about. She forced a polite laugh, trying to hide her fears. “Yes, the...the one at Thornberg Vineyard? With the job listing for a sommelier? I came all this way for an interview... It said to apply in person, so here I am.”

Kris’s expression shifted into something akin to recognition, then mild panic. He swallowed hard, and Cassia’s stomach twisted. She’d made a terrible mistake and if she didn’t act fast, she was going to make a fool of herself. And worse, if this got out, it could dent her reputation. Just as Dante had dented her pride and self-respect.

Her instincts screamed at her to turn on her heel and run back to her car. But the sight of the vineyard, the quiet openness of the land, and the tinge of vulnerability in Kris’s gaze anchored her in place.

She was not going to run anywhere.

“Yes.” She nodded slowly. “I do have the right place, don’t I? The sign said Thornberg Vineyard.”

He nodded, still looking more than a little bewildered. “It is.”

“Okay.” She dug a hand in her purse and pulled out her phone. “And this is your ad.” She held out a screenshot of the ad.

“Oh.” His eyes widened. “Thatad.”

How many other ads were there for this job? Cassia tensed her jaw. This was not going well. Not well at all.

But then his expression cleared, and he smiled, shaking his head as if he’d just figured something out. “I’m Kris. Kris Thornberg.” He extended his hand. “My brother put that ad up. I’m sorry for the confusion. I didn’t realize he’d actually posted it yet.”

“Oh.” Cassia’s face turned red with embarrassment when a surge of electricity traveled up her arm as she slipped her hand into his. He tightened his grip on her hand, and she was sure he felt it, too, like they had an instant connection. “So you’re not hiring?” she asked when she finally got control of herself.

His eyes held hers for a moment longer than necessary, and something unfurled in her stomach. Longing. “Hiring? Oh, hiring. We are. Definitely. Just...” He glanced toward the main house. “The timing’s a surprise. My brother tends to jump the gun sometimes.”

Relief washed through her. “So I didn’t drive all this way for nothing? I was worried since the ad said to apply in person, which is a little on the odd...side.”

She had just called Kris Thornberg, the man she hoped would be her boss, odd. Good start, Cassia!

“No, ma’am.” The corner of his mouth quirked up. “Though I should warn you, the restaurant’s still more concept than reality at this point.”

Cassia couldn’t help but notice how his accent deepened when he said “ma’am,” a gentle drawl that hadn’t been there before. It was...charming.

“I don’t mind a challenge,” she said, lifting her chin slightly. “Actually, I prefer it.”

Something flickered in his eyes. Approval perhaps, or maybe even a hint of admiration.

She squared her shoulders, hoping to exude confidence she didn’t feel. “Could we talk about the position?” she asked. “If it’s still available?”

Kris’s lips parted, and for a moment, she thought he might say no or maybe laugh at her. Instead, he nodded slowly. “Yes. Of course. This way.” His voice held a tentative kindness that made her heart skip despite the confusion.

Clutching the folder containing her ideas a bit tighter, Cassia followed behind Kris as he headed off between a row of vines. Something definitely felt off here, but this was her best shot at a fresh start.

“I hope this isn’t an awkward time,” she said, hurrying to keep up with him. “I know you must be very busy.”

“No, it’s...” Kris ran a hand through his hair. “It’s not your fault. There’s just been...some confusion. That’s all.”

But there was no confusion about the effect Kris had on her. As they passed through the rows of vines, Cassia had to force herself not to stare at him. He moved with the ease of someone completely at home in his surroundings. His broad shoulders shifted beneath his worn flannel shirt, and despite her determination to stay professionally focused, she found herself appreciating the view.

But then they left the vines behind, and he led her to a large rustic-looking building she recognized as the place where Kris Thornberg works his magic. At least that was the caption in the magazine article. And boy, she would love for him to work his magic on her!

“Come on in.” Kris pulled open the door to the tasting room and held it for her.

“Thanks,” she squawked as she stepped inside and was greeted by the sight of large casks of wine, barrels lining the walls, and the rich, woody scent of fermenting grapes that filled the air. The space was rustic yet elegant, with exposed beams overhead and wide windows that bathed everything in golden afternoon light.

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“This is beautiful,” she said, turning in a slow circle to take it all in.

“Thank you.” Pride warmed his voice. “The vineyard has been in my family for generations.”

Cassia nodded, noticing the framed photographs on one wall—black-and-white images of men who shared Kris’s strong jawline and broad shoulders, standing among rows of young vines. “Your grandfather started it?”

“Great-great-grandfather, actually.” Kris moved to stand beside her, close enough that she could feel the warmth radiating from him. “But my family settled here when the town was first founded.”

Their eyes met, and for a moment, Cassia felt as if she were falling into those warm brown depths. She quickly looked away, reminding herself why she was there. This wasn’t a date, it was a job interview. For a job that might not even exist.

“So,” she said, clearing her throat. “About the sommelier position...”

Kris winced slightly, his broad shoulders tensing. “Right. About that.” He gestured toward a small table in the corner of the tasting room. “Why don’t we sit?”

Cassia followed him, her heart sinking with each step. This wasn’t going well at all. The job she’d pinned her hopes on—her escape from heartbreak and humiliation—seemed to be evaporating before her eyes.

“So,” Kris began as they settled into their seats, “we’re still very much in the



planning stages of the restaurant. I guess the idea is to showcase our wines with proper food pairings.”

“That sounds wonderful,” Cassia offered, trying to keep her voice steady.

“It is. It does. In theory.” Kris’s voice trailed off.

“Oh.” Cassia’s hopes dimmed further. “So you don’t need me.”

“Oh, I do. Wedo!” Kris replied quickly. “We definitely need someone with your...expertise. The timing’s just a bit...premature.”

She studied his face, searching for any hint of deception, but found only genuine embarrassment. “When were you planning to open?”

“Oh.” He leaned forward, resting his forearms on the table. “No fixed date. Not as yet.”

“You really didn’t know your brother posted that ad, did you?” she asked, hitching her purse on her shoulder as she eyed the door. Maybe she should make a dignified exit for both their sakes.

A rueful smile crossed Kris’s face. “No, Cassia. I did not.”

“Then I should go. I’m sure we both have better things to do.” Although that was a lie. She had nothing else to do. She hadn’t realized until this moment just how much she had pinned her hopes on this job.

“No, Cassia. I don’t,” Kris said, as if he mirrored her thoughts. Then he leaned forward, his voice low. “Do you believe in fate?”

“Fate?” she asked, looking into his dark brown eyes.

“Yes.” He nodded.

Was he saying what she thought he was saying? That it wasn’t an accident she’d seen the ad? That they were meant to meet?

“I...” Cassia hesitated, uncertain how to respond. After Dante’s betrayal, she’d sworn off romantic notions like fate and destiny. And yet, sitting across from this man in this beautiful vineyard, she couldn’t deny the strange pull she felt. “I’m not sure what I believe anymore.”

Kris nodded, his gaze never leaving hers. “Fair enough.” He leaned back in his chair, a thoughtful expression crossing his face. “Look, I won’t pretend this isn’t awkward. But since you’ve come all this way, why don’t I show you around? Give you a proper tour of the vineyard. Explain what we’re trying to build here.”

Hope flickered within her. “So, there might still be a position?”

“Yes,” he said with quiet certainty.

“Then I might just become a believer,” she replied with a smile.

“When I have shown you everything,” he began, “I know you will.”

### Chapter Three – Kris

Kris’s heart stuttered in his chest as he watched Cassia’s eyes flicker with that hesitant spark of hope. Of all the scenarios he could have imagined when Finn “pretended” to post that ad, this—meeting his mate—had never once crossed his mind. That fate would somehow draw her here to the vineyard, and into his life at

last, was almost impossible to believe.

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Yet here she was. In the flesh.

Here she is, his bear murmured, its deep voice thrumming with barely contained excitement. Our mate.

Kris swallowed the excitement—and the panic—tightening in his throat. He needed to keep calm and figure this out. After all, Cassia was here to apply for a job that did not exist.

Yet, his bear said.

Yet, Kris agreed. But somehow, he needed to create the job, and the restaurant, before his mate learned the truth. Because if she did, she might leave his life as abruptly as she'd entered it.

He glanced around the tasting room, his eyes drifting up to the high wooden rafters before moving on to the casks and crates lining the walls. He drew in a deep breath, inhaling the comforting aroma of fermenting grapes and various spices. This was his domain, his place of refuge. But now it felt charged with the electricity of Cassia's presence.

Then his eyes rested on Cassia. His mate. His true love.

As he let out a long breath, he offered her a neutral smile, reminding himself to act calm. Which was not exactly easy when his bear was practically doing somersaults inside his mind.

You should be doing somersaults, too,his bear said, unable to hide its excitement.This is our mate!

I know,Kris said.And I'm trying to make her stay.

He took another deep breath, exhaling slowly. "So," he began, "why don't I show you what we do here? I mean, where we make the wine before we, uh, chat about the details?"

Cassia nodded, though a trace of uncertainty still clung to her face. "Yes, please. I'd love a tour." There was a note of relief in her voice. She'd likely been worried by Kris's initial reaction that the entire "job listing" was a mistake.

It was,his bear said.

I know. You know. But Cassia does not need to know,Kris replied. And he'd be damned if he was going to lose her over a misunderstanding.

Not ever,his bear said.

All I have to do is convince her to stay,Kris told his bear.

I'm sure I could,his bear said.After all, who can resist a big cuddly bear?

If we changed places right now and she saw you, I don't think 'big cuddly bear' is exactly the first thought that would go through our mate's head,Kris said with a chuckle.

Our mate,his bear said dreamily.

"Shall we?" Kris directed Cassia toward the back of the tasting room. The stones

underfoot gave way to smooth concrete where the temperature dropped a few degrees. This was the production area. He flipped a switch, and bright overhead lights illuminated rows of gleaming stainless-steel tanks.

“Impressive,” she said as she looked around the room.

“This is the start of the process,” he said, trying to sound professional. “We ferment the grapes in these tanks after the harvest. Different yeasts, different fermentation times. Even slight changes can influence the flavor.” He paused, casting a glance her way. “You know this already, of course.”

She stepped closer to one of the tanks, running her fingertips lightly over the steel. “I do, but I love hearing different vintners talk about it in their own words. You can learn so much about a vineyard’s character by how the owners handle fermentation.” She offered him a small, genuine smile. “Everyone has their own style.”

Kris’s bear rumbled with approval. She is interested. She cares about the craft.

Of course, she cares, he replied. She’s a sommelier. But she wasn’t just any sommelier. She was their sommelier.

We should tell her, his bear encouraged. Let her know who we are. That she belongs here. To us.

Not yet, Kris insisted. She’ll freak out. He fought the urge to run a hand through his hair again, a telltale sign of his nerves. No, he needed to keep it together.

He cleared his throat. “Let me show you the barrel-aging room. That’s personally my favorite space.”

Damn, you sound like a nerd, his bear complained.

It's my superpower,Kris said as he led her through a wide door and down a short corridor into a dimly lit room stacked floor to ceiling with oak barrels. The smell was heavenly. A mix of toasted wood, red wine, and a faint hint of the vineyard's soil. Low lights gave the barrels a warm, golden glow. Cassia inhaled deeply, and her eyes drifted shut, as though savoring every note of the aroma.

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“Wow,” she breathed, stepping carefully between the stacked barrels. “This is incredible. It’s bigger than I expected.”

Kris let out a short laugh. “We have very fertile soil here. My brother, Philip, works alongside my parents to enrich the land,” he said, following a step behind her. “Which means we’ve increased our harvests year on year.”

“Is he the one responsible for the ad?” she asked.

“No,” Kris lowered his gaze. “That would be my brother, Finn.”

“How many brothers do you have?” she said, turning to face him.

“Five,” he replied.

“Five.” She nodded slowly. “And do they all work here at the vineyard?”

“No. Just me and Philip. But I’m sure you’ll meet the rest of them sooner or later.” Kris placed his hand on the nearest barrel. He felt a brief pang at the thought of how quickly word would spread among his siblings once they heard about Cassia. He wasn’t ready to share her with them yet. “Some of these barrels have been aging for months, some for years. Each batch is unique. The slightest difference in the grape’s growing conditions can alter the result.”

“I love that about wine,” Cassia said as she moved to stand by his side. “It’s never just science. It’s artistry. Intuition. Heart.” A faint pink blush covered her cheeks, as though she felt self-conscious about showing her passion so openly.



Kris's heart gave a traitorous little flip. Intuition. Heart. That was exactly it. Wine, for him, was a language. But right now, he was lost for words.

She gets it, his bear growled in delight. Our mate gets us.

"Yeah," he finally managed, his voice almost a whisper. "Exactly."

Silence settled over them, broken only by the quiet hum of the cooling system. Kris drew a slow breath, inhaling the sweet oak and fruit-laced air to steady himself. He needed to address the elephant in the room.

The fact that the ad was never supposed to be real, his bear reminded him.

And it was right. The idea of opening a restaurant at the vineyard had come from Uncle Thaddeus, who ran a successful restaurant in Bear Creek. But it remained just that—an idea.

Until now, his bear said. Because if we want Cassia to stay, we might have to make the restaurant a reality.

Oh boy. This is going to take some explaining to our parents, Kris said wryly.

"These barrels are amazing," Cassia said. "And it must take patience to give the wine time to mature. You must be a patient man."

You have no idea, his bear said gruffly. We've waited a lifetime for our mate to arrive.

Kris parted his lips to speak, but the sight of her peering up at the barrels, that subtle wonder lighting her face, stopped him. Her eyes shone with enthusiasm and a dash of excitement. He couldn't crush that by telling her this was a mistake. Somehow, he had to make it work. But how?

“I think we need to talk about the job,” he said, gesturing for them to head back toward the tasting area. “I realize there’s some confusion, and I want to clear it up.”

She nodded, lips pressed into a line that betrayed her tension. “All right.”

They walked back to the main tasting room, more open and airy. Kris paused at a small wooden table near a wide picture window overlooking the vines. He motioned for Cassia to sit. She perched on the edge of the chair, her earlier enthusiasm replaced by uncertainty.

Does she think we’ve been toying with her? his bear asked.

Possibly, Kris said. But we’d never be that cruel. Especially not to our mate.

Kris set about grabbing a couple of glasses. Then he pulled one of his favorite bottles from a nearby rack—a classic Thornberg Vineyard Merlot, something approachable yet expressive. Confidence, be confident, his bear told him.

I’m trying, Kris said, forcing a small smile as he popped the cork.

“The best way to see what we do is to taste what we do,” he said, pouring for them both. “This is one of our staple wines, and I’m...proud of it.”

He caught the slight arch of her eyebrow, as though she were still bracing for bad news. Setting the bottle aside, he lifted his own glass, swirling the wine gently.

She followed suit, bringing the glass to her nose. “Mmm,” she hummed, closing her eyes to focus on the bouquet. “Ripe plums, a hint of cedar...there’s a nice chocolatey undertone, too.”

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Kris couldn't help the grin tugging at his mouth. "Exactly. That's what I love about it. It's warm but not heavy. Easy to pair."

She took a sip, and a faint smile curved her lips. When she opened her eyes, they glimmered with a spark of genuine appreciation. "That's lovely. Smooth, well-rounded. You can taste the care that's gone into it."

Kris felt a rush of pride. "Thank you. We do our best." Their gazes met, and an invisible current of awareness flowed between them. An awareness that said, This could be something.

She definitely senses we share a connection, his bear murmured, excitement in its tone.

Kris cleared his throat, setting the glass down. "Cassia, about that ad...it wasn't supposed to be posted." He swallowed when her posture stiffened. "My brother—Finn—was playing a prank. He never meant for it to go online. Ever."

Her expression faltered, a mix of shock and disappointment crossing her features. "I...see."

"But," he pressed on, leaning forward, "the idea behind it isn't completely off-base. We've been talking about opening a small restaurant to showcase our wines—like a tasting menu concept. We want it to be special, something that draws visitors from all over. And for that, we do need a sommelier or someone with a refined palate." He ran a hand over the table's smooth wood, a nervous habit. "We just haven't gotten all the logistics sorted out."

Her shoulders relaxed a fraction, though her gaze was still guarded. “So, it wasn’t purely a joke? There’s actually a plan to open a restaurant even if it’s just theoretical?”

He nodded. “Absolutely. It’s just...not as far along as the ad suggested. But if you’re serious about wanting to help us, I...I’d love to have you.”

We can’t let her leave,his bear insisted.Make her see the future. Her future, here with us.

Kris inhaled and forced a small chuckle, hoping it didn’t sound too shaky. “Guess you could say the timing’s perfect in a twisted way. Your arrival might be the push we need to finally move from talk to action.” He paused, lips curving into a grin that felt more genuine by the second. “So, how about it? If you’re willing to put up with the chaos of bringing a half-baked idea to life, I’m offering you a trial period.”

She stared at him, her hazel eyes flicking between disbelief and cautious hope. “A trial period,” she echoed.

He nodded, ignoring the anxious flutter in his stomach. “Two weeks. Maybe more, if you’re up for it. We’ll start drafting a menu, pairing wines, and see how it feels. Once we have a solid plan, I can talk to my folks about renovating the old barn. My parents—Nancy and Hugo Thornberg—are all for expanding what we do here, as long as it’s done right.”

Cassia took another sip of wine, seeming to mull over his words. Kris watched her carefully, noticing the faint pinch in her brow as she weighed the risk of trusting him.

Please,his bear pleaded.Say yes. We need you here.

“This is...unusual,” she said finally. “But you know what? I didn’t drive all the way

here to give up at the first hiccup. If you're serious..."

"I am," Kris said, a bit too quickly. "We need someone with your skill set. The listing might have started as a...comedic advertisement, but the position can be real if we decide to make it so." His heart pounded, realizing how desperate that sounded, but he pressed on. "I promise, if you stay, you won't regret it. Let us prove Bear Creek is worth your time."

She tilted her head, studying his face, then let out a breath she'd clearly been holding. "All right," she said, a smile tugging at the corners of her mouth. "A trial period. Two weeks, maybe more."

A surge of triumph shot through Kris's veins. Yes. He realized he was smiling like a fool, but he didn't care. "Thank you," he said simply.

#### Chapter Four – Cassia

This was crazy. She was agreeing to a two-week trial for a job that, until a couple of minutes ago, did not exist. Worse, the job was at a restaurant that also did not exist.

She should just get out of there, go back home...

What a joke! She did not have a home. Not anymore.

And hadn't she wanted a fresh start? They sure didn't come any fresher than this.

She glanced around the tasting room, her eyes settling on the swirling patterns of old wine stains on the floor. "So...where do we start?"

"First, let me show you where we actually produce and store the wines," Kris said, clearing his throat. "We've got some older barrels we can taste from. That'll give you

a good place to start when it comes to potential pairings. And from there, I guess we'll also talk about your vision for the food side."

He rose from his chair, retrieving his half-finished glass of Merlot. Cassia stood, too, still clutching hers. He gestured for her to follow him to a side door that led deeper into the production area. Steel tanks and tall racks of barrels loomed around them while a faint hum from the cooling system created a subdued background noise.

"I love the scale of this," she remarked, running her free hand along a row of stacked crates labeled by year. "It's big enough to be significant, but still feels personal." She glanced at him. "That's how wine should be. Intimate, with a story behind every bottle. Don't you think?"

Kris offered a small nod, the corners of his mouth lifting in a subtle smile. "Exactly. Wine is not just about mass production. It's about connecting people with a particular place. We try to keep it that way."

Cassia let her gaze drift across the towering shelves of dusty bottles and labeled crates. Each date, each variety, represented a chapter in Thornberg Vineyard's story. One she hoped she'd get to be part of.

Was she ready for this? Was she good enough?

A flutter of nerves stirred in her stomach. If Kris was going to push forward with plans for the restaurant because of her, she did not want to let him down.

But as her gaze landed on Kris, the flutter turned to excitement. Maybe he was right. Maybe this was fate. She was meant to see that ad, and she was meant to be here.

Was it ridiculous that she sensed he felt something, too?

He paused before a row of large barrels, resting his palm on the smooth oak. “We have a mixture of both French and American oak here,” he explained. “Different barrels for different wines, different intensities. You can get everything from subtle vanilla notes to deep smoky undertones.”

Cassia nodded, absorbing his words. “I’d love to note these differences. It’ll help me think about the menu. The kind of dishes that might go well with the intensities you get from each aging process.”

Kris flicked his gaze to her, and she was struck by how earnest he looked. Despite the jokes about a non-existent job, he believed in this place. It radiated off him in the way he lingered over the details, the way he smoothed his fingers across the barrel’s surface as though it were precious.

She closed her eyes briefly, imagining his fingers trailing across her skin as if she were precious to him, too.

“So, shall we?” he said, and her eyes flew open as her cheeks flushed pink. It was a good thing he could not read her mind.

But she sure would love to read his. What exactly did he think of her? It’s not every day that a stranger turns up unannounced for an interview for a nonexistent job. Yet he’d been such a gentleman about the whole thing.

“Cassia?”

She shook her head, trying to focus, but it was near impossible when he was so close. “Sorry, I was just thinking about...” You, a small voice inside her added.

“Thinking about?” He leaned slightly forward, his dark eyes mesmerizing. And she longed to thread her hands around his neck and pull him closer.

“The wines, the menu...” She smiled brightly—too brightly. “But I should probably learn more about your different vintages before I start planning anything concrete.”

“Then come this way.” Kris motioned for her to follow him toward a steel platform where a few smaller barrels were set apart. “This batch has been aging for about twelve months. It’s one of our more experimental blends. We tried a heavier Cabernet base with some lighter, fruitier grapes for a layered effect. Do you want to sample?”

Cassia smiled and nodded, never able to say no to tasting. “Absolutely.”

Kris grabbed a small, stainless steel sampling tube from a nearby hook and carefully drew out a measure of deep, ruby-red liquid. Cassia held out her glass, and he poured the sample into a slow stream. The wine’s aroma wafted up to meet her senses before it even settled. She closed her eyes to focus, inhaling slowly. “Ooh,” she murmured softly. “Dark fruit...blackberries, maybe a hint of blackcurrant. And there’s a bit of spice—cinnamon? Possibly clove?”



Kris watched her intently. “That’s exactly what we’re aiming for. A bit of depth and warmth.”

She took a sip, letting the wine linger on her tongue. It was bold, a touch tannic, but still balanced enough to leave a smooth finish. “I’m picturing a menu item that plays with those same spice elements. Maybe something slow-cooked—short ribs with a cinnamon-clove rub. That would really draw out the warm notes.”

His eyes lit up. “Short ribs, huh? I can see that being a hit in a cozy vineyard setting.” A self-conscious grin tugged at his lips. “Look at us, brainstorming. Feels good to be making progress, right?”

She let out a small laugh. “Yeah, it does. A lot better than me standing around, feeling like I’d stumbled into some kind of cosmic misunderstanding.”

“A cosmic understanding, huh?” He looked as though he wanted to say more, then hesitated. “Anyway, I have a feeling your ideas could really inspire us.” He then quickly added, “To actually start the restaurant.”

She’d never seen herself as inspiring anyone or anything before. But it was hard not to be inspired by Thornberg Vineyard. Or Kris Thornberg himself, a man who surely could work magic, judging by the wines she’d tasted so far.

She lowered her gaze to the wine in her glass, staring at the swirl of deep red. She could fall for a man like him.

But that was not happening. She needed to keep her personal life separate from her professional one, or she might blow this chance at a dream job.

She caught Kris watching her, and for a breathless second, she wondered if he could read her thoughts. The notion made her heart pound. She cleared her throat, setting

the glass aside on a nearby barrel. “I should probably jot some notes down before we move on.” She pressed her fingers to her temples. “My mind’s racing with ideas, and I don’t want to forget any.”

Kris nodded, stepping aside to give her space. “Sure, go for it. I’ll draw another sample if you’d like, from an older barrel we keep around the corner.”

“That’d be great,” Cassia agreed, rummaging in her purse for a small notepad and pen. It was bright pink, a reminder of the lightheartedness she used to feel before her fiancé’s betrayal. Focus on the now, she told herself, flipping it open. At the top of the page, she wrote Thornberg Vineyard - Sample Blends, then quickly scribbled tasting notes:

Crisp fruit with a subtle spice—blackcurrant, blackberries. Potential dish: spiced short ribs or slow-cooked lamb with a cinnamon-clove rub.

She paused, chewing her lower lip, then jotted down a quick reference: 12 months in American oak, heavier on Cab base.

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“All right,” Kris said from behind her. How could a man his size move so quietly? “Here’s something older by a couple of years. I took a slightly different approach with this one.”

“Intriguing.” She turned, holding out her glass again as he poured. “Thank you.” She quickly wrote down the label’s details from the barrel’s side.

The wine had a richer, deeper aroma, more leathery or earthy, with a wisp of cedar. She took a careful sip. This one had a more robust structure, with a lasting finish. “Mmm. It’s heavier. Could stand up to something with real weight. A steak or a braised dish with mushrooms—portobellos, maybe.”

Kris nodded. “I like that idea. Mushrooms bring an earthy undertone that mirrors the barrel’s effect.”

She jotted more notes as Kris lingered near her shoulder. She didn’t need to see him to know he was there; it felt as though some invisible cord connected them.

Kris cleared his throat, and she glanced up. “Does this mean you’re willing to take a chance on...me?”

She swallowed hard. Was it her imagination, or had the temperature risen by five degrees? “I won’t pretend it’s not daunting,” she admitted. “But it’s also exciting. I guess I’m at a place in my life where I want to give myself permission to take a risk. Make a fresh start.”

He nodded, understanding flickering across his features. “A fresh start. I get that. It’s

easy to get stuck in a rut,” he said with a small, knowing smile. Then, as if to lighten the mood, he gestured around them. “So, want to sample a couple more? I can show you the main lineup we’ve already bottled.”

“More wine tasting,” she said, matching his lighter tone. “Absolutely. Let’s do it.”

They wandered back to the original tasting room, where multiple bottles lined the walls. Kris selected two more, a crisp white and a lighter-bodied red. He arranged them on a small counter near the front window, beckoning Cassia to join him.

When she stepped closer, he offered her a clean glass. “This one’s a Viognier,” he explained, uncorking with a smooth twist. “It’s more floral, with hints of peach. Great for a dish that needs some sweet fruit notes without being overtly sugary.”

She raised her brows, scribbling the name and vintage in her notebook. “So maybe a spring salad with goat cheese, something that picks up on those floral notes?”

Kris nodded, clearly impressed. “Exactly. If we’re aiming for a seasonal menu, that’d be perfect in warmer months.”

“So,” she ventured as she made a final note, “you seem unbelievably accommodating. Are you always this friendly to strangers who show up for made-up positions?”

He chuckled a low, rich sound that made her heart flutter. “Friendly might be stretching it. I suppose I just don’t want to miss an opportunity, especially one that came knocking in such a strange way.” His gaze flicked aside for a split second. “And...I guess I believe in fate more than most.”

Her lips parted slightly. Fate. She closed her notepad, hugging it to her side like a shield. “In that case, I’m glad I showed up, too.”

He set his glass down, tapping a finger on the tabletop. “Tomorrow...why don’t we start drafting an outline of the menu? We can talk about style, maybe some sample dishes. The best approach might be a small selection to start with, pairing each item with one of our wines. Then we can expand once we see what people like.”

Cassia nodded, excitement coursing through her. “Yes, definitely. I’d be thrilled to help. Matching flavors to wine and seeing how each enhances the other is one of my favorite things.” A hint of doubt crept in. “Though I’ll be honest, I’ve never built a restaurant concept from scratch.”

Kris shrugged. “Neither have I. But we’ll figure it out together.” Then his expression grew more serious. “And if at any point it feels...not right, or you get cold feet, just tell me. I don’t want you feeling stuck.”

She swallowed. “I appreciate that.” His sincerity nudged a lump of emotion into her throat. He actually cares how I feel, she realized, and it gave her hope that trusting him wasn’t a mistake.

Tucking her notepad into her purse, she glanced at the clock. She hadn’t realized how quickly the afternoon had turned to evening, but the shadows outside had deepened. “I guess I should go,” she said, a twinge of reluctance pinching her chest. “I still need to figure out where I’m staying tonight. I can’t exactly sleep in my car.” She tried to sound casual, but her nerves buzzed at the prospect of searching for a motel this late.

Kris’s eyes widened a fraction. “Oh. Right.” He cleared his throat. “There’s a place in the mountains—Bear Creek Lodge—that might have vacancies. But if you want something more...homely, I could call my aunt. She and my uncle live up in the mountains, and they have a small guest house they sometimes rent out.”

Cassia hesitated. “I really don’t want to impose on your family any more than I already am.”

He waved off the concern. “Trust me, it’s no imposition. My aunt loves hosting people. She’s been known to mother-hen folks so thoroughly, they stay longer than planned.” A fond smile tugged at his lips. “Let me at least check. If it doesn’t work out, we can look for something else in town.”

Her heart flip-flopped. She wasn’t used to such kindness from strangers. “All right, but only if you’re sure.”

He didn’t bother responding, just pulled out his phone and tapped the screen. As he waited for the call to connect, Cassia wandered across the tasting room, letting her gaze roam over the neatly arranged bottles on the wooden shelves. The lingering scent of wine in the air, mingled with faint oak and fruit, gave her a sense of belonging.

Don’t get carried away, Cass, she warned herself. You barely know this place. Or him.

But when she thought of how Kris’s eyes lit with pride whenever he talked about his wines, her stomach filled with a thousand tiny butterflies. Yes, you’re definitely in trouble here.

She caught snippets of his conversation: “Yes, Aunt Mel,” and, “That’s great, thanks so much.” Then Kris ended the call and turned to her.

“They have space, no problem. My aunt says you’re welcome to stay as long as you need.”

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“Thank you, Kris. Really. I appreciate this.”

“You’re welcome,” he said, sliding his phone back into his pocket. For a moment, they just looked at each other. Cassia’s heart gave a few irregular thumps, a pleasant sensation that also made her feel the floor might disappear beneath her feet. She cleared her throat and looked at her car keys.

“I should probably head out, so I can find my way there before it’s completely dark.”

“Of course,” Kris agreed, walking with her to the door, their footsteps echoing on the cool floor.

They stepped outside into the fading light. The sky was streaked with gold and lavender, and the air held that sweet scent of sunbaked earth cooling for the night. Cassia inhaled deeply, feeling a calm settle over her. Kris accompanied her to her car, and once they reached it, she paused by the driver’s door, not wanting to leave.

He paused, too, lifting his hand slightly as if to reach for her, then lowering it. “I’ll see you tomorrow, then?” he asked softly, like he wasn’t quite ready for her to go.

She nodded, forcing a small smile. “Yes. First thing in the morning, we can talk menus or whatever you guys want to do to get this restaurant going.”

“That’d be good.” He exhaled, running his fingers through his hair in that distracted way she already found endearing. “And if you need anything tonight—directions, or if you get lost—just call. The cell signal can be spotty, but you should catch enough bars in certain areas.”

She unlocked her car door and slid inside. Kris lingered by the window, leaning down slightly. “Drive safe, all right?”

She swallowed. “I will. Thanks again, Kris.”

His eyes held hers for a moment longer than expected. Then he stepped back. She closed the door and started the engine. As she eased the car around, he lifted his hand in a small wave, and she waved back, feeling a surprising pang of reluctance to leave.

The last glimpse she had of him was his tall silhouette framed by the vineyard, arms crossed over his chest as though he were wrestling with his own mix of emotions. Then the bend in the gravel driveway hid him from view.

And she wanted nothing more than to be wrapped in his strong arms, her head resting against his chest.

## Chapter Five – Kris

As Cassia’s car disappeared around the bend, Kris remained rooted in place, staring down the empty gravel driveway as if he could will her back by sheer force of longing.

If only, his bear said dreamily.

If only, Kris agreed, inhaling deeply as he caught the last of her scent before it was replaced by the sweet aroma of grapes ripening on the vines.

He’d always loved the smell of sun-warmed grapes, but now he doubted it would ever compare to the scent of his mate.

His mate! Kris couldn’t quite wrap his mind around it. His mate had just driven away.



Mate, his bear echoed, rumbling contentedly.

Kris locked onto Cassia as she drove toward town. What if she didn't come back? What if she decided not to take a chance on the restaurant? On him.

What if she kept on driving and he never saw her again?

You are being dramatic. She'll be back tomorrow. She wants this to work as much as we do, his bear reminded him pointedly. No need to panic.

I know, Kris answered, exhaling. But...

He let that thought trail off. Cassia had agreed to stay for a two-week trial period, and he sensed she was not the kind of person who broke her word.

But the notion of her leaving if things went wrong, if he failed to get the restaurant off the ground, gnawed at him.

She'd been through something painful. He could see it in the guarded flicker of her eyes. He might not know the details, but he felt her heartbreak. Almost as if it were his own.

And he wanted to comfort her. To hold her and tell her that it was the past, and he was her future.

But the last thing he wanted to do was scare her away by smothering her with how strongly he felt.

Strongly, indeed. We might only have met a few hours ago, Kris told his bear, but I can't imagine going back to a life without her.

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Then we'd better come up with a plan, and fast, his bear said. Because Cassia believes there is a real job for her here, and if we want her to stay, we have to make that job real.

The half-formed idea of a restaurant had been raised several times over the last couple of years, but they'd never committed resources. Now, the time had come.

All he had to do was convince his family of that fact.

He turned, letting his gaze sweep over the rows of grapevines. We'll build it, he vowed. No matter what it takes. Because the alternative—watching Cassia drive out of his life forever—was simply unthinkable.

When the rest of the family knows what is at stake, they will back us one hundred percent, his bear said.

Then we'd better go tell them. Clenching his jaw, Kris forced himself to turn his back on his mate. A hard thing to do, even when she was almost out of the range of his shifter senses. It took all his strength not to turn back around, shift, and run after her. To keep a hold of the connection they shared.

But he resisted the urge, instead heading to the house where he could sense his parents inside and smell the aroma of his mom's cooking.

We're late. Kris glanced at his watch. He'd promised his mom he'd be there for dinner, but losing track of time with Cassia had been...well, inevitable. Better get inside before she sends out a search party.

As he climbed the porch steps, he paused and looked back in the direction of the road. She was gone.

But he had to trust in fate. Had to trust that she would be back tomorrow. And when she returned, he needed to have something more concrete to offer her. He needed to show her this was where her future lay.

Here,with us,his bear added.

The aroma of something savory—maybe roast chicken—drifted through the screen door. The moment he opened it, he was greeted by his mom. “There you are.”

“We thought you were going to spend the night crafting the perfect wine,” Philip said from where he sat at the kitchen table, his meal half-eaten. “Again.”

“But then we saw the car and figured you had a client,” his dad said.

He took a breath, trying to center himself.

Just act normal,his bear told him.

I’m not sure what normal is anymore,he told his bear.

“I’m sorry I am late. I lost track of time.” His voice sounded unfamiliar. Had meeting his mate changed him already?

Leanne looked up from the table where she was spooning carrots from a serving dish to a plate. “Are you all right?”

Kris opened his mouth to reply, but no words came out.Should I just say it? ‘I found my mate, Mom’?

Now that would be a bombshell in the middle of a quiet family dinner, his bear said. But they deserve to know. They'd want to know.

Yes, they do, Kris agreed.

He inhaled, tried to speak, and then paused again. Hugo, his father, was seated at the table, quietly ladling gravy over his mashed potatoes. At the sight of Kris's expression, he set down the ladle, eyebrows lifting. "Something on your mind, son?"

Philip looked up from his plate and then set down his fork. "You look like you got struck by lightning."

A wry chuckle escaped Kris. "I—uh—maybe I did." He cleared his throat and stepped closer to the table. He ran a hand through his hair once more, glancing at his mother, then father, then brother. Suddenly, his chest felt too tight. "You guys better brace yourselves, because...I just met my mate."

That triggered a moment of stunned silence, like the hush after a sudden clap of thunder. Hugo's eyes widened, a spark of delight quickly banishing any surprise. Leanne set the dish of carrots down with a light thud. While Philip blinked once, then twice, before a broad grin slowly spread across his face.

"What?" he breathed incredulously, though the delight in his voice was obvious. "Your mate?"

Kris nodded slowly, a faint smile spreading across his lips. "Yeah."

"Are you sure?" Philip asked.

"Duh!" Kris said with a roll of his eyes.

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“Just making sure you haven’t had too much wine!” Philip teased.

Leanne’s face broke into a radiant smile as she rushed around the table, ignoring the carrots, ignoring dinner, ignoring everything but Kris. “Oh my goodness, Kris. This is wonderful news.” She reached for his hand, her motherly love washing over him as it always did. “Who is she? When did you meet her? Why didn’t you tell me sooner?” The questions tumbled out in a rush.

Kris took a steadying breath. “I just... She just turned up, basically.” The adrenaline from Cassia’s departure still thrummed in his veins. “Her name is Cassia. She arrived this afternoon, responding to the job ad.”

“Job ad?” Hugo repeated, confusion flickering across his face. “We’re not hiring. You have enough staff for harvest and...”

“Well, funny story,” Kris said, waving a hand. “Cassia thought the job ad was for the restaurant. The one we talked about but never actually started.” He forced a rueful laugh, noticing how bewilderment now flared in both Leanne’s and Hugo’s eyes. “Remember the idea about a small restaurant on the vineyard property to showcase our wines?”

“Of course,” Hugo cut in. “We’ve tossed that around for a while. But we never agreed to post any ad about it.”

Kris grimaced. “Well, apparently my brothers thought it would be amusing to write an ad...”

“Hey, to be clear, it wasn’t for a job,” Philip cut in as all eyes turned on him. “It was more for a mate. For Kris. We were teasing him about working too hard. It was never meant to be posted.”

A snort of laughter escaped Hugo. “But fate stepped in and it got posted, huh?”

“Yes,” Kris confirmed, crossing his arms. “Cassia saw it and showed up this afternoon. She was, understandably, confused to learn the restaurant was nonexistent. But I convinced her to stay for a trial period—two weeks—to help us plan it.” He paused, inhaling. “And since she is my mate...”

Leanne pressed her hand to her chest, eyes bright with tears of joy. “We have to make it work,” she murmured.

“Exactly,” Kris whispered, swallowing a surge of emotion. “She’s perfect, Mom. It’s like we fit together in every way.”

The three people around the table fell silent as the news sank in. Then Hugo set aside his napkin, rising to clasp Kris’s shoulder. “Well, that’s the best news we’ve heard in a while. Congratulations, son.”

Philip’s grin returned in full force. “I can’t believe you found your mate because of that ad. And I swear none of us knew Finn posted it. But you know he’ll never let you live it down.”

Kris exhaled a laugh. “You’re not wrong there. Although, it could have turned out entirely differently if anyone but Cassia had shown up for the job.” He didn’t quite agree with his brother’s meddling, but all the same, Kris owed Finn a debt. For bringing Cassia to Bear Creek, no matter how unorthodox the method.

Leanne squeezed Kris’s hand, giving him a soft, searching look. “You said she’s

staying for a trial period?”

Kris nodded. “Yes.”

“Come on, sit down, before you fall down.” Leanne smiled at Hugo, who pulled out a chair for his son.

Kris sat down heavily. It was as if something had zapped his strength now that the adrenalin had worn off. The smell of warm chicken and roasted veggies reminded him he hadn’t eaten in hours.

“So, do you have a plan?” Philip asked as he picked up his fork and went back to eating his dinner.

“Not exactly.” Kris nodded his thanks to his mom as she set a plate down in front of him. “The problem is, she thinks we’re more ready for the restaurant than we are. I mean, we don’t have any plans at all.”

Hugo eyed him thoughtfully. “But you want to build it for her, so she won’t leave.”

Kris rubbed the back of his neck. “Is that too rash? She’s my mate. I can’t risk her going off to find some other job, some other life.”

“Sweetheart, building a restaurant isn’t the simplest project, but this family has done bigger things when the time called for it.” Leanne glanced at Hugo, eyes lighting up. “Remember the expansions we did on the tasting room when we were first married?”

Hugo chuckled. “I do. My brothers all pitched in. Just like all your brothers will pitch in.” He nodded sagely at Kris. “And I’m sure your cousins will help, too, if we need them to.”

“Of course,” Philip said, reaching for a glass of water, “just as you would do the same for us.”

Relief flooded Kris’s chest, so intense he had to lean back in his chair to breathe. “Thank you. Really. You don’t know how much this means to me.”

Philip grinned. “I hope one day soon I get a chance to find out.”

“All my sons mated,” Leanne said. “What more could I ask for?”

“Well, it happened for our lucky cousins up at the ranch,” Philip said. “So there’s hope.”



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“There is indeed,” Leanne said as she flashed a smile at Hugo.

Hugo winked at her and reached across the table to cover her hand with his. Then he turned his attention back to Kris. “So, what’s your next step? She’s here for two weeks. You have to show her that this job is real enough to keep her.”

Kris swallowed the piece of carrot he’d been chewing. “Yes, exactly. Tomorrow morning, we’re meeting to draft a menu, discuss tasting pairings, and figure out what style we want. But I also need to talk to Dad—both of you—about budgets, building permits, and anything we need to get started. She’s not expecting a full-scale restaurant overnight, but I can’t let her see zero progress.”

Philip leaned forward, resting his elbows on the table. “You know we’ll all pitch in. And we have some local contractors who owe us favors.”

“Great.” Kris tapped his glass. “And we can use the old barn, the one near the western vines as we discussed before. It’s in good shape structurally, just needs a redesign. Also, we can keep it small at first, maybe just an intimate dining experience, with, what, twenty? Thirty seats?”

Leanne tilted her head, considering. “A smaller, exclusive feel might work well. People would come for that intimate vineyard-to-table experience.”

Hugo scratched his chin thoughtfully. “Yes, focus on quality over quantity. That’ll attract the right crowd. Let’s set up a meeting with Thaddeus at some point—he has the restaurant expertise and might give us pointers.”

Kris's chest eased further. They had a direction, a plan forming already, and it felt unstoppable.

He looked around at their eager expressions: Hugo's measured excitement, Leanne's motherly pride, Philip's grin.

I'm so grateful for them. His mind flashed to Cassia's aloneness, how she'd mentioned having no real home left. If only she realized she had a ready-made family right here, just waiting for her.

Finishing the last of his dinner, Kris leaned back, exhaling. The day had been an emotional rollercoaster, and exhaustion tugged at his limbs. "So that's that," he said softly. "I guess I found my mate. And we're building a restaurant."

Leanne chuckled, her eyes crinkling at the corners. "That's quite a day's work, Kris."

Quite a day's work indeed, his bear rumbled happily.

## Chapter Six – Cassia

As Cassia drove away from the Thornberg Vineyard, and Kris, she could not shake the idea that she was making a mistake.

Not in agreeing to a two-week trial for a job that did not exist. But because when she'd left Kris, it was as if she had left part of herself behind.

Which was ridiculous. She did not believe in love at first sight. And after the way her ex-fiancé had treated her, she wasn't sure if she believed in love at all.

However, she could not deny that every time she lifted her gaze to the rearview mirror, the ghost of Kris Thornberg's tall silhouette drifted across her mind's eye,

making her heart skip. It was as if she could still sense him—his presence, his warmth—despite leaving the vineyard in her rearview for good, or at least until tomorrow.

She tightened her grip on the steering wheel, eyes sliding to the folded piece of paper on the passenger seat. On it were the directions Kris had scribbled down for her to find Aunt Mel's place. Apparently, it was quite remote, and the GPS could not always be trusted. So it was a good thing Kris had spelled out each twist and turn as if wanting to ensure she got there safely.

She pictured his face in her mind, the protective concern in his dark eyes when he'd carefully written out every landmark she would pass. There was something intensely comforting about a man who paid such careful attention to details.

Was she really falling for this man?

A short laugh escaped her lips, echoing hollowly in the confines of the car. Yes, she was. She was, ironically enough, quite giddy about all of this. Which was insane—a two-week trial for a job that, until an hour ago, literally did not exist. She had no real guarantee that Kris had the resources, the backing, or even the skill to conjure a functioning restaurant out of thin air. And yet she felt it was right.

Am I losing it? she wondered. Or is it just the wine talking? Her rational mind insisted it might be the latter; after all, she'd spent the last part of the afternoon tasting different Thornberg blends, enough to leave her happily warm but not intoxicated. Certainly not over the legal limit to drive.

No, it was more about what the wine represented. The history of the vineyard, the story of the Thornberg family. Not to mention, the various wines had been delightful, but nowhere near as potent as Kris's presence.

She rolled down the window, letting in the cool evening air. Maybe letting the wind sting her cheeks would help keep her mind off how striking Kris had looked in the dim light, or how his voice dropped whenever he described a particularly good wine. She swallowed a lump in her throat.

She sensed that behind his somewhat shy exterior, he had hidden depths that she longed to explore. She wanted to discover everything about him.

With a shake of her head, she snapped her attention back to the road. Tall pines and oaks lined the winding route, creating pockets of darkness as the sun set lower behind the mountains. She slowed at a bend, carefully following Kris's scribbled instructions as she turned onto a road that climbed higher into the mountains until, eventually, the paved road gave way to a narrower, tree-lined lane.

The lane went on and on, and it was a relief when she finally spotted a small sign reading Bear's Rest Guest House on the right, half-hidden by an overgrown hedge. Cassia turned in, her headlights bouncing off the rocky path.

She'd made it!

She couldn't wait to relax and kick off her shoes. It sure had been a long and eventful day.

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Kris had said his aunt Mel was welcoming. “She’s like a mother hen,” he’d joked.

Good.

Cassia needed a bit of mother-henning these days, especially since her actual mother was hundreds of miles away, and Cassia wasn’t on the best of terms with...well, anyone from her old life.

They’d all thought she was overreacting when she broke off the engagement with Dante. Her mother even had the gall to insinuate that Cassia should forgive Dante because he was probably the best she was ever going to get. The memory still stung.

She bit her lip, refusing to let her thoughts spiral back to that betrayal. No. This is about new beginnings, she reminded herself. A new adventure.

Cassia parked her car in front of the charming two-story cottage with a wraparound porch. The structure was nestled among tall pines, with warm golden light spilling from the windows. It looked like something from a fairy tale, complete with window boxes overflowing with colorful flowers.

Before she could even turn off the engine, the front door swung open, and a woman emerged onto the porch. She was petite with silver-streaked dark hair pulled into a loose bun, wearing a floral apron over casual clothes. This had to be Mel.

“You must be Cassia!” the woman called, waving enthusiastically. “Kris called to say you were on your way. Come in, come in! You must be exhausted.”

“It has been a long day,” Cassia admitted, feeling an immediate warmth toward the woman. She grabbed her purse and made her way up the stone path. She’d collect the rest of her luggage later.

“I’m Melanie Thornberg, but everyone calls me Mel,” the woman said, pulling Cassia into an unexpected but somehow not unwelcome hug. “Welcome to Bear’s Rest. I hope you found the place all right. We’re a little out of the way and the mountain roads can be tricky after dark if you are not familiar with them.”

“Kris’s directions were very detailed. I don’t think I could have gotten lost if I’d tried.” Cassia smiled, noting how Aunt Mel’s gaze flicked briefly over her, as though summing up more than just her physical appearance. “Thank you for letting me stay at such short notice.”

“Think nothing of it!” Mel let out a light laugh. “It’s what we’re here for.” She gestured for Cassia to follow, leading her around the side of the main house. “We have a couple of little guest houses for folks passing through. Usually hikers or nature lovers. But I suppose you’re here on business, hmm? Kris didn’t say.”

Cassia tried to maintain composure. Business. Yes, that was the official line, though it felt more personal than that. “Yes, I’m helping your nephew with a new venture. Or I’m hoping to,” she said carefully.

Mel cast a quick grin over her shoulder as she led the way. “A new venture. Yes, it is certainly that.”

Heat rose in Cassia’s cheeks, though she forced a neutral nod. Did Mel sense Cassia felt something more for her nephew? But how? Was Cassia that obvious? She would need to be more guarded on her next encounter with Kris Thornberg. “He definitely seems dedicated.”

Mel chuckled, pushing open a small gate leading to a path of stepping stones. “Oh, he is. That boy has always had a strong dedication to what he loves. Now, watch your step here. Some of these stones shift if you stand on them wrong.” As they walked, Cassia noticed how carefully maintained the surroundings were: potted plants, neat little wind chimes tinkling in the faint breeze, and lanterns casting warm puddles of light across the pathway. Soon, the path opened to a quaint little cottage that looked as if it was once a barn or some other outbuilding. “And here we are.”

Cassia’s breath caught for a moment at how picturesque it looked. Nestled among towering pines, the guest house exuded warmth, as though it had been built just for weary travelers like her. Mel nudged the door open, flicking on an interior lamp. “It’s compact. A bedroom, a small living area, plus a kitchenette. The bathroom is at the back. If you need anything at all, just give me a shout.”

“Oh, I’m sure I won’t need to disturb you,” Cassia said.

“You won’t,” Mel replied. “I’m on my own for a couple of days. My husband, Kris’s uncle is away for a couple of days on a mountain patrol.” She stared toward the distant peaks towering above them her eyes unfocused as if she were searching for him out there.

Cassia stepped inside the guest house, the interior smelled faintly of cedar and fresh linens, and it was decorated with cozy mountain-town touches: plaid throw blankets, a crocheted rug, and framed photos of local flora and fauna on the walls. “This is lovely,” Cassia said, turning around to take it all in. She couldn’t remember the last time she felt so instantly at peace in a new place.

“I’m sure you are going to enjoy your stay.” Mel watched her with a kind, evaluating gaze. “You must be hungry.”

Cassia hesitated, she’d eaten nothing since midday, aside from the bread Kris had

offered during the tasting to cleanse her palate. “Honestly, I’m starving, but I don’t want to be a bother.”

“No bother at all,” Mel said cheerily. “I always cook too much since I never know when one of my boys might pop in. I’ll bring you up a plate in a few minutes. You just get yourself settled in.”

So this was the mother-hen side Kris had warned her about. She offered Mel a grateful smile. “Thank you so much. I really appreciate it.”

Mel nodded, hand lingering on the doorknob. “And would you like a glass of Thornberg wine with your dinner?”

Cassia’s pulse quickened as an image of Kris once again invaded her thoughts. She nodded. “Yes, please.”

“Wonderful.” With a smile, Mel excused herself. “Now, make yourself at home. I’ll be back in a jiffy.”

Cassia let out a slow breath once Mel was gone, the door clicking softly behind her. Alone in a new place, again. But this time, it didn’t feel lonely or frightening. How could it?

The cottage had a snug living area with a small sofa, a coffee table, and a single armchair by the window. Beyond that, a door presumably led to the bedroom, another to the bathroom. It was more than enough for a comfortable short-term stay.

She ran her hand across the back of the sofa, gently pressing the cushions. The place had an immediate charm, the sort that coaxed her to sink in and forget her worries. But she had tasks to do. First, she needed to collect her luggage from the car.



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Turning her back on the interior, she headed back out, careful not to tumble on the stones. Hugging her jacket around her against the chill evening air, she reached her car, opened the trunk, and grabbed her suitcase. As she closed the trunk she paused, taking in her surroundings. It was so quiet up here. With only the rustle of the leaves and a distant hoot of an owl breaking the silence.

This was what she needed. Peace and quiet, and time to heal.

Grasping her suitcase tightly, she headed back to the cabin and headed for the bedroom. It was not exactly big, but the bed was comfortable, and the pastel furnishings created a relaxing atmosphere.

Settling on the edge of the bed, she flipped open the suitcase, rummaging past the typical T-shirts and jeans. She pulled out a soft pair of lounge pants and a plain tank top, thinking that'd be good enough for an evening's unwinding. After slipping into them, she felt the day's tension in her back ease, though her mind still buzzed with the memory of Kris's voice, the faint trace of concern in his eyes when he asked if she was okay with all of this.

Yes, she was. She had to be. Because an hour into meeting him, she'd basically staked her future on his half-baked plan. Now, the least she could do was start drafting the structure of the menu. Show him she wasn't all talk, that she was serious about this. No matter how handsome he was, she needed to prove she'd come for the job, not just for him.

She rummaged in her purse, pulling out the bright pink notebook where she'd taken her tasting notes. The pages now had scribbles referencing four or five different

Thornberg wines, each with potential dish ideas. She carefully set it on the small desk in the corner, ready to add more detail.

First, she would separate the dishes by season. Put her focus on a small rotating menu centered around seasonal produce, locally sourced. Excitement flickered. She'd never been solely responsible for designing a full menu. It was a challenge but one she would rise to.

A knock on the door snapped her attention away. "Come in," she called as she closed the notebook and left the bedroom.

The front door opened, and Mel stepped inside, carrying a tray that tantalized Cassia's senses. "I hope this is okay," Mel said, placing it on the small table by the window. "Just some leftover pot roast, potatoes, vegetables. A bit simple, but it's hearty. And here's your Thornberg wine." She winked. "Enjoy."

Cassia's stomach gave an appreciative growl. "Thank you, Mel. This is perfect." She eyed the glass of wine, seeing the deep hue. "Merlot or Cab?"

Mel smiled, folding her arms. "It's the new Merlot Kris put out last year. Should pair nicely with pot roast if you don't mind a heavier red."

Cassia nodded, a thrill of excitement threading through her veins at the mention of Kris's name. "I don't mind at all. Sounds wonderful."

Mel lingered a moment, looking as though she wanted to say something more. Cassia caught the curious spark in her eyes as if she were searching for clues or reading Cassia's body language. But the older woman simply smiled. "You enjoy your dinner. And remember, if you need anything, just knock on the door or call me on that phone by the nightstand. Yes, there's a direct line."

Cassia, deeply moved by Mel's kindness, nodded gratefully. "Thanks again. I appreciate all this hospitality."

"It's our pleasure," Mel replied, stepping back toward the door. "I'll let you settle now." She hesitated, a flash of amusement in her smile. "Kris is a good man." Then Mel gave a little wave and pulled the door shut behind her before Cassia could respond.

How she wanted to believe Mel. Once bitten, twice shy. And boy, had she been bitten.

Cassia sank onto the chair by the table, letting the delicious aroma envelop her. Pushing thoughts of Kris out of her mind, she picked up the fork and took a bite, the rich flavors of the tender meat and vegetables bursting on her tongue. Aunt Mel was a wonderful cook. The pot roast was perfectly seasoned, with hints of rosemary and thyme, and the vegetables were still crisp, not overcooked.

As she ate, Cassia turned to her notebook and flipped it open to her scrawled notes. After scanning through them, she began adding more detail. The new Merlot could pair with anything from midweight roasted poultry to a robust cheese platter. She scribbled ideas for side accompaniments: roasted root vegetables, maybe a sauce with a slight tang. Then she jotted a star next to her short-ribs concept, mentally placing it under a "winter menu" heading.

Her pen flew across the page, sometimes pausing as she took quick bites of potato or sips of wine. Time slipped away.

In the back of her mind, the shape of a real, workable menu was forming. Possibly small, maybe just six or seven dishes, each carefully paired with a Thornberg wine. Enough to impress visitors and give them the essence of Bear Creek's local charm.

Eventually, the plate was empty, the wine glass half-full, and her notebook full of new bullet points. She leaned back in her chair, letting her shoulders loosen. A drowsy contentment threatened to lull her, courtesy of the good food and the swirl of wine.

She should try to get some sleep soon. Tomorrow was going to be an intense day, with Kris expecting her bright and early. She certainly didn't want to appear incompetent or unprepared.

Not when the rest of her life was riding on this.

## Chapter Seven – Kris

Kris woke before dawn, his eyes flicking open to the faint, silvery light that edged the horizon. The house lay still around him as everyone else slept. For a moment, he lay in bed, recalling the shocking events of yesterday.

Shocking in a good way, his bear said as he stretched and yawned.

Very good, Kris agreed. Amazing even.

But honestly, there were no words to describe meeting Cassia, realizing she was his mate, and agreeing they would build a restaurant from scratch. Together.

And all that happened in a single afternoon, his bear murmured contentedly. Hard to believe.

I know, Kris replied, pressing a hand lightly against his chest as though to calm the surge of emotions within. It's real, though. A small smile twitched at the corners of his mouth. Real, and so much bigger than anything he had imagined for himself.

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Then a different reality came crashing down around him. There was so much to do.

He swung out of bed, quickly pulling on worn jeans and a comfortable T-shirt, and padded out of the room. As he went down the stairs, he mentally listed off everything he needed to do today.

Not just vineyard chores, but plans for the restaurant. Once he'd had his first cup of coffee of the day, he'd head over to the barn, which they planned to renovate. It was old, sturdy, and beautiful with its weathered wood exterior. It would be perfect for the restaurant.

When he reached the kitchen, Kris busied himself setting up the coffeemaker, scooping grounds into the filter, and filling the pot with fresh water. The soft hiss and gurgle that followed was a familiar comfort. While the coffee brewed, he stepped outside onto the back porch, letting the pre-dawn air brush across his face.

The porch overlooked the vineyard, rows upon rows of neatly aligned vines stretching toward the distant hills. Even at this early hour, the faint silhouettes of leaves shimmered with morning dew, hinting at the promise of another warm day. Kris inhaled deeply, savoring the tranquil hush.

We really found her, he told his bear, scanning the horizon as the sky lightened.

At that thought, the coffee machine beeped, signaling it was done. Kris stepped back inside, pouring himself a generous mug full. Then he returned to the porch, cradling the warm mug between his hands as he sank into an old rocking chair, where the steam rose to meet the crisp morning air. The first sip was heavenly, strong, and

invigorating.

Do you think Cassia likes coffee or tea?he mused.

His bear chuckled.You should probably ask her, rather than guess.

Kris smiled into his coffee. He would ask her, and a thousand other little things, too. What her favorite breakfast was, whether she liked sunrises or sunsets better, if she preferred hiking or swimming. He wanted to know everything about her.

Kris took another swallow of coffee, letting the warmth chase away any lingering sleepiness. He'd have to re-check the barn, make mental notes for the layout, and maybe start marking which walls could be knocked out, where the kitchen might go, and how to connect it to a potential dining area. A lot to do, but he felt a surge of excitement.

This is the first day of the rest of our lives,his bear said happily.

Kris's heart clenched in his chest.Was it only yesterday we'd sat in this very spot, with no idea who our mate was?

Hard to believe, isn't it?his bear replied.Our life changed in the blink of an eye.

All thanks to that stupid advert.Kris shook his head. It was like something out of a movie.

Finishing his coffee, Kris rose from the chair and headed back inside. He rinsed his mug in the sink and left it to dry on the rack, then grabbed his phone from where he'd left it, charging on the counter. No messages yet—it was still too early for most people to be awake.

Including Cassia, he thought with a small smile. He wondered what kind of sleeper she was. An early riser like him, or someone who cherished those extra moments wrapped in blankets?

Or wrapped in his arms. Desire unfurled in his stomach, and he quickly tamped it down. All in good time. They had only just met, and even though he knew they were mates. Cassia had not felt that same instant attraction, that same pull of fate.

She would need time.

Especially after that look in her eyes yesterday when she'd mentioned her past. There was pain there. Something, or someone, had wounded her deeply. He hadn't pressed, but his protective instincts had flared immediately. Whatever—or whoever—had hurt her, Kris wanted to make sure it never happened again.

Enough daydreaming, he told himself firmly. There was work to be done.

He slipped his phone in his pocket and headed back outside, strolling along the narrow path that wound between rows of leafy green. The faint aroma of earth and ripe fruit enveloped him. Some clusters of grapes were starting to deepen in color, promising a good harvest if all went well.

Morning mist clung to the vines, giving the landscape an ethereal quality. Birds were beginning to stir, their cheerful calls reflecting his mood.

As Kris neared the old barn, his steps quickened with anticipation. The structure stood proudly against the backdrop of mountains, its weathered boards telling stories of generations past.

Kris could already envision the transformation. Not that he planned to change the outside too much. He wanted to preserve the rustic charm, but the interior would need

a complete overhaul.

He pushed open the heavy door, which creaked in protest. The interior was spacious, with high ceilings supported by thick wooden beams. Dust motes danced in the shafts of light streaming through the windows and gaps in the walls. The earthen floor was uneven but solid and, more importantly, dry.

What do you think? he asked his bear, turning slowly to survey the area.

His bear rumbled with approval. Perfect. Like our mate.

I'd describe it more as has potential. Like us, Kris said as he walked around the old building.

He pulled out his phone and began taking photos, occasionally jotting down notes in an app. Stacks of crates, leftover barrels, and random equipment lined one wall. The other side held a wide-open space where hay used to be stored decades ago.



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He inhaled slowly. So much work. They'd need new insulation, wiring for a commercial kitchen, and plumbing for restrooms. But we can do it.

Of course, we can, his bear said with confidence.

Someone's coming. Kris turned his focus outward.

Finn, his bear said.

Kris tried to maintain a straight face as he turned, crossing his arms. "Well, look who it is."

"Morning," Finn said stiffly as he stood in the doorway, looking as if he was expecting a scolding.

Kris raised an eyebrow. "Is it?" he asked, letting the silence stretch for an extra beat.

Finn cleared his throat, glancing around the barn. "Look, I... I'm sorry about that ad, okay? You know it was only written as a joke. I have no idea what happened. I swear I did not post it, and I took it down as soon as I realized. I'm surprised anyone had a chance to see it."

Kris kept his face neutral, strolling past a stack of old crates. "A joke, huh?" He trailed a hand along a dusty barrel, forcing Finn to sweat a little.

"Yeah," Finn replied as he shook his head. "Like I said, I had no clue it'd get posted for real. But then... apparently, it did. And apparently, you found your mate because

of it, so maybe it was meant to be.” He ended with a half-smile, raising his hands in a helpless gesture. “It was fate.”

Kris let the tension linger for a moment, then exhaled, crossing the room to give Finn a playful shove. “You realize you gave me a heart attack, right? A total stranger showing up, expecting a job that didn’t exist.”

Finn grimaced. “Sorry. That must’ve been awkward.”

“Awkward? Try cosmic-level awkward,” Kris retorted, though his lips twitched as he stifled a grin. “But yeah...it was fate.”

Finn looked both relieved and a little sheepish. “So, you’re not mad?”

Kris paused. Then, in a burst of movement, he pulled Finn into a tight bear hug. “I should be furious,” he muttered. “But if it wasn’t for you, Cassia wouldn’t be here, and I wouldn’t have found my mate.” He stepped back, clapping Finn on the shoulder. “So...thank you. Even if it was the dumbest stroke of luck ever.”

Finn snorted. “You’re welcome, I guess.” He scratched the back of his neck, gaze flicking around the barn. “I’m real happy for you. And more than a little jealous. Must have been amazing to sense her at last. I’m kind of wishing I had put an ad up for my own mail-order bride.”

A small grin tugged at Kris’s mouth. “It is. It was. I hope one day I can return the favor, and help you find your mate, too. Either by accident or by design.”

Finn’s half-smile turned wistful. “Yeah, me, too. But hey, you know what happened over at the ranch. Once Ezra found his mate, the rest did, one after another. So, we might all see our mates soon enough, if fate decides. Who knows?”

“Who knows?” Kris echoed, nodding. He pivoted on his heel and swept his arm around the room. “Anyway, this is it. The restaurant is finally going to happen.” His voice caught with unexpected emotion. “After all the time we’ve talked about it.”

Finn whistled low, looking around the barn. “So, this is really happening? Not just talk anymore?”

“It’s happening,” Kris confirmed, a surge of excitement coursing through him. “It has to.”

“Well, damn.” Finn stuffed his hands in his pockets as he surveyed the barn with a critical eye. “It’s going to take some work.”

“It is,” Kris agreed, trying to stop any doubt from creeping in. “I was just taking stock of what needs to be done. It’s a lot, but not impossible.”

“It’s a big job, for sure.” He patted a splintered post. “But it’s still sturdy. We can do a lot with it. Actually...” He reached into his back pocket, pulling out a folded piece of paper. “I whipped up a rough sketch last night, trying to see if I could visualize a layout.”

“This is...pretty good,” Kris said, looking over Finn’s shoulder at the plans. He traced a finger along the hypothetical doorways. “Kitchen in the center, dining around it, big windows looking out at the vines...”

Finn grinned. “I had some late-night inspiration. Figured if we’re doing it, might as well do it right, yeah?”

“Yeah,” Kris said. “I had some ideas, but yours are better.”

“Aren’t they always?” Finn asked with an arched eyebrow.

Kris suddenly looked up, eyes distant. “She’s coming.”

Finn’s gaze slid to the door, though there was no one there yet. “Cassia?”

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“Who else?” Kris put his hand over his heart. “I was scared she might leave town. But I can sense her. She’s close.”

A flicker of longing crossed Finn’s face. “Man, that must be something. I hope one day soon I get to feel what you feel. Know what you know.”

Kris clapped him on the shoulder again, offering a comforting squeeze. “You will. I’m sure that day will come for all of us.” He held out his hands for the plans. “For now, these plans are a start. I’ll show them to Cassia, and see what she thinks.”

Finn nodded and handed the plans to his brother. “You do that,” he said, sliding his hands into his pockets. “I’m heading over to the house, so if you need me, just holler. Otherwise, we’ll talk later.”

Kris shot him a grateful smile. “Thanks. For everything.”

Finn shrugged, but then his eyes twinkled, just like they had when they were kids, and he was up to mischief. “Don’t mention it. Or actually, do mention it. A lot. Tell everyone it was all my doing. I am the reason you found your mate.”

“My hero,” Kris said with a mock bow as Finn left the barn.

He is, Kris’s bear said. He seriously is.

## Chapter Eight – Cassia

Cassia stirred at first light, blinking in the warm glow that seeped through the

bedroom window. At first, she forgot where she was. But as she lay there listening to the gentle rustle of wind through the leaves, it came back to her, Bear's Rest Guest House.

Yes, she was in a cozy cabin in the woods, high in the mountains above Bear Creek, worlds apart from the city apartment she used to share with... Oh no, she was not going to give Dante a second thought. Not today.

Cassia sat up, the quilt falling around her, a tingle of excitement threading through her veins. She was brimming with ideas for the restaurant, her thoughts swirling around the layout, the décor, the wine list, and menu choices. She didn't want to forget a single thought, so she snatched up her bright pink notepad from the bedside table and jotted down a few lines:

Cozy, low lighting? Or airy, open windows?

A dedicated tasting bar?

Social media...

The more she wrote, the more anxious she got. What if Kris had been wrong to put his faith in her?

She forced a deep breath, trying to ease the knot in her stomach. She could not think like that. She needed to trust her abilities. What happened with Dante had dented her self-confidence, but it had not changed who she was. And she was good at her job.

And Kris had seen that. He believed in her. Why else would he have given her this chance?

The memory of his smile and touch sent shivers of delight down her spine. Or was it

desire?

Heat spread through her body as she imagined him here, lying next to her, his hands caressing her ...

Oh no. She swung her legs out of bed and stood up. She needed to keep things purely professional.

She dressed quickly, opting for comfortable jeans and a simple blouse. Not her usual professional look, but much more practical if she was going to get stuck doing any work on the barn renovations. Since this venture was going to be built from the ground up, she planned to be involved in every aspect.

Yes, Cassia planned to make herself indispensable to the Thornbergs. And one Thornberg in particular, the small voice inside her head said.

Quickly silencing that small voice, she slipped on a pair of flat shoes, grabbed her purse, and left the cabin. It was still very early, and she carefully picked her way over the stones and skirted the main house, not wanting to wake anyone.

Cassia felt a flash of guilt for leaving without saying goodbye, but she didn't want to disturb Aunt Mel. But she could catch up with Mel when she returned.

When she reached her car, she opened the door as quietly as possible, although it was so quiet that every sound she made seemed to echo among the trees. She slid into the driver's seat and started the engine, wincing at the rumble that broke the morning stillness.

Even the rumble of her stomach!

As she drove away from Bear's Rest, Cassia decided a coffee shop might be the

perfect way to start the day, gather her thoughts, and soak in the vibe of Bear Creek.

Ten minutes later, she reached the town's main street, which looked like something from a postcard, with old-fashioned storefronts lined up beneath a canopy of tall trees. A sign for "Bear's Brew Coffee" caught her eye, or more particularly, the chalkboard advertising fresh pastries. Perfect. Cassia pulled into a parking spot just along the street and got out of the car. She wasn't the only one out and about at this early hour. Several people strolled along the sidewalk, nodding friendly hellos as Cassia passed them. It struck her how different this was from the city, where strangers rarely acknowledged each other. She pushed open the door to Bear's Brew, a bell tinkling softly overhead.

Stepping inside the coffee shop, she inhaled the rich aroma of espresso mingled with fresh-baked dough. A teenage barista gave her a bright grin. "Morning! What can I get you?"



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“Um, a large coffee with a little milk, please,” Cassia said, scanning the glass display of pastries. “And one of those cranberry muffins?”

“Coming right up!”

After picking up her order, she slipped back into her car. As she drove, she admired the quaint storefronts and the tidy sidewalks. A sense of belonging bloomed unexpectedly in her chest.

Or was she imagining it? She’d never truly felt at home anywhere. She’d always blamed it on her childhood, which had been one upheaval after another as the family was forced to move with her father’s work commitments.

Even when she and Dante moved in together, she’d never felt like they were making a home.

Had Dante picked up on it and was that why he’d...

No. She slammed the brakes on that train of thought. She would not shoulder the blame for Dante’s actions. He had cheated because he was selfish and self-centered, not because of any perceived failure on her part.

Cassia gripped the steering wheel a little tighter. Focus on the good, she reminded herself. Focus on now. She left the small downtown behind, following the winding road that led up into the mountains to the vineyard. Halfway there, she noticed a little pull-off area, a small gravel patch by the roadside that overlooked a stretch of forest. With a spur-of-the-moment decision, Cassia slowed and pulled over, rolling down her

window to let in the pine-scented air. What better place to eat breakfast?

She cradled her coffee in one hand and unwrapped the muffin with the other, inhaling the sweet scent of cranberries. She took a slow bite, savoring the tang of fruit against the buttery pastry.

Her gaze drifted to the forest, imagining for a second that she was living here, truly living, not just passing through. Could she see herself in a small cottage, or even an apartment in Bear Creek, driving up to the vineyard each day to help Kris shape a dream? She swallowed, heart twinging with an odd sense of longing.

So far, everything about this place had been welcoming, from Mel's hospitality to the gentle kindness Kris showed. He's so easy to talk to, she mused, remembering how seamlessly they'd brainstormed wine and dish pairings the previous day. Something about him made her feel...seen, in a way she didn't recall ever feeling with Dante.

Don't jump to any conclusions, she scolded herself, finishing the last of her muffin. But she knew it was pointless. Deep inside, she was hopeful, a sense that maybe, just maybe, she could finally find a place to set down some roots.

As she finished her coffee, she started the engine and drove on. She wanted to be at the vineyard before Kris might worry or wonder if she'd changed her mind. Starting the engine again, she resumed her drive up the mountains, the road curving through scenic overlooks and pockets of dense forest. If she hadn't been so keen to keep her word, she might've stopped at each vantage point to soak up the views.

At last, the familiar sign for Thornberg Vineyard emerged around a bend, and her chest fluttered at the thought of seeing Kris again. She just hoped he was happy to see her.

What if he'd just been kind yesterday and was really hoping she might have gone

back to wherever she'd come from?

Well, too bad!

She parked in the same spot as yesterday and cut the engine as her pulse quickened. Maybe this was a mistake.

Just breathe. She took a moment to gather her purse, her notepad, and her newly minted ideas. Then she stepped out onto the gravel, surveying the tranquil property. In the morning light, the vineyard looked even more alive than it had yesterday. Dew sparkled on each leaf like a million diamonds as a faint breeze teased the vine leaves into motion.

However, her eyes were irresistibly pulled toward a figure standing a little way off, close to the vines.

Tall, broad-shouldered, that confident but unassuming stance. Kris Thornberg waited as if he'd been expecting her at any second. The morning sun cast a gentle glow around him, making his dark hair catch the light. She swallowed, heat flaring across her cheeks. He's so... She couldn't even complete the thought. Handsome seemed too simple a word.

She took a deep, steadying breath and composed herself as she waved and walked toward him. In return he lifted a hand, his entire posture shifted, that subtle tension in his shoulders easing, a small smile lifting his features. It was the kind of look that said You're here, and in that instant, she felt more welcome than she ever had. Anywhere.

He started walking toward her, and she met him halfway. The sunlight glinted off the barn's weathered boards behind him, a backdrop that hinted at all the work they had ahead. But in his eyes, she saw something else—like none of that work daunted him

as long as she was in it with him.

“Morning,” he murmured.

“Good morning,” she replied, the blood thrumming in her veins. She forced herself to sound composed. “I hope I’m not too early.”

He shook his head, the corners of his mouth curving into a wider smile. “No, you’re perfect...” He paused, a flicker of embarrassment crossing his face. “I mean, your timing is perfect. I was just checking the barn, and I have some preliminary sketches from Finn to show you if you want to look.”

Her chest tightened with relief. Deep down, she’d been afraid he might have changed his mind about her working on the project, that perhaps he’d seen something in her yesterday that had made him doubt his decision. But the way he looked at her now, with that warmth in his eyes, told her otherwise.

They’d started moving forward already. He was all in. “Yes, absolutely,” she answered. “I have some ideas, too. I, uh, woke up early and couldn’t sleep, so I wrote a bunch of notes in my notepad.” She tapped the purse strap slung over her shoulder.

Kris’s eyes flicked to her purse, his expression lighting up. “I can’t wait to see them.” Then something softer crossed his features. “Did you sleep okay?”

She nodded, a smile tugging at her lips. “Better than I have in a while. Aunt Mel’s guest house is perfect. She even brought me dinner and a glass of your Merlot. It was...” She let out a quiet sigh, remembering how soothing it felt. “...really nice.”

“Good to hear. I want you to feel at home.” Feel at home, he said, like it was a given that she’d belong here. She didn’t quite trust herself to speak, so she gave a small nod, hoping he saw the gratitude in her eyes.

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And nothing more. Because what she felt for him surpassed mere gratitude. But that was a complication she wasn't ready to face. At least not yet.

But it was hard to deny the yearning that had crept into her heart.

Finally, she cleared her throat. "So, let's see these sketches from Finn."

"Yes." He nodded and then let out a short laugh. "You know, I was worried you might have bailed on me."

"You were?" she asked as the atmosphere lifted.

"Yes." He shrugged his shoulders. "I thought you might have changed your mind once you had time to think it over."

"If we're being completely honest," she began.

"We are," he said, suddenly serious.

"Well, I thought you might have had second thoughts about me."

"Never," he replied, his eyes darkening.

And she believed him. Completely.

Chapter Nine – Kris

Kris stood in the barn doorway, the early sun catching on the old wooden boards behind him. He wanted to climb to the rooftop and shout out to the world that she was here, his mate!

So, you're a little relieved that Cassia hasn't run off?his bear asked dryly, even though the same excitement buzzed in his veins.

And more, she is serious about the restaurant,Kris replied, picturing them working together to bring this seed of an idea to fruition.

So, what are you waiting for?his bear asked.Time to get to work.

He glanced sideways at Cassia, who stood beside him, casting an assessing eye over the barn's interior.

How lucky we are that Finn mistakenly posted the ad.That last thought lit a flicker of longing. He'd love to see all his siblings find that special someone.

That only someone,his bear said reverently. Having Cassia here was like some kind of a miracle.

Cassia took a small step forward. "Well," she remarked, voice echoing faintly in the open space, "it definitely has rustic charm. I can already imagine the potential—windows along this side..." She paused, then glanced over her shoulder at Kris. When she grinned, his heart skipped a beat.

She didn't even say anything more. Just that grin, as if they shared a secret. The air whooshed out of his lungs as a rush of heady gratitude swept over him.

You can breathe now,his bear teased, nudging him mentally.Or stand frozen there until she wonders if you're broken.

Kris blinked, managing a half-laugh at his own awkwardness. “Yeah, sorry. Still waking up, I guess.” He rubbed the back of his neck and forced himself to move. Pulling the folded paper from his back pocket, he gestured for her to come closer. “This is Finn’s draft layout. I think it’s the simplest place to start.”

“Sure.” She joined him at the center of the barn, rolling her shoulders as if preparing for a real brainstorming session. “Let’s see.”

Kris unfolded the sketch carefully. It was nothing fancy—pencil lines, half-labeled sections, scrawled ideas about potential doorways and windows. But the general concept was there.

Cassia traced a finger along the drawing. “I like how the tasting area is near the entrance—makes it easy for visitors to start with a wine flight before deciding on what to eat. “Then the main dining area, kind of shaping around a big window so you can see the vines.” She glanced at Kris. “It would be gorgeous.”

Her enthusiasm made Kris grin. “Agreed. Plus, the view from that side is the best, especially during sunset.” A tingle of pride filled his chest, recollecting how many times he’d watched the sun dip over those same vines. To share that moment with her? He could hardly wait.

“Sunset dinners,” Cassia mused, a dreamy tone seeping into her words. “We could market that, you know. Candlelit evenings, and wine pairings, all overlooking the vineyard. Something special, not your everyday dinner out.”

Kris nodded. “I love it,” he said, relief pulsing through him. That fear that maybe she’d find the barn unimpressive or the challenge too big began to dissipate.

They had a shared dream, and he planned to make all her dreams come true.

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Side by side, they sank deeper into conversation, as they discussed a plan of action, getting the structure assessed, electrical and plumbing upgrades lined up, and permits filed. Kris watched Cassia's face light up as she talked about the kitchen layout, her hands gesturing animatedly.

Through it all, his bear hovered in his mind, quietly humming its contentment.

He was about to mention an idea for an open kitchen concept—something that let diners see how the chef worked with fresh local ingredients—when the barn door creaked. Sunlight spilled in, framing three familiar silhouettes. He'd been so enraptured by Cassia he had not sensed his mom, dad and Philip approaching.

“Are we interrupting?” Leanne asked as they stepped inside. “Finn just left so we thought we would come and find you.”

Cassia straightened, pressing her notepad to her side. Kris sensed a hint of nerves in her posture—how she squared her shoulders, her eyes darting quickly to him as if seeking reassurance.

“No, of course not,” Kris said. “We were just discussing the plans Finn drew up.”

Introduce her properly, his bear urged. She's ours, let her feel that she's among family.

“This is Cassia,” Kris said, sticking close to his mate, not wanting her to feel outnumbered.

“Hello, Cassia. I'm Leanne, Kris's mom.” Leanne flashed her a reassuring smile.



“I’m Hugo.” Hugo gave a brief wave.

“And I am Philip.” Philip nodded and then cracked a grin. “You’ve caused quite a stir.”

“In a good way,” Hugo added quickly.

“Yes, we’ve talked and talked about renovating this place and expanding, but we never got around to it,” Leanne said as she looked up at the beamed ceilings. “But it sure has potential.”

“It’s a wonderful space,” she said, her voice gaining confidence as she spoke. “It would be perfect for a farm-to-table concept. The location, the history, the connection to the vineyard—it all tells a story that guests will love being part of.”

Hugo glanced at Leanne and reached for her hand. “Our story, I like that.”

Leanne squeezed his hand, her eyes crinkling at the corners. “It has been a journey, one I have loved sharing with you.”

Kris watched his parents exchange that look they’d had for as long as he could remember—that silent communication that came from decades of partnership. Something inside him ached with longing. Would he and Cassia have that someday?

His bear rumbled with certainty. We will.

“I’d love to hear more about that story,” Cassia said, clearing her throat. “The more I understand about the vineyard’s roots, the better I can honor it in the restaurant.”

Philip whistled low. “Oh, she’s good, Kris. Smart lady.”

Cassia blushed, and Kris stepped closer to her, a protective instinct he couldn't quite suppress.

"We have albums and albums of photos," Leanne said, her eyes lighting up. "Throughout the early years, all the way to now."

"And stories," Hugo added. "Plenty of those, too."

"I'd love to see them," Cassia said. "And hear them. There's so much I need to learn—about local produce, the flavors people here expect...or what might be new and exciting."

Philip flashed a grin. "The soil up here's amazing. We could always branch out and grow some produce and Dad's got connections with local farmers. We can get you everything from fresh vegetables to honey if you want to go that route."

"It would be wonderful to showcase the town and the people who live here." Cassia smiled, her enthusiasm contagious. "I'm thinking of a seasonal menu that rotates with what's available locally. It creates anticipation and keeps things fresh."

"And pairs perfectly with our wine schedule," Kris added, unable to keep the pride from his voice. "Each season brings distinct notes to the forefront."

"Exactly!" Cassia's eyes met his, and for a moment, it felt like they were the only two people in the barn.

And in that moment he got a glimpse of their future, of the deep bond he'd seen his parents share his whole life.

"Shall we show them Finn's plan?" Cassia asked, an undercurrent of excitement in her tone.

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“Well, why don’t we all head back to the house?” Leanne suggested. “I’ve got a fresh batch of cinnamon rolls that should be just about ready. And I’ll put on some fresh coffee.”

“I’m in,” Philip said, his hand resting on his stomach. “We can discuss the plans over breakfast, and then I need to get started on my chores.”

“Mom’s cinnamon rolls are legendary in these parts,” Kris explained, his hand finding the small of Cassia’s back as they walked toward the door. The touch was light, almost hesitant, but the connection sent warmth spreading through his fingers. “She won the county fair baking competition three years running before they asked her to be a judge instead.”

“Oh, stop.” Leanne waved a dismissive hand, but her smile betrayed her pride. “It’s just an old family recipe with a few tweaks.”

“Do you have any other family recipes that we could use for the restaurant?” Cassia asked. “That would add such a personal touch to the menu.”

Leanne’s eyes widened with delight. “Oh my, I have notebooks full! My grandmother was quite the cook, and her mother before her. I’ve got recipes dating back generations.”

Hugo chuckled. “Some of them might need translation. The older ones have measurements like ‘a knob of butter’ or ‘cook until it feels right.’”

“I never heard you complaining,” Leanne said with a raised eyebrow.

“I never said they weren’t good,” Hugo replied.

“Good?” Leanne’s eyes narrowed as she looked at him.

“Careful, Dad, you are in dangerous territory there,” Philip warned.

“I meant they are amazing.” Hugo slipped his arm around his mate’s waist and pulled her close. “Just like my wife.”

“Good save!” Philip clapped his hand on his dad’s shoulder.

Leanne laughed and nestled closer to her husband. “You’re forgiven. This time.”

As they walked back toward the house, Kris couldn’t help but notice how naturally Cassia fell into step with his family. She asked Philip about the vineyard’s seasonal patterns, listened intently to Hugo’s explanation of the irrigation system they’d installed last year, and complimented Leanne on the beautiful flowers lining the path.

“I grew up in the city,” Cassia admitted as they approached the house. “But I’ve always been drawn to the countryside.” She sucked in a deep breath. “I love it already.”

“The land has a way of getting into your blood,” Hugo said thoughtfully. “Especially this land. There’s something special about this valley. Even if I do say so myself.”

Kris caught the knowing glance his parents exchanged. They weren’t just talking about the soil or the climate. The connection to their territory ran deeper than words could express, something Cassia would understand once she knew the truth about shifters.

Once I tell her, his thoughts circled back to his most pressing concern.

Soon, his bear insisted. I don't think I can stand many more days of not meeting her in the flesh.

As they approached the house, the scent of cinnamon wafted through the air, prompting Philip to pick up his pace.

"Some things never change," Kris murmured to Cassia with a smile. "Philip's always first in line for food."

"I heard that," Philip called over his shoulder, not slowing his stride. "And I'm not even sorry about it."

Cassia laughed, sounding relaxed. "I understand completely. I've never met a cinnamon roll I didn't like."

They followed Philip into the kitchen, where the warmth from the oven created a cozy atmosphere. Leanne immediately busied herself making a fresh pot of coffee while Philip grabbed plates from the cupboard.

"These look incredible," Cassia said, eyes wide with appreciation as Leanne then set a plate of still warm from the oven cinnamon rolls on the table.

"Sit, sit," Leanne urged, gesturing toward the table. "Coffee's ready, too."

As they settled around the well-worn kitchen table—a massive oak piece that had witnessed decades of family meals—Kris felt a profound sense of contentedness settle on him. Cassia fit here, at his family's table, in their kitchen, in their lives.

His bear rumbled in agreement as he watched her accept a steaming mug from his mother. It feels as if Cassia is not the only one about to make a fresh start.

Chapter Ten – Cassia

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It had been a long, long day. Cassia leaned back against the barn door and stared out at the view before her.

Despite the ache in her back, and her arms, and her legs...she had used muscles she never knew she had as she worked alongside Kris, clearing out the barn...she felt invigorated. The progress they had made today was visible and satisfying. So very satisfying.

So yes, it had been a long day, but it had been a good one. A very good one.

And it wasn't just the barn where they had made progress. Leanne had also dug out some of the Thornberg family recipe books and cooked up some sample recipes for lunch.

The spread had been incredible—a savory mushroom ragout with fresh pasta that Cassia suspected had been made that morning, a rustic bread with a perfect crust that crackled when torn, and a salad bursting with vegetables freshly picked from the small kitchen garden Leanne hoped to expand.

As they ate, the recipe books had been passed around, and Cassia had found new inspiration in the handwritten notes scrawled in the margins. Generations of Thornbergs had added their personal touches—a bit more rosemary here, a touch less sugar there. The books themselves were a living history of the family, stained with splashes of sauce and marked with thumbprints of flour from decades past.

She'd been left with a head full of so many ideas. It was a little overwhelming.

But then they'd headed back to the barn and the sight of Kris working had cleared her head of all thoughts, except one. How ridiculously attractive he was.

The pictures of him in the magazine article she'd read did not do him justice, and it was hard to imagine how a man like him had remained single.

"Penny for your thoughts?" Kris's deep voice startled her from her reverie. He approached with two glasses in one hand and a bottle in the other.

"Just admiring the view," she said as he drew closer. And she was not just talking about the vineyard. "It's beautiful here."

"It is," he replied, leaning against the barn beside her, their shoulders nearly touching. And the way his gaze caressed her left her unsure whether he was talking about just the view. But then he turned and gazed out at the vines and the mountains beyond. "Some days I take it for granted, and then there are moments like this..."

"I don't think I will ever take it for granted," she murmured.

"Neither will I. Not anymore." He turned and looked at her and something unspoken passed between them as their eyes locked. Then he cracked a smile and held up a bottle of chilled wine, the condensation beading on its emerald surface. "A little reward for all our hard work today. It's one of our whites from two seasons ago. It's crisp, with notes of pear and honeysuckle."

"You had me at 'reward,'" Cassia laughed, accepting the glass he poured for her.

The wine was indeed crisp and refreshing, cooling her throat as she swallowed. Perfect after the physical labor of the day. She closed her eyes briefly, savoring the complex flavors that unfolded on her palate. When she opened them again, Kris was watching her with an intensity that made her stomach clench with longing.



“What do you think?” he murmured.

“It’s exquisite,” she answered honestly. “Elegant but approachable. The kind of wine that makes you want to linger.”

Something flickered in his eyes at her words. “That’s exactly what we aim for.” He took a sip from his own glass, his gaze never leaving hers. And how she wanted to drown in those deep brown eyes.

“You have an incredible talent,” she said as she took another sip and forced herself to break eye contact.

“And so do you. My mom is inspired.” Kris chuckled as he drank. “She’s rustling up another old family recipe as we speak. And asked me to invite you to stay.”

A surge of delight threatened to overwhelm Cassia. Dinner with the Thornbergs. She was beginning to feel as if she were one of them.

For a second, she actually pictured all of them around a large wooden table, passing bowls of home-cooked food and sharing laughter. Her heart yearned for it, ached, even. But it also triggered her guard: You are not part of this family. You are an employee. Keep it professional.

She gave a small smile. “That’s really sweet. But I—I should probably get back.” She gestured vaguely, as though more tasks awaited her at the guest house. “I have a lot of notes to organize, maybe refine the menu suggestions, and send out some inquiries to local farmers. I want to stay ahead of the curve.”

Kris’s face fell, and Cassia’s stomach twisted with guilt. But he simply nodded, a flicker of disappointment passing across his eyes. “Of course, you’ve probably had enough of us for one day.”

Never,said the voice in her head.

“No.” Cassia swallowed the lump in her throat. “You’ve all been so kind and welcoming. I promise I’ll be back tomorrow. Early, even. We still have more wines to sample, more specifics to iron out, right?”

“We do,” Kris replied, with a smile that robbed her of breath. There was a sadness to it as if he truly wanted her to stay.

And goodness knows, she truly wanted to say yes. But she couldn’t. Not tonight. She needed to step back and needed some space to breathe and think clearly. Being around Kris muddled her thoughts, and made her forget all the reasons why getting emotionally entangled with her employer was a terrible idea.

“Rain check?” she offered.

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“I’ll hold you to that,” he said, clinking his glass against hers. “The Thornbergs always collect on their debts.”

The warmth in his voice made her cheeks flush, and she took another sip of wine to hide her reaction. She didn’t need him to see the war waging inside her. Or to know if he asked her again, her resolve would crumble.

“I should get going,” Cassia finally said, finishing her wine and handing him the empty glass. “Thank you for the wine.”

“A perk of the job,” he replied as his fingers brushed hers and a jolt of recognition coursed through her.

Had he done that on purpose? As her eyes flew to his, she saw the same awareness reflected in his eyes. She knew for sure he felt it, too, and their connection wasn’t just in her head.

But what did it mean?

Confused, she stepped back, putting space between them. “I’ll see you tomorrow morning.” Her voice sounded breathless even to her own ears.

“Sure,” he said as he stepped away from her. “I’ll walk you to your car.”

“You don’t have to,” she told him.

“I know,” he said. “But I’d like to.”

Cassia nodded and fell into step with him as they made their way back through the vineyard, retracing their steps to her car. Was it only this morning that she had parked her car here, and seen Kris silhouetted against the rising sun?

It was as if a lifetime had passed. As if she were not the same person who had arrived here mere hours ago.

They arrived at her car, and Kris turned to face her, hands sliding into his pockets. The distance between them felt both physically small and emotionally vast. Cassia's pulse thudded, wishing she could erase the carefully laid lines she'd drawn. But if she let him see how much she longed to stay, how soon would it be before he saw her weaknesses, too?

And use it against her?

Would he? Dante certainly would. He was skilled at getting what he wanted, no matter what the cost to those around him.

No. Cassia forcefully pushed the thought away. Nothing about Kris suggested he would be anything like her ex. She was letting old wounds dictate her present.

"Thank you for today," she said, fumbling with her car keys. "I think we made real progress with the barn."

"We did." Kris's voice was warm, but there was something guarded in his expression now. "Our restaurant is starting to take shape. At least on paper."

"Your restaurant," she corrected. Why did her heart beat faster when he said that, as if they were something more to one another?

Because that was what she wanted. Deep down, she knew it. Yet she also knew she

had to deny herself.

His brow furrowed. “Our restaurant. This is a collaboration, Cassia.”

The sincerity in his voice made her chest ache. As if what was his was hers.

She nodded, unable to trust her voice for a moment. “I’ll see you tomorrow,” she finally managed, opening her car door.

“Tomorrow,” he said, as if he could not wait a minute for the sun to set and rise again.

Her hand trembled as she inserted the key in the ignition, but somehow, she started the engine and drove away from the Thornberg Vineyard. And Kris.

Kris, who made her feel like she could do anything. Kris, who made her feel desired. Kris, who...

She cut off the thought and focused on the road ahead as she traveled through the mountains.

When she arrived at Bear’s Rest Guest House, Cassia parked her car under the tall pines and got out, feeling suddenly deflated. She walked to the guesthouse, over the stones, and entered. The same cheerful warmth that had greeted her on her first night was there, but this time it felt hollow somehow.

As if something was missing...

Knock-knock. The soft rap at the door startled her out of her thoughts. She paused, half-expecting Mel to be on the other side of the door. Maybe she’d brought dinner or wanted a quick chat. But something instinctive told Cassia her visitor was not Mel.

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She opened the door, and her breath caught in her throat. Kris stood on the doorstep, framed against the twilight sky. For a second, all the bottled-up tension inside her threatened to spill over. Why was he here?

How was he here? Had he jumped in his truck and followed her the moment she'd left the vineyard? But she hadn't heard a truck pull up outside.

"Kris," she managed, voice barely above a whisper. "I..." She didn't know what to say. But she could not deny she was happy he was here.

He cleared his throat, as if unsure of his welcome. "Sorry to show up unannounced," he said with an awkward smile, "but I...I needed to see you. Can I come in?"

She hesitated, as she forced herself to act naturally. He could simply be here on business. Yes, that must be it. He'd suddenly thought of something about the restaurant. Something that could not wait until morning. Something he could not have communicated to her over the phone.

"Yes, of course." She stepped back, giving him room to enter.

He stepped into the small living area, shutting the door gently behind him. "Thanks."

Cassia clasped her hands together, trying not to fidget. "Is everything okay?"

Kris's gaze roamed the room, then landed firmly on her. "We...we need to talk."

Cassia's pulse raced at his final words. We need to talk. That phrase was so loaded. Is it

good or bad?

She swallowed, mustering a steady tone. “Now?” Of course now, or else why would he be here?

He nodded, stepping closer. “Yes. Please. There’s something I need to tell you. Or show you...”

Show her? Cassia’s brows tugged together. What could he possibly need to show her at this time of night?

But whatever it was, she wanted to know.

“Okay,” she said, with a feeling that if she followed him out of the door, her life would change forever.

## Chapter Eleven – Kris

What exactly did he plan on telling, or showing, Cassia? As his bear ran over the mountains to Bear’s Rest Guest House, that was the one question on his mind.

And the one question he could not answer.

Should he tell her the truth? The whole truth and nothing but the truth?

Were either of them ready for that?

If he told her about his bear, told her they were fated mates, would that make things easier?

Or worse? Much worse.

Kris ran a hand through his hair, feeling the familiar tightness in his chest that came with overthinking.

Something he was good at.

Maybe better at than winemaking, his bear teased.

Funny, Kris retorted. But his bear might be right. He was an expert at overthinking, it was what kept him in the tasting room for such long hours as he tried to perfect a blend.

You're going to have to cut your hours down now that we have a mate, his bear warned him.

Oh, don't worry, Kris replied. Once Cassia knows she is our mate, I plan for us to spend every spare moment with her.

But he also knew he could not let his commitment to the vineyard slip.

Balance. That's what he needed. Balance between love and duty, between his heart and his heritage. It would not be easy, but nothing worthwhile ever was.



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“So, what is this about, Kris?” Cassia asked as she pulled the door closed behind her and joined him outside.

“I...” He was lost for words, and not simply because he still had not decided how much of himself he planned to share.

No, it was more than that. Being here with his mate still felt surreal, as if it were all a dream.

“Why don’t we walk?” he finally said and nodded toward a trail that led into the forest.

At least this way, his options were still open. If he showed her his bear, they would be shielded from view of anyone else staying in the guest house.

“Should I be worried?” Cassia asked as she fell into step with him.

“No,” he said and turned to face her with a frown. Did she know about shifters? Was she scared he might hurt her?

“So, you haven’t come to tell me the restaurant is not happening?” she asked, and her voice hitched.

And his heart ached.

“No!” he said quickly, wanting to reassure her. “The restaurant is absolutely happening. My family is thrilled about it. I’m thrilled about it. They love you...re

ideas.”

Relief washed over Cassia’s face, softening the worry lines that had formed between her brows. “Oh, good. I guess I was worried it was all too good to be true.”

She’s not the only one,his bear said.

But weknowthis is true,Kris replied.

They continued along the forest path, and Kris’s bear stirred with contentment at being in nature with their mate.

This was his domain. The wilds of the mountains and forests, and he longed to share it all with her.

“I understand that feeling,” Kris assured her. “Sometimes the best things in life seem unbelievable until we let ourselves trust them.”

Like we trust in fate,his bear said.Because finally, we have met our mate.

Cassia glanced at him. “Is that what you wanted to talk about? Trust?”

“Trust?” Kris repeated.

“Yes, trust,” she replied, her eyes narrowing.

No going back now,his bear told him.You need to tell her everything. And fast.

His bear was right. If he explained everything to her, she would understand how this was about more than a restaurant. How her future here in Bear Creek was secure, whether or not the restaurant worked out.

But what if he was wrong? What if Cassia didn't want to be the mate of a bear shifter in a small town?

Cassia was obviously driven. Her career was important to her. Why else would she have dropped everything and come to Bear Creek after reading the ad?

Because she needed a change. A fresh start, his bear replied.

And what if a relationship with a shifter does not fit in with her plans? Kris said.

"Kris?" Cassia folded her arms across her body, hugging herself as her brow creased. "Don't you trust me?"

"Trust you?" he asked. How could she think that? Surely, he'd given her no reason to.

"Yes." She nodded. "I know this is a big step for your family. A big investment of both time and money. But I can assure you I am up for the job. I will work hard to make the restaurant a success."

"Oh, I know." He nodded and then gave a nervous laugh. "I don't have any doubts."

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“But I completely understand if you would rather interview other people for the position,” she said.

“No,” he blurted. “You are exactly what I need. What we need. For the restaurant.”

And everything else, his bear added happily.

“As long as you are sure,” Cassia said. “I don’t want you to feel any obligation toward me.”

Oh, we are extremely obliged, his bear said with a chuckle. Obligated to make you happy. Obligated to protect you. Obligated to love you.

But it is more than an obligation, Kris reminded his bear. It is a deep-rooted need. One he could never deny.

Cassia’s happiness, and her wellbeing, both physically and mentally, would always come first.

Kris cleared his throat. “I want you here, Cassia. That’s what I want to talk to you about, actually.”

They reached a small clearing where the fading light filtered through the canopy of leaves overhead, casting dappled patterns across the forest floor. Perfect. It was private enough that he could shift, if necessary, yet beautiful enough that if this conversation went well, it might become their special place.

A place that would always remind them of this moment. Of the bond they shared.

“There’s something about me—about my family—that you should know,” Kris began.

“Okay,” she said, eyeing him warily. “I’m listening.”

Kris inhaled deeply, drawing strength from the familiar scents of pine and earth. “In Bear Creek, there are families who are...different. Special, you might say.”

“Different how?” Cassia asked, her eyes searching his face.

Yes, just tell her, his bear urged. Show her who we are.

“We’ve lived here for a long time...” Kris fought to find the right words.

“Oh,” Cassia’s body tensed. “Is this some kind of...” She paused and pressed her lips together.

“Some kind of what?” Kris repeated, a faint crease forming between his brows. Cassia licked her lips, and he sensed her wariness. She was afraid if she spoke her mind, she might offend him.

Or lose the chance of a job, his bear added.

“Please, tell me,” Kris said.

She let out a breath. “I don’t know...maybe some kind of high-status family thing?” She shifted her weight, glancing away. “As if you’re trying to say you’re these bigshots in Bear Creek and I should know my place. I don’t mean to jump to conclusions, but you said your family’s different—special. It made me think maybe

your family is used to calling the shots around here. Of getting their own way... If that's the case, I'd rather know."

Kris blinked, then shook his head firmly. "No, no. It's nothing like that." His bear stirred, nudging him gently to make her see that it was about as far away from the truth as you could get. "We're just a normal family. Honestly."

"Then what?" she asked with slight exasperation in her tone.

"It's...so much deeper than that." He took a careful step closer to her and lowered his voice. "It's about who we are."

"Who you are?" Cassia visibly relaxed a fraction, but her guard didn't drop entirely. She studied him, clearly trying to read his intention. "Okay," she said slowly. "So then...what is it? What are you?"

Get on with it, his bear urged.

I know. I'm trying, Kris replied. It's not easy.

Neither is watching you fumble your way through this, his bear said.

Well, it's not as if I've ever done anything like this before, Kris said in his defense. And thankfully, he would never have to do it again.

He took a breath to steady his nerves, but it didn't work. There was so much resting on this. "It's something I hope you'll understand, but it might be a lot to take in."

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There was a flicker of doubt in her eyes, but to his relief, she nodded, folding her arms in a protective stance. “All right. I can’t promise I won’t freak out, but I’ll try to keep an open mind.”

Kris let out a slow exhale of relief. “Thank you. That means...a lot.” He swallowed, steeling himself for what was to come. Then he took a step back from Cassia, lifting his palms in a gentle plea. “Trust me?”

Cassia studied his face for a long moment, then gave a single, careful nod. “I’ll do my best,” she whispered.

She’s willing to give us a chance,Kris said with relief.

That’s all we can ask for,his bear replied.

“All right,” he murmured. “Then...let me show you.”

He turned away from her slightly, preparing to shift.Here goes,he told his bear.Now it’s up to you.

But just as he started to let go of the world around him, and his mate, Cassia’s phone rang, shattering the quiet of the clearing.

Kris flinched, stunned by the jarring intrusion.Of all times...

“Apologies,” Cassia murmured, her face crumpling as she reached into her pocket and glanced at the screen.

Kris watched her face pale. Who could it be?

I don't know, but they have terrible timing, his bear growled in frustration.

"Hello?" she murmured, pressing the phone to her ear. She winced, shooting Kris an apologetic look before taking a few steps away. "I...now's not a great time."

The voice on the other end of the line rose, the words too faint for human ears. But Kris wasn't just human, and he caught every word.

"It's me," the man said.

"What do you want?" Cassia hissed.

"You," came the reply.

Kris's stomach tightened in knots, but he forced himself to remain calm.

However, his bear let out a mournful roar. This is not good.

Another few minutes and they would have revealed themselves to Cassia. They would have shown her what they were and told her they were mates, destined to be together forever.

But now...

Cassia's shoulders stiffened. "Maybe you should've thought of that before you cheated on me," she replied, her voice tight with hurt.

The man's tone wavered. "I'm sorry, Cassia, truly. It was cold feet—I panicked. I didn't know what I was doing. But we can fix this...we can fix us. I still want to marry



you.”

A wave of anger and sadness twisted in Kris’s chest. Marry her? Adrenaline spiked in his veins.

She is ours! his bear roared.

But how could they stand in her way if she still had feelings for this man?

Cassia pressed her free hand to her forehead, half-turning away from Kris. “This isn’t the best time to talk,” she said, voice trembling. “I’m...I’m in the middle of something.” She glanced over her shoulder, meeting Kris’s gaze with conflicted eyes.

“Don’t end the call,” the man pleaded, desperation lacing his words. “We love each other, Cassia! I made a mistake, but we can move past it. I’ll do anything.”

Her knuckles whitened around the phone. “I’m not sure how you expect me to believe that after what happened. Saying you ‘panicked’ is one thing, but you slept with my best friend.” Her voice shook, raw pain simmering beneath the anger.

“I know!” he burst out. “I—I was stupid, I got scared about the wedding, and I... God, I’d do anything to take it back. Just...please, let’s talk this through. You’re the only woman I want, Cassia.”

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She remained silent, and in that silence, Kris's mind whirled. The man was begging for another chance. Would she give him what he wanted?

Kris's bear whimpered, feeling a painful mix of sorrow and jealousy. "We're her mate," he insisted. "She belongs with us, not him."

A part of Kris wanted to roar in protest, to yank the phone from her grasp and proclaim she was his. His mate, his future. But what if that wasn't what she wanted? Cheating aside, maybe this man had once been her entire life. It wasn't Kris's place to force her. If you love her, you'll let her decide.

But we can't lose her," his bear warned.

And we can't keep her if she's not happy," Kris countered. He forced himself to remain still, to fight every primal urge to grab the phone from her hand and tell the guy on the other end of the line that Cassia was his. And only his.

The hush stretched on, Cassia's grip on the phone slackening. At last, she wet her lips and whispered, "I can't talk right now," again, then cut off the call. Her eyes stayed locked on the phone screen as if she couldn't quite process what had just happened.

Kris swallowed the lump in his throat. Now what? He stood still, uncertain whether to reach out to her or step back.

She turned around slowly, face pale, heartbreak flickering in her gaze. "I'm sorry," she managed, voice hollow. "I didn't mean to drag you into that..."

“You have nothing to apologize for,” Kris assured her quietly. “If there’s anything I can do...” He broke off, sighing.

Cassia let out a shaky exhale. “I...need some time to think. That was my ex-fiancé,” she added needlessly, eyes darting away. “He wants to fix things. Says he...loves me.” Her voice cracked on the last words, and Kris’s chest clenched in sympathy.

We can’t show her who we truly are now, his bear said with a pained rumble. She’s hurting.

Kris nodded inwardly. Of course not. With that phone call, everything had changed.

He stepped forward, raising a cautious hand. “Cassia,” he murmured, wanting to soothe her. Wanting to hold her. “You don’t have to decide anything right now. About him or about...us.”

Her gaze lifted to him, eyes glistening with confusion. “Us?”

Kris forced a sad smile, though it felt like his heart might shatter. “I mean the restaurant, your place here, or...anything else...” he said gently. “I can’t lie. I hope you’ll stay. But you deserve time and space if that’s what you need.”

A sob almost escaped her, but she swallowed it back. “I...I’m so sorry,” she whispered again, tears threatening to form. “It’s like everything’s hitting at once.”

Kris’s heart twisted. He wanted to cradle her in his arms, shield her from heartbreak and confusion. But would that actually help her? Or make things worse?

He let out a breath, slow and steady. “It’s okay,” he said. “Really. If you need to be alone, I understand. If you need to talk, I’m here. Either way, just know that you have a place in Bear Creek...with us...for as long as you want it.”

Cassia looked at him for a long moment, tears brimming in her eyes but not falling. Then she blinked them away, nodding. “Thank you,” she whispered. “I think I should go...sort my head out.”

He forced his chest to loosen, stepping back to give her space. “Right,” he said, voice tight. “I’ll walk you back.”

“You don’t have to,” she told him.

“But I want to,” Kris said.

Every fiber of his being told him that letting her go would break him in ways he’d never recover from. But Cassia’s happiness came first.

No matter the cost.

## Chapter Twelve – Cassia

Cassia slid her phone into her jacket pocket, the residual tension from that call still buzzing through her veins.

Dante’s timing could not have been worse. Kris had been about to share something with her, something that was obviously important to him. Something he was willing to trust her with.

But now the moment had gone. Ruined by Dante.

Just as he’d ruined so much else in her life. Did that mean she had already made her decision? That there was no way back?

For so long, all her plans, hopes, and dreams were tied up with her relationship with

Dante. When he'd asked her to marry him, it was like a dream come true.

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As a child, she'd always fantasized about getting married. Of walking down the aisle with the man of her dreams waiting for her, ready to promise her forever.

If she rejected Dante now, would she ever get the chance again?

Or was that just her mother's voice in her head?

Cassia was suddenly aware of Kris watching her, his expression pained.

Of course, it was pained. When he'd come to talk to her tonight, he could never have expected to get caught up in her messy drama.

Yet here he was, his expression filled with concern for her.

Or was it a concern for his business? He must have heard at least some of the conversation. Now he must be worried he'd made a mistake taking a chance on her. After all, until she'd arrived in town after seeing that stupid advert, the vineyard restaurant was on the back burner. Now he'd persuaded his family to move forward with the plan.

Was he thinking he'd made a mistake putting his trust in her?

"Come on," Kris said and guided her back toward the trail. "Let's get you back."

She didn't argue. Although she'd said she'd go back to the guest house alone, as her mind cleared, she remembered where she was. In a forest on a mountain. A mountain where bears, wolves, and mountain lions lived. It was no place to be wandering

around alone. Especially at this hour.

“Thanks,” she said, not trusting herself to say more, even though thanks seemed totally inadequate.

“No trouble at all,” he assured her as they set off toward the guest house.

“Sorry,” she murmured, guilt threading into her voice. “You were about to tell me something, then I—then my phone rang, and I basically shut you down...”

Kris gave a small shake of his head. “It’s okay. It can wait.” He winced slightly as if remembering how close they’d come to him revealing...something. She still didn’t know what, exactly, but clearly it was big. “And if you need to talk, I’m here.”

Cassia had never been good at sharing her innermost thoughts. After she’d found out Dante was cheating on her, he’d called her a closed book.

An accusation that had stung because there was some truth to it. She didn’t find it easy to open up, to let people in. But right now, even though she barely knew Kris, she found herself wanting to share.

“My ex-fiancé, Dante, called,” she said, the words tumbling out before she could stop them. “We were engaged until I found out he was cheating on me with my best friend. That’s why I left... That’s why I came here.”

Kris’s footsteps faltered slightly on the path beside her as she felt him tense. “I’m so sorry.”

“He wants me back,” she continued, her voice hardly more than a whisper. “Says he made a mistake.”

“Do you want him back?” Kris asked, his voice carefully neutral.

Cassia considered the question. Just a few weeks ago, she might have said yes without hesitation. But now...

“I don’t know,” she admitted. “Part of me does. I mean, for the last couple of years, our lives have been intertwined. You know?”

“Yes,” he said hoarsely.

Had she caused some past memory of a bad relationship to surface? Or worse, had he lost the love of his life?

She hated the idea of anything causing him any pain.

“Sorry, you don’t need to hear my troubles,” she said and stared straight ahead into the gathering darkness.

“Your troubles are my troubles,” he said, his tone lighter, but there was an undercurrent of something deeper beneath it. Then he added, “While you’re working at the vineyard, your happiness is important to all of us.”

She glanced at him, trying to read his expression in the gathering darkness. Was he simply being a good employer? Or was there more behind his words?

“I appreciate it,” she said. “And it won’t affect my work. I promise. I’m just...reeling. One phone call, and suddenly my ex is begging for me back, wanting to fix everything. As if it never happened.” A bitter note tinged her laugh. “But it did happen. He cheated, and now I’m supposed to act like it’s all forgivable? That’s the part that kills me.”



A hush stretched between them as Kris tightened his jaw and his eyes flashed with something primal. Something that sent a shiver down her spine. Not of fear. She doubted she could ever fear this man.

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It was more of a thrill. As if an instinctual part of her was reacting to him.

Yet when he spoke, his tone was gentle. “You said you needed space, right? Then that’s exactly what he should give you. If he truly loves you, if he’s truly sorry, he’d respect your time to heal. And your choice. Because you don’t owe him anything just because he suddenly realized his mistake.”

“That’s...exactly what I said,” she replied, her breath wavering as a potent mix of emotions pulsed through her. Pain and anger, and also a flicker of relief that Kris understood. “I guess I never realized he might come crawling back. And ironically, I was afraid maybe I was jumping into something else too fast.” She hesitated, glancing toward Kris, but he didn’t flinch. “I mean, with the restaurant,” she added hastily, “not...well, you know.”

He nodded. “I get it. You’re second-guessing yourself.”

Cassia let out a shaky laugh. “You have no idea. A couple of days ago, I was in a city apartment, feeling like my world was caving in. Now I’m on a mountain, planning a restaurant with a family I’ve only just met, and I’m...enjoying it more than any job I’ve had before.” Her voice caught. “It makes me think maybe I’m just on the rebound. That I’m only throwing myself into this because I’m scared to be alone, or because I’m angry at him. And that’s not fair to your family, or you.”

She’d braced for Kris to look crestfallen, but his expression softened with empathy. “I can’t speak for your ex, but I know my family is happy you’re here. And me...” He trailed off, pushing a pine branch aside for her to pass. “I’m...happy, too.” He paused and then added, “That doesn’t mean you owe us your future.”

Cassia's throat tightened at the earnestness in his tone. Yet she got the feeling that it was exactly what she owed him. Because her future was here with him. It was a done deal.

But she could not trust her feelings. Not when they were so heightened after the phone call. As for Kris, he was simply being kind.

Or maybe he was simply trying to persuade her to give herself time, give herself two weeks to think things over because that's what he needed from her.

Two weeks to plan the menus for the vineyard restaurant. Two weeks to fulfill the bargain they'd struck.

"You make it sound so simple," she whispered. "But I'm still terrified of making a mistake."

"Then let's keep it professional, like you said." He paused, letting the words sink in. "You commit to the restaurant at least for the two-week trial. We get the opening off the ground. After that...well, hopefully, you won't vanish on us. But if you do..." He let out a ragged breath. "We'll deal with it then."

She was right. This had everything to do with the restaurant. How foolish she had been to think otherwise.

When he'd brought her up here to talk about his family being different, his big secret was probably to do with the Thornberg wine. Some secret blends they used. Or something unique about the barrels they used.

She swiped at a stray tear that threatened to escape. "Right, yes. The two-week trial. As we agreed," she repeated. "As for afterward, it's not that I will leave you high and dry. But realistically, once the restaurant is open, and the menu is set, you might not

need me.” She forced a weak smile. “A pairings consultant can swing by once a month, update a few items...that’s all.”

A subtle crease appeared on Kris’s brow. “We’ll always need you,” he said, so quietly she almost missed it. Then, as if catching himself, he cleared his throat and added in a more pragmatic tone, “I mean, your expertise. But yes, if you wanted to scale back, that’s your call.”

Her heart squeezed painfully. He said he’ll always need me. The way he looked at her...made her want to believe that their connection was more than a rebound, more than a fleeting comfort. But then she remembered her ex’s words: You’re the only woman I want.

She’d heard it all before. Where had it led?

To pain and heartache.

They crested a small rise in the trail, and the lights of Bear’s Rest Guest House came into view through the trees. Cassia’s steps slowed. She didn’t want him to leave. She didn’t want to be alone with her thoughts. She would never have guessed, when they set off on their walk to talk, that things would have turned out this way.

Side by side, they walked silently toward the guest house. The evening air had grown cooler, and Cassia pulled her jacket tighter around herself, feeling the chill seep deeper than her skin.

When they reached the porch, Kris hesitated, his large frame silhouetted against the warm glow from the windows. “Will you be okay?” he asked, his deep voice gentle in the darkness.

Cassia nodded, not trusting herself to speak. A part of her wanted to ask him to stay,

to talk more, but the rational side of her brain knew that would only complicate things further.

“Thank you for walking me back,” she managed finally, her fingers fumbling with her keys.

“Always,” Kris replied, and something in that single word made her heart stutter.

He waited until she had the door open before stepping back. “Get some rest, Cassia. Tomorrow’s another day.”

For a moment, she thought he might lean in and kiss her. Her heart raced, wishing he would cross that line.

But Kris stayed where he was. His arms twitched at his sides as if he was waging an internal battle to either gather her close or keep a respectful distance. At last, he stepped back, offering a gentle smile. “Are you sure you’ll be all right?”

“Of course,” she murmured, tears prickling again at the corners of her eyes. “And I promise I won’t let this interfere with my work. I’ll have those updated pairing notes first thing...”

“That’s not what I meant,” Kris cut in gently, a hint of regret in his tone.

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She forced a faint, shaky laugh. “I know. I’m sorry.” Tipping up on her toes, she placed a swift, light kiss on his cheek. It was an instinctive move, one she instantly regretted.

What was she thinking?

Kris froze, his eyes widening slightly at the unexpected gesture. The warmth of his skin lingered on her lips as she pulled away, her face flushing with embarrassment.

“I...” she started, but the words caught in her throat.

Kris’s hand came up slowly, his fingers brushing the spot where her lips had touched his cheek. The gesture was almost reverent, and his eyes, when they met hers, held something wild and tender all at once.

“Cassia,” he whispered.

The night air seemed to crackle between them, charged with unspoken feelings. For a heartbeat, Cassia thought he might close the distance between them, might pull her into his arms and kiss her properly. Part of her—a growing, insistent part—wanted him to.

But instead, he took a deep breath and stepped back, his hands dropping to his sides.

“Goodnight,” he said, his voice rough with restraint. “I’ll see you tomorrow.”

Before she could respond, he turned and walked away, his broad shoulders

silhouetted against the moonlit path. Cassia watched him go, her heart aching with a longing she couldn't fully understand. Only when he disappeared from view did she finally step inside and close the door behind her.

The guest house felt emptier than it had before, despite its cozy furnishings and warm lighting. She leaned against the door, eyes closed, trying to make sense of the tumult of emotions coursing through her.

What was she doing? Kissing Kris on the cheek after explicitly telling him they should keep things professional? After her ex had just called begging for another chance?

She pressed her fingers to her temples, trying to sort through the tangle of emotions. The vineyard, Kris, Bear Creek—they all felt right in a way her life with Dante never had. But was that real, or was she just running from one bad situation into another?

But in her heart, she knew. Knew that her dream of marrying Dante had been just that, a dream, a fairy tale.

Whereas this new life, and her feelings for Kris, were real. But did he feel the same way?

Or had she blown it all up with that stupid kiss?

However, when she pressed her fingers to her lips, still tingling from the touch of his skin, and recalled the expression in Kris's eyes, she realized the kiss was anything but stupid.

## Chapter Thirteen – Kris

Kris lay flat on his back, eyes fixed on the ceiling, as he had been for most of the

night. The kiss—herkiss—kept replaying in his mind. That light, soft touch on his cheek had stirred something deep inside.

Every time his thoughts circled back to that kiss, a tingling warmth spread out from where her lips had grazed him. As though the memory of her touch was seared into his very being.

You're turning into a lovesick fool,his bear teased softly.

Maybe I am,Kris admitted.But I don't care.

He let out a restless sigh as he adjusted his position. Staring at these four walls all night hadn't brought him sleep, only an endless loop of Cassia's face—and that ex-fiancé phone call that threatened everything.

He rolled onto his side and glanced at the clock on his nightstand, 4:13. Not that he'd need to look, his internal sense of time already told him it was close to dawn.

Useless,he thought.I'm never going to sleep.He swung his legs off the bed, standing in one fluid motion. No point fighting it.

Still can't stop thinking about that kiss,his bear murmured, half-laughing.And that was just her cheek. Imagine if she'd gone for the lips...

Kris felt a twist of longing shoot through him.A man can dream,he answered wearily.

Oh boy, so can bears,his bear said with a dramatic sigh.

Kris raked a hand through his tousled hair, frustration battling with a flicker of amusement.You're not helping.But deep down, he was thankful for his bear's unwavering confidence that things would turn out all right between him and Cassia.



They have to, his bear added with equal confidence.

*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 5:22 am*

I hope you are right,Kris said as he quickly dressed in worn jeans and a T-shirt, plus a flannel to ward against the early chill.

Wearing only socks, he crept out of his room so as not to wake anyone else in the house. At this time in the morning, the house seemed too still, too quiet, and he held his breath as he made his way along the hallway and downstairs without a sound. In the kitchen, he set about making coffee, each familiar action bringing a measure of calm to his tumultuous thoughts.

Soon enough, the comforting aroma of fresh brew filled the room, and he poured a mug, then carried it to the doorway that opened onto the back porch. It was so peaceful, even the birds had not yet begun their dawn chorus.

He sipped the coffee in silent appreciation of the life he had here. A life he wanted to share with his mate. Surely, she could see how perfectly she fit here. Not just with him, but this place he called home.

We love this place,his bear said gently.Always have.

Kris nodded inwardly.Always will.There was so much history in these rows of vines, so many memories of him and his brothers growing up, and his parents. The flourish of fresh growth every spring, the golden leaves in fall, the satisfaction of harvest. The vineyard was his lifeblood, binding him to Bear Creek, and he'd never questioned whether this was where he belonged. But now...

If his mate chose to go back to her old life, her old love, would he ever feel the same sense of peace again?

Kris closed his eyes. He could see it so clearly, the future he craved. Their kids running free between the rows of vines, just as he and his brothers once had, their laughter echoing beneath the bright summer sky. Cassia at his side, her face alight with joy.

And love, his bear added.

But then the image blurred, turning cold and empty. The vines withered. The valley lay barren—like his heart would be if she chose to leave if she decided to go back to her ex. The thought felt like a punch to his stomach.

She won't leave, his bear tried to assure him.

I wish I was as certain, Kris countered. Because if there was one thing he'd learned from last night, it was that Cassia's heart was torn. She'd come here wanting a fresh start—maybe she still did. But her ex's call had dragged her back to the cusp of the life she thought she wanted, once upon a time. No wonder she's confused, Kris thought. What if she's not ready for...me? For the truth about who I am?

He finished his coffee in a single gulp, ignoring the bitter sting on his tongue. The rest of the household would be up soon—his mom and dad never stayed in bed past dawn. But for a moment longer, Kris lingered, letting the scene before him calm his soul. As it always did.

But today was different. It was like he had an itch he could not scratch.

He pushed off the doorframe and stretched his arms above his head. No sense in moping. If he couldn't fix Cassia's heartbreak right now, at least he could throw himself into the day's tasks. Maybe manual work would help him think.

And maybe today you'll find a chance to tell her the truth about us, his bear rumbled

hopefully.

You don't think we should give her some space? Kris asked. The last thing I want to do is put pressure on her. Wasn't that what we agreed?

It was, his bear said. But that kiss changed everything.

Kris's mouth twitched in a wry grin. Always the optimist, he mused. Fine. Maybe that optimism was exactly what he needed.

He went back inside, set his mug on the counter, pulled on his work boots, then stepped outside into the first light of dawn. The air was cool, fresh with the promise of another summer day. Even though no one else was up, the vineyard itself felt alive, dew shimmering on the vine leaves. Kris inhaled slowly, letting the crisp oxygen fill his lungs. One foot in front of the other. That's all we can do for now.

It's what we've always done, his bear murmured, as if reading his anxious thoughts. And what we will always do.

Kris nodded silently, weaving between rows of vines. The ground was still damp from the night's cooler temperatures, leaving faint footprints in his wake. He ran a hand along a loaded vine, noticing the slight sag in the wires. Not one to ever leave a job undone, Kris located a small toolbox from under a tarp, intending to fix the tension. A simple job, but at least it'd keep his hands busy and his mind from spiraling.

As he worked, he let the repetitive motion, the click of the wire ratchet, center him. For a few minutes, the day's earlier turmoil eased. He was just Kris Thornberg, caretaker of these vines, a man with a vineyard to run and a dream to chase.

But every so often, a pang shot through his chest. Would Cassia walk these rows with

me ever again, or was that wishful thinking?

He hammered a small stake deeper into the ground, the reverberation shaking up his arm. What if she can't let go of him—Dante! A wave of frustration swept over Kris. The guy had cheated on Cassia. How dare he try to tempt her back with some half-baked apology?

But was Kris any better if he tried to bind her to him by telling her they were fated mates?

That's not love, his bear said. Love means letting her choose.

Still, the idea of letting her go tightened a knot in his stomach. But there were other ways to make her stay, he resolved. I'll show her a glimpse of her future here. I'll show her what an incredible business we can build. Then, if she decides to go, at least I'll know I tried.

He straightened, rolling his shoulders to loosen the stiff muscles. The sun had risen enough to cast a warm glow across the vines, and the day was already beginning to warm. Rubbing his hands on his jeans to dust off bits of dirt, he surveyed his work. This vineyard might be his home, but right now, it also felt like a stage, a place where everything he did or said might shape Cassia's decision.

Stop overthinking, his bear grumbled. You've done what you can here. We have other tasks.

*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 5:22 am*

Kris exhaled.Right. The barn.He glanced over his shoulder at the old structure. They'd cleared some space inside already, but it still needed a serious overhaul. But he wanted to get rid of as much junk as possible before the contractor came.

He walked along the rows toward the barn's wide doors, stepping inside the airy space. It certainly looked a whole lot better than this time yesterday, but there was still plenty to do.

All right,he muttered, scanning the mess.Time to roll up my sleeves.

And keep our mind from imagining the worst,his bear pointed out.

Exactly.Kris inhaled, letting the purposeful energy fill him.

He worked methodically, sweat prickling at his temples despite the morning chill. With each plank he shifted or stack of junk he hauled, he pictured how this barn could look in a few months—an intimate dining area, a tasting bar, possibly an open kitchen that Cassia was so excited about.

She was so excited about the project,he said with a pang.

And she still is,his bear replied.

You'd better be right.Kris grabbed a broom and started to sweep the uneven floor. Dust rose in lazy swirls, catching in the beams of sunlight.

He was so focused that the sound of footsteps outside the barn caught him by

surprise. He paused, broom in mid-sweep, every sense going on alert. Then a familiar presence tugged at his awareness—Dad.

Kris set the broom aside and headed toward the door, a half-smile forming at the sight of his father's broad figure approaching. Hugo carried two steaming mugs in one hand and a plate covered with foil in the other. He wore the same calm, but rugged expression Kris remembered from childhood mornings, back when his dad would wake early to check the vines.

"Morning," Hugo greeted, stepping onto the barn's threshold. His gaze flicked to the pile of junk Kris had stacked near the door. "Doing some cleaning, I see."

Kris gave a small shrug, crossing to him. "Figured it needed doing." He was about to add something else but caught the unmistakable aroma of pancakes coming from under the foil. "Are those...?"

Hugo lifted the plate slightly and inhaled deeply, a half-smile tugging at his mouth. "Your mom made a stack. Thought you could use some nourishment after an early start."

"She thought right." Kris wiped his sweaty hands on his jeans again, and Hugo handed him one of the mugs before setting the plate on a low table near the barn door. Kris removed the foil. Sure enough—there were pancakes, warm and fragrant, with butter and jam on the side.

"Thanks." He took a breath, mouth watering. "This is...just what I needed."

"That's what your mom thought. And you know she is always right." Hugo watched him for a moment, then gestured. "Wash up, son. I can wait. No sense eating dust with your pancakes."

Right. Kris let out a small laugh, heading over to the outside tap attached to the barn's side. He turned it on, cold water splashing onto his hands. It numbed his skin but felt refreshing after the dusty barn. As he rinsed, he took a moment to stare at the wide blue sky.

When the day is as beautiful as this, how can things not go our way?he asked his bear.

That's the spirit!his bear said.

Once he dried off with a rag, he returned to where Hugo had pulled up one of the battered chairs. Kris opted to sit on a low wall near him, accepting the second mug. They sat in companionable silence as Kris dug into the pancakes, each bite sweet and comforting.

He was about halfway through when Hugo murmured. "You always chew too fast," he observed, a note of concern in his voice.

Kris forced himself to slow down. "Just hungry," he mumbled, taking a swig of coffee to wash it down.

Hugo gave him a sideways look. "Sure. But I suspect it's not just an empty stomach that's bugging you."

Kris set the fork down, exhaling. He hated how easily his father read him. But he also craved the man's solid wisdom. "Cassia got a call last night," he admitted, voice subdued. "Her ex-fiancé, begging for another chance."

Hugo nodded slowly, as though it confirmed his suspicions. "Mm-hmm. I figured something was on your mind. Since you rose before sunrise."



“Sorry, if I woke you.” Kris raked a hand through his hair.

“I was already awake,” Hugo admitted. “So, share.”

Does he mean the pancakes or our woes?his bear asked forlornly.

“I’m not sure what to do, Dad. She’s torn. She left him because he cheated, but now he’s telling her he made a mistake. If she forgives him...” He let the thought trail off, the possibility of losing her like a stab in the heart. “I know I shouldn’t stand in her way, but...”

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Hugo studied him for a moment, then let out a slow breath. “Son, you know your mother and I didn’t always have it so easy. Back before we were engaged, I nearly messed everything up. I was so busy trying to prove I could make a solid future for us that I neglected to show her how I felt. We had a near breakup because of it.”

Kris blinked. He’d heard bits and pieces of this story over the years, but never the full truth. “What happened?”

A faint smile curved Hugo’s lips. “We were dating, but I was too stubborn. Insisted on working dawn to dusk, trying to show your grandfather I could run the place. Meanwhile, your mom was back in town, feeling ignored. She started wondering if I really wanted her, or if the vineyard was my only priority.”

Kris’s bear rumbled softly in his mind. Sounds familiar, he noted.

Hugo continued, “She almost left for good. She packed a bag and told me she’d had enough if I couldn’t find time for her. I’d never been so terrified.” A nostalgic laugh escaped him. “So I hopped in the old truck—transmission squeaking like a dying cat—and raced after her. Ended up stalling out half a mile from her place. Ran the rest of the way on foot, panting like crazy. Showed up on her doorstep, sweaty and out of breath, begging her not to go. Told her the vineyard was my heritage, but she was my future.”

Kris raised an eyebrow, touched by the sincerity behind that last line. “And she forgave you?”

Hugo shrugged lightly. “She took some convincing, but in the end, yes. Because

I proved it. After that, I made space in my life, balancing the vineyard with our relationship. She saw it wasn't all talk. And we never looked back."

Kris inhaled the story, letting it sink into the churn of his thoughts. "So you're saying...what, exactly?"

Hugo gave Kris a steady look. "That you accept she might need time, especially with this ex-fiancé. But you also remember that you and she are meant to be. And you have to prove that to her. You have to win her heart. You have to show her there is no one else for her."

Kris chewed on that. Show her. But how, when she was so conflicted?

By being there, consistently, his bear offered in a gentle tone.

Kris nodded, half to himself. "I guess you're right." He set the coffee aside and grabbed another small bite of pancake, though his appetite had waned under the swirl of emotions. "It's just... I worry that she's still hurting, and maybe she's not ready to see what I want to show her, or...who I am. That might scare her off."

Hugo clapped him on the shoulder. "One step at a time. You don't have to lay all your cards on the table at once, but you also can't hide them forever. Trust your instincts. You know, Cassia is the one. She'll handle the truth, no matter how surprising."

Kris's bear let out a quiet hum of agreement. She is the one, he said with certainty. She just doesn't know it yet.

Kris finished the last of the pancakes in silence, letting his father's words roll through him. We just need to prove it, he echoed. Just like Dad did.

## Chapter Fourteen – Cassia

Cassia had not had the best night's sleep. Every time she closed her eyes, Kris's face filled her mind, and her lips tingled at the thought of kissing him. And her body tingled at the thought of his hands on her skin, caressing, stroking, tempting, and teasing.

She'd risen at the first light of dawn and pulled on her robe, before heading to the kitchen to make a pot of tea. While it brewed, she'd opened her notebook and read over the notes she'd made on the Thornberg wines she'd tasted. Then she'd made a short list of dishes that would both complement and enhance the subtle flavors of each wine.

By the time the pot of tea was drunk, she had a fully fleshed-out menu for a potential trial run of a wine-pairing dinner.

Which she would suggest to Kris when she next saw him. If she could look at him without blushing, that was.

Her mind wandered back to last night. And that kiss.

What had she been thinking?

That was the problem, she hadn't been thinking. At least not with her head.

No, that kiss had been purely an act of her heart. And her soul.

She placed her hand on her chest and took a deep, shuddering breath. Why did he make her feel like this?

It was as if she drew her to him by pure animal magnetism alone.

Kris might blend the finest of wines with their sophisticated notes and complex tones, but there was nothing sophisticated about the way she responded to him. It was primal. Raw. Overwhelming.

She rubbed her temples with her fingertips and sighed. This was not how her fresh start in Bear Creek was supposed to go. She'd come here to heal, to find herself again after having her heart trampled. Not to immediately fall for the first attractive man she met.

But Kris wasn't just any man, was he?

Cassia shut her notebook with a sharp snap as she remembered last night. Her cheeks brushing against his stubbly jaw, the low sound of his breath catching as she'd pressed her lips to his skin. That moment had been so charged, so unlike anything she'd planned or expected.

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Kissing him was a slip-up, right? We agreed to keep things professional. And yet, part of her refused to label it a mistake. It had felt...well, real. Which scared her all the more. She tried to push the memory away, but it hovered just out of reach, setting her nerves on edge and stirring a longing in her heart.

“All right,” she muttered to herself, standing up quickly and clearing her throat, as if scolding the restless part of her mind that kept replaying the kiss. She needed to focus on her job. On her future. Right now, she owed Kris an apology, and she needed to prove to him she was committed to the restaurant project.

And not to Dante!

She gathered up her notebooks and shouldered her purse before grabbing her keys from the nightstand and heading out the door. She'd said she'd see him bright and early, so she might as well bite the bullet and get her embarrassment out of the way.

She walked nimbly over the stones and headed for her car, refusing to let thoughts of that kiss take up any more room in her brain. But it was hard to stop the scene replaying in her head.

So, as she drove, she focused on the world outside her windshield. And what a world it was. The forests bordering the road offered shades of green she'd never known existed. Sunlight filtered through the canopy, casting dappled patterns across the winding road. Bear Creek might be small, but what it lacked in size, it made up for in natural splendor.

She rolled the window down a crack, breathing in the forest's invigorating scent. It

was as if she were being healed from the inside out. Or the outside in.

Maybe that's why she was finally opening her heart again. The mountains had a way of stripping away pretense, leaving only what was real and true. And what was real was that when Kris had looked at her, something inside her recognized him on a level she couldn't explain.

The road curved around and she caught the first glimpse of the neat rows of vines a few minutes later. The vineyard's entrance sign came into view. A sudden nervousness struck her. What if Kris rescinded his offer of a job? After all, the kiss had been inappropriate. She'd practically ambushed him after that upsetting phone call from Dante.

Parking near the main house, she stepped out of the car, tucked her notebook under her arm, and adjusted her purse. Then she noticed a movement near the porch. Her heart stuttered in her chest. Was Kris waiting for her to arrive?

However, it was not Kris Thornberg who appeared. Which left Cassia both disappointed and relieved, all at the same time. Disappointment that it wasn't him, but relief that she at least had a job for a few minutes more.

Unless Leanne was lying in wait to do the deed. But she suspected Kris would see it as his duty to fire her since he was the one to hire her.

Ugh, why had she made her life so damn complicated?

"Morning, Cassia," Leanne called, stepping down from the porch. A slight breeze ruffled Leanne's hair, but her expression was as warm as always, giving Cassia some degree of hope that things would turn out okay. "You're here bright and early."

Cassia nodded, managing a small smile. "Hope it's not too early. I wanted to get a

head start. I have some ideas I wanted to share with Kris.”

Leanne shaded her eyes from the morning sun. “Kris is out at the barn if you’d like to track him down. He’s been up before dawn this morning. I think he has something on his mind.”

Cassia’s stomach clenched at the mere mention of Kris, but she forced a casual nod. “Perfect. Thank you.”

Leanne smiled, giving her an assessing once-over that felt almost maternal. “You look as if you have something on your mind, too, Cassia.”

“I do?” Cassia asked, as her cheeks flushed pink.

“Just make sure you don’t work too hard,” Leanne said. “I’ll catch you later.”

“I hope so,” she managed, nodding again before she took off toward the barn. As she headed through the first row of vines, Cassia spotted Hugo near the tool shed, rummaging through some supplies. She inclined her head in greeting, and Hugo responded with a slight smile and a nod, his eyes gleaming in a way that made her suspect he already knew something about last night’s events.

Had Kris told his parents about what happened? If he had, did the discussion center on the kiss, the phone call, or both? The idea left her feeling more than a little embarrassed.

Well, she would just have to face Kris head-on and plead her case. And, if necessary, beg him to give her another chance.

Taking a deep breath, she stepped inside the barn, blinking to adjust to the dimmer light. Wow, someone had been busy. The floors looked swept clean, the pile of debris



that they'd tucked neatly in one corner was now gone, and the open space near the back seemed significantly clearer than when she left last night.

Then Kris emerged from behind a partially dismantled wooden partition, a few old boards in his arms. He paused at the sight of her, a flash of warmth in his eyes that made her heart skip.

"Oh—morning," he said, walking toward her.

Cassia swallowed, forcing a smile. "Morning." She jiggled the notebooks under her arm. How was she supposed to play this? Ignore it ever happened? That would certainly save them both an awkward conversation. "I've got some sketches of how we might arrange the dining area, plus a concept for the menu layout. If you want to take a look?"

Kris nodded, carefully setting aside the boards he was carrying. She noticed his hair was slightly damp with sweat as if he'd been working hard for hours already. That dedication, that sense of purpose, was part of what drew her to him.

They found a relatively dust-free barrel to use as a makeshift table. Cassia opened her first notebook, flipping to her hand-drawn sketches of the barn's interior, annotated with arrows and labels for seating, lighting, and the potential tasting bar.

Kris leaned in beside her, and that subtle closeness sparked a wave of awareness in her. She tried to focus on the lines on the page rather than the solid warmth of him at her elbow.

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“These lines here,” she explained, tapping the rough outline. “I thought we could keep part of the barn’s rustic charm but incorporate a polished floor. Maybe keep the wooden beams exposed to show the barn’s original character. Then, for the seating, I’d go with smaller, well-spaced tables for an intimate vibe. You know, let people focus on the wine-and-food pairing without feeling like they’re in a huge dining hall.”

Kris nodded slowly, eyes flicking between her sketches and the barn around them. “I like it,” he murmured. “Preserving the barn’s authenticity is important. And an intimate setting fits the Thornberg style—personal, handcrafted, not mass-market.”

Cassia positively glowed at his words of approval. “Exactly. And for the menu, I have made a shortlist of dishes for the seasonal menus. I did quite a bit of research last night, and most of what we need can be sourced locally.”

He grinned, the tension around his eyes easing. “You have been busy. This all looks fantastic.”

She released a breath of relief. “I want to do a good job,” she said simply. For you, her mind added, though she didn’t speak it aloud.

“We’ve got some quotes coming in for the work, and Finn is applying for the permits we’ll need.” Kris looked up, his eyes scanning the interior of the building. “It’s all starting to come together.” He ducked his head and looked at her, and it was as if she were drawn to him.

“Great.” She winced as she closed her notebook and held it in her arms. She needed to put some distance between them. It was as if, when she was around him, she lost

all control. Maybe if she addressed what happened last night, and he told her how uncomfortable it had made him... But what if it hadn't made him uncomfortable?

Damn, this was driving her crazy!

She cleared her throat. "Kris...about last night." Her voice wavered, but she could not take the words back.

"Last night," he said as if he had no idea what he was talking about.

Cassia clutched her notebook tighter. "I want to say I'm sorry—" She paused, swallowing. "Sorry I kissed you," she clarified quickly, cheeks burning. "It was inappropriate. You're my boss, essentially, and I don't want to cross a line that makes this job...complicated. Especially after you invested your trust in me."

Kris's expression softened. "You don't have to apologize for that."

She shook her head. "I do. The phone call from my ex...I don't know, it messed my head up. But I won't let it happen again. I want to show you I'm serious about this restaurant."

His lips curved in a faint, wry smile. "I understand. And for what it's worth, I know you're serious. This barn, these ideas, the menu—you've jumped in wholeheartedly." He exhaled, placing a gentle hand on the battered notebook in her grasp. "And if you want to keep things professional, I understand."

Was she reading him right? He didn't regret it.

They held each other's gaze, a thousand unspoken words flickering between them. Then Kris cleared his throat. "So," he said. "These recipes?"

Cassia latched onto the shift in topic with relief and opened her notebook once more. “Yes...the recipes.”

But all she could think of was that with Kris, she seemed to have stumbled across the recipe for love.

## Chapter Fifteen – Kris

How was he supposed to focus on the restaurant plans when all he wanted to do was look into his mate’s eyes?

Is that all you want to do? his bear asked with a chuckle.

No, Kris admitted. I’d like to hold her in my arms and kiss her. Not on the cheek, but on her lips.

Now, that would not be keeping things professional, his bear teased.

No, it would not, Kris agreed. But if that is what Cassia wants, then we need to respect her wishes.

It felt as if their relationship was on a knife edge and the last thing he wanted to do was tip the balance the wrong way. He took a deep breath and tried to focus on the recipe Cassia was showing him.

“This pasta dish would be perfect for the first week’s menu,” she was saying, tracing the ingredients list with her finger. “It uses local produce and pairs beautifully with your Pinot Noir.”

“It looks delicious,” Kris said, but he wasn’t looking at the recipe. He was watching the way her eyes lit up when she talked about food, the passion evident in every

gesture.

Yes, the recipes might sound delicious, but nothing could taste as good as his mate's lips.

She looked up from the recipes and caught him staring. "Sorry, I get carried away sometimes," she said as a light blush flushed her cheeks.

"Don't apologize," he said. "I love watching you get excited about your craft."

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“My craft.” A smile spread across those kissable lips. “I’ve never thought of it like that.”

“You should. Blending the wines with recipes for the restaurant is as much a craft as the winemaking itself.”

“Oh, I don’t know,” she replied. “I am not creating something as unique as you. I am taking two things that already exist and marrying them together.”

Oh, how I would like to marry our mate, Kris sighed.

Their eyes locked, and for a moment, Kris forgot about everything else—the restaurant, the vineyard, even his bear. There was only Cassia...

“Kris,” she said, her voice barely above a whisper, “I know we agreed to keep things professional, but...”

His heart hammered in his chest. “But?”

She took a deep breath. “But I don’t think I want that anymore. Professional, I mean.” She reached out and placed her hand over his. “When I came to Bear Creek, I was running from my past, trying to find somewhere I could start fresh. I didn’t expect to find...this.”

Kris’s throat went dry. His bear was practically dancing with excitement inside him.

“This?” he prompted, his voice rough with emotion.

“A place that feels like home already. People who make me feel welcome. And you.” Her eyes softened. “Especially you, Kris.”

He turned his hand in hers, so their palms met, fingers intertwining. The simple touch sent electricity racing up his arm. “Are you sure? After the conversation with your ex last night, I wasn’t sure...”

“I’m not going anywhere,” she continued. “I’ve made my decision. Bear Creek is where I want to be. Where I need to be. I’m done looking back. I only want to look forward now.”

The words were everything he’d hoped to hear, but Kris knew there was still one massive barrier between them. One truth she needed to know before they could truly move forward.

“Cassia,” he said, squeezing her hand gently. “There’s something I need to show you. Something important about me, about who—what—I am.”

He could feel his bear rising close to the surface, eager to reveal himself after hiding for so long. This was the moment of truth.

“What is it?” Cassia’s eyes searched his face, concern creasing her brow.

Kris held on tightly to her hand. “It might be easier if I just show you. But I need you to know that I would never, ever hurt you.”

Her face paled, but she nodded. “I know that, Kris.”

“What you’re about to see...it’s going to seem impossible.” He stepped back, creating space between them. His heart beating so hard he was sure she could hear it. “My family has a special...heritage. A gift that’s been passed down through generations.”

“So you said yesterday.” She nodded again, and then added, “Kris, you’re scaring me a little.”

He gave her a fleeting smile. “I’m scared, too. Scared of how you’ll react.” Taking a deep breath, he closed his eyes. “But you deserve to know the truth.”

At last,his bear said.

She reached out and placed her hand on his arm. “Kris, I do know the truth.”

“You do?” he asked, surprised.

“Yes. I know you are one of the kindest, most genuine men I’ve ever met. Whatever it is you need to tell me, it can’t change that.”

Her words gave him courage.

Do it,his bear said.It’s now or never.

It’s now,he told his bear.

Yes!His bear let out a long roar of triumph. He was ready to be set free, ready to meet his mate.



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But were either of them ready for rejection?

She will not reject us, his bear said with such confidence that Kris had to believe him. And had to take the chance.

“Stand back,” he whispered, releasing her hand. “Please.”

Confusion flickered across her face, but she nodded and took several steps backward. Kris closed his eyes, centering himself, feeling the familiar surge of energy that preceded the shift.

The air crackled and popped as Kris took one last look at his mate and then let go of the world.

For a second, their mate was lost to them. It was as if they existed in different dimensions. But a second later, Kris’s bear appeared, huge, powerful, and filled with wonder, standing in the presence of their mate.

Cassia gasped and took a faltering step backward as her hands flew to her mouth. Her eyes widened with shock as she shook her head in disbelief. For one terrible moment, Kris feared the worst, that she would scream, run, and never look at him the same way again.

But she didn’t run.

“Kris?” she whispered, her voice trembling. “Is that...is that really you?”

The bear nodded his great head, keeping perfectly still to avoid frightening her further. He lowered himself slightly, trying to appear less intimidating despite his massive form.

Tears filled Cassia's eyes, but they weren't tears of fear. Something else shimmered there, wonder, perhaps, or awe.

"May I..." she asked, extending her hand tentatively. "May I touch you?"

The bear rumbled softly and inclined his head toward her outstretched fingers. Cassia stepped forward, her movements slow and deliberate. When her fingertips finally made contact with his thick fur, she let out a shaky breath.

"So soft," she whispered. Her hand moved gently, stroking the coarse outer guard hairs to find the downy undercoat beneath. "I can feel you in there, Kris. Somehow, I can sense you."

The bear leaned into her touch, a low, contented sound rumbling from deep in his chest. Then he leaned forward and rubbed his head against her thigh, huffing softly.

"This is the most incredible thing I have ever seen," she murmured as she cupped his massive head in her hands.

And Cassia is the most wonderful thing I have ever seen, his bear said in reply.

She is, isn't she? Kris agreed, even though it felt like a complete understatement.

But how could he explain his feelings for this woman? A woman who was a part of him. Who made him complete.

I don't know, his bear said. But you're going to have to find them if we want to keep

her.

You're right, Kris said, and a moment later, Kris shifted back, the air shimmering around him as his human form returned. He stood before her, his eyes never leaving hers as he waited for her response.

"That was..." Cassia's voice trailed off, her hand still outstretched as if searching for the bear that had just been there. "Something else."

That's one way of putting it, his bear said happily.

"I mean..." She shook her head. "It was incredible."

Incredible, I'll take that, his bear shuffled from side to side, unable to contain his excitement.

"What are you?" Cassia asked. "A werebear?"

"I'm a shifter," Kris whispered. "A bear shifter. My family—all the Thornbergs—we carry this gift in our blood. It's who we are."

"It makes you special." Cassia nodded slowly, processing this revelation. "This is what you were trying to tell me, show me, last night when I got the phone call."

"It is," he said.

"And there was me thinking it was a social status thing..." She sighed and cupped her face in her hands. "How wrong I was."

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“Are you okay?” Kris stepped forward, his hand outstretched as she swayed on her feet.

“Yes. At least, I think so. I mean, I should be terrified,” she whispered. “I should be running for the door. But I’m not.” She looked up at him, bewildered. “Whyam I not afraid, Kris?”

He took a step toward her. “Because of what we are to each other.”

“What we are to each other?” She tugged her brows together. “Could you be a little less cryptic?”

“I’ll try.” He drew a deep breath. “In our world, shifters have mates—one person they’re destined to be with. It’s like love at first sight. Everlasting love at first sight.”

Understanding dawned in her eyes. “And I’m...”

“My mate,” he confirmed, his voice thick with emotion. “From the moment I saw... No, from the moment I sensed you...”

“This is crazy,” she whispered.

“But it doesn’t make it any less true,” Kris said.

Cassia sat down heavily on the nearest chair. Her hands trembled slightly as she ran them through her hair. “You’re telling me we’re...what? Soulmates? Destined for each other?”

“Yes,” Kris said simply, remaining where he stood, giving her space. “That’s exactly what I’m saying.”

She looked up at him, her eyes brimming with questions. “Is that why I felt so drawn to you? From the very beginning?”

He nodded. “And why I felt it, too. The mate bond works both ways, even if humans don’t always recognize it for what it is.”

“So you wait your whole life for your mate to just turn up?” she asked incredulously.

“Something like that,” Kris said. “You are my fated mate, Cassia. You are the only one for me. Ever.”

“Fated mate,” Cassia repeated.

“Yes, fate has a way of bringing mates together,” he gave her a lopsided grin. “In mysterious ways.”

“The job listing,” she whispered, realization dawning. “Oh goodness, you said it was never meant to be published. Are you saying that...”

“Was fate. Yes.” Kris smiled softly. “Finn swears he has no idea how the job listing got posted.”

“So fate brought me here,” Cassia said wonderingly. “Because we are...mates.”

“Yes. I truly believe that fate had a hand in that ad finding you,” Kris said.

Cassia’s eyes widened with wonder. “Fate,” she whispered, testing the word on her tongue. “I’ve never believed in fate before.”

“I’ve never believed in anything else,” Kris said. “But I was beginning to give up hope of ever meeting you. But then you walked into my life.”

Cassia’s eyes sparkled with unshed tears. “And I thought I was just running away from my past. It turns out I was running toward something far more important.”

“Toward me,” Kris said softly, taking a tentative step closer. “Toward us.”

“Us,” she repeated, testing the word on her tongue. She looked up at him with wonder. “How does this work? The mate bond, I mean. Do I get a say in it, or is it like some magical compulsion?”

Kris shook his head firmly. “You always have a choice, Cassia. Always. The bond draws us together, but it never forces us. It’s an invitation, not a command.”

“And if I accept this invitation?” Her voice was barely above a whisper.

“Then we build a life together.” He kneeled before her, close but not touching. “We share everything, the good days and the bad, the vineyard, the restaurant, all of it. And...” he hesitated, his eyes searching hers, “a family. Children. If that’s what you want.”

“And I thought I was coming here to plan a menu, not the rest of my life.” She took a shuddering breath.

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“Take all the time you need.” He reached out and covered his hand with hers. As warmth spread along his fingertips and traveled up his arms, he relished the connection between them.

But did Cassia feel the same?

He got his answer, when she cupped his face with her free hand, and whispered, “I don’t need time. I need you.”

### Chapter Sixteen – Cassia

Being around Kris was more intoxicating than any wine she had ever tasted.

Perhaps that was why she had told him, with a breathless whisper, that she needed him. It would also explain why it felt as if the world was spinning, like she was teetering on the edge of a precipice, swept away by some invisible force—by fate, as he’d called it.

The same force that had drawn them together, in the most uncanny way, now seemed to be urging her to take the next step forward. And the next.

And who was she to argue with the pull of destiny?

She exhaled, letting the tension in her limbs melt away under Kris’s intense gaze. “So, this...this mate bond,” she whispered, voice catching on the words. She could hardly believe she was saying them, but everything about this felt more vivid, more real than anything in her previous life. “It explains why I feel like this is more

than just a rebound relationship. Why I feel...certain.”

The admission left her breathless. She met his eyes and saw the same fierce longing mirrored there. An unspoken promise passed between them, drawing her closer. Before she could second-guess herself, she leaned in, pressing her mouth to his in a slow, intimate kiss. Electricity seemed to spark between them as Kris’s arms encircled her waist, gathering her tight against his chest. She let out a quiet gasp of relief as she leaned into him, and their kiss deepened.

My mate, a voice whispered inside her, a voice she could no longer deny. She pictured the powerful creature he could become and felt the raw, primal magnetism that pulsed beneath his skin.

Suddenly, she pulled back, her breath coming in ragged puffs. She bowed her head, inhaling sharply to gather her nerves. This is happening. She couldn’t stifle the wave of nerves and excitement that swirled in her stomach.

Kris loosened his hold, just enough to see her face. “You all right?” he asked, concern lacing his words.

She nodded, her eyes fluttering closed for a moment before she lifted her gaze to his. “Promise me,” she managed, “promise me this is all real and you’re not...playing some trick on me.”

His eyes shone with earnest emotion, and when he spoke, his voice was low and hoarse. “I promise. I could never lie to you, Cassia. You’re my mate.”

Those final words unlocked something in her, and she pressed her forehead against his, her heart drumming in time with his. Yes. This is real. She kissed him again, slowly, sensuously—pouring every ounce of trust, every fragile piece of her heart into that moment. He answered with a low growl, his arms pulling her closer again,



and she knew beyond a doubt that this was not some fleeting indulgence.

Whether it was fate or something else, she didn't care. All she knew was that it was real, and she trusted it.

And trusted him.

When they finally broke apart, Kris's eyes were molten, and a rumble of satisfaction vibrated through his chest. The sensation sent a delicious shiver down Cassia's spine.

"I've been waiting my whole life for you," he murmured. "Even when I didn't know who you were, I was waiting."

"I never believed in this kind of thing," she admitted, leaning into his touch. "The idea that someone could be meant for you...it seemed like a fairy tale."

"It's not a fairy tale," he assured her. "This is real. In some ways more real than anything I have ever experienced in my life."

"I feel it, too," she said, then she glanced around the barn. "Did you mean it when you told me you couldn't lie to me?"

"Yes, it's true," Kris said warily. "Unless it's to protect you."

"Protect me?" Her eyes narrowed. "From what?"

His brows knitted together as he mulled the question over. She sensed he was choosing his words carefully. "From hurt. Not just physical..."

"You mean you would lie to me if you thought it was for my own good?" she asked, an edge to her voice. If there was one thing she wanted from Kris, if there was one

thing she needed to be sure of, it was that she could always trust him to tell her the truth.

“Not exactly,” Kris said. “It’s more like... If something happened and you were in danger...”

“You would lie to protect me.” Cassia nodded slowly, processing this new information.

“Yes,” Kris murmured.

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“I understand,” she said, reaching up to touch his cheek. “But I don’t want secrets between us, Kris. Not if we’re...mates.” The word still felt foreign on her tongue, yet strangely right.

He captured her hand in his, pressing a kiss to her palm. “No secrets. But there are some things you should know about being mated to a shifter.” A smile tugged at his lips. “That I was born to make you happy in so many ways.”

Cassia chuckled nervously as heat spread through her body. “Born to make me happy.”

“Uh huh,” Kris’s eyes darkened, a rumble vibrating deep in his chest. “It’s written in our DNA. To protect, to provide, to...please.” The last word came out in a husky whisper that sent a shiver down Cassia’s spine.

“Is that so?” she murmured, her fingers trailing along his jaw. The vineyard, the mountains, and even the barn around them seemed to fade away until there was only Kris—his warmth, his scent, his presence enveloping her.

“A mate bond is sacred,” he continued, his thumb brushing across her lower lip. “It’s not just attraction or compatibility. It’s...deeper. More primal.”

Cassia swallowed, her throat suddenly dry. “Primal?”

“Yes. It’s part of our nature. Bears are protective, possessive even. We’re driven to provide for our mates, to keep them safe, to make them...” He trailed off, his cheeks flushing.

“To make them what?” Cassia pressed, feeling the heat rise to her own face.

“Happy,” he finished, his voice dropping to a husky whisper. “In every possible way.”

The promise in his words sent a flutter through her stomach. She bit her lip, suddenly aware of how close they were standing, of the warmth radiating from his body, of the vineyard stretching around them.

“And what about me?” she asked, fingers tracing the line of his jaw. “What’s my role in all this?”

Kris’s expression softened. “You’re the heart of me. The one who makes me complete.”

Her eyes rested on his lips, and she held her breath as he leaned in closer, his breath warm against her skin. Time seemed to slow as his lips brushed against hers, soft and questioning at first, then more insistent. A low growl rumbled in his chest, and something wild and uninhibited awakened within her. She pressed herself against him, fingers threading through his dark hair, anchoring him to her.

When they finally broke apart, both breathing hard, Cassia felt dizzy with desire.

“I want you...” Kris began, his voice rough with desire.

“I want you, too,” she agreed, not needing him to finish the thought. This wasn’t exactly the day she’d planned. But the tension building between them had been simmering since their first meeting. She could feel it, that inexplicable pull, drawing her closer to him with each passing moment.

“Not here,” Kris murmured against her neck, his warm breath sending shivers down

her spine. “Not like this.”

Cassia pulled back slightly, her eyes searching his. “Where, then?”

“Somewhere worthy of you,” he replied. “Our first time together should be special, not rushed in a barn with my brothers possibly walking in at any moment.”

The thought made her cheeks flush deeper. “Good point.”

Kris pressed his forehead against hers, his eyes closed as if he was gathering strength. “You have no idea how hard it is to be responsible right now.”

A small smile played on her lips. “I think I might have some idea,” she whispered, her body still thrumming with desire.

He chuckled, the sound warm and rich. “Come on.” He took her hand and led her outside, but no sooner had they stepped into the sunlight than he stiffened.

“Is everything all right?” she asked, clinging to him.

“You know what I said about my brothers walking past?” he said.

“I do.” Although being so close to Kris made it hard to think straight.

“Well, Finn and Philip are on their way to join us,” Kris said, half-turning to look at her. “We could go into the forest...”

“But if you can sense them, then they can sense us,” she said. “They are shifters, too, aren’t they?”

“They are,” he said.

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“Then it would be rude to run off into the forest,” she said. And she meant it even though she could think of nothing more desirable than disappearing into the trees with Kris. “And we’ve got plenty of time, don’t we?” She smiled, linking her fingers with his and giving a reassuring squeeze.

Kris’s eyes softened, his thumb brushing over her knuckles. “All the time in the world,” he agreed, though the heat in his gaze told her he was as reluctant as she was to postpone what had nearly happened in the barn.

“Then I guess we can wait,” she said, her voice hoarse as she added, “but maybe not too long.”

He growled softly, a sound that sent delicious shivers through her. “You’re testing my restraint, Cassia.”

She squeezed his hand. “Maybe that’s my role as your mate. To challenge you.”

The smile he gave her made her heart flip. “Among other things.” He slipped his arm around her waist and pulled her close, so close she could feel his hardness pressed against her stomach.

Unable to resist, she inched her body up and down, pressing tighter against him as she tempted and teased him. He groaned a guttural sound, and closed his eyes, moving his hips in rhythm with her.

But she wasn’t the only one capable of teasing. Kris slid his free hand between their bodies and slipped his fingers between her legs. She gasped as he pinched her

sensitive flesh through her pants and then bit down on her bottom lip as he applied more pressure, making her tremble.

“Kris!” she gasped, clinging to him, her head falling back as pleasure coursed through her body. “We can’t...your brothers...”

“They are discussing the vines,” he whispered against her ear as he slipped one finger inside her pants, stroking her through the thin fabric of her underwear. “They’re at least five minutes away.”

“Five minutes,” she echoed breathlessly, her hips moving of their own accord against his skilled touch. It wasn’t enough time for what she truly wanted, but the need building inside her was impossible to ignore.

Kris guided her backward until her shoulders met the rough wooden wall of the barn, hidden from view by the angle of the doorway and a cluster of tall wildflowers. His eyes had darkened to molten chocolate, pupils dilated with desire.

“Trust me,” he murmured, his voice a low rumble that vibrated through her chest. His fingers continued their torturous journey, finding the edge of her underwear and slipping beneath.

Cassia gasped as he touched her bare flesh, her knees nearly buckling at the sensation. She clutched his shoulders, anchoring herself as pleasure spiraled through her body. The mountain air felt cool against her flushed skin, the contrast heightening every sensation.

“Kris,” she whispered, her voice catching as his fingers found a rhythm that made her entire body tremble. “What if they...”

“They won’t know what we’re doing,” he assured her, his breath hot against her ear.

“Bear senses are good. I can hear them talking about the east vineyard. About a new kitchen garden for the restaurant. They’re completely distracted.”

They weren’t the only one. Finally, she surrendered to his touch, her head falling back against the barn wall. The risk of discovery only heightened her arousal, sending her pulse racing. His fingers moved with expert precision, finding every sensitive spot as if he’d been touching her for years instead of minutes.

“Look at me,” he commanded softly, and when she did, the intensity in his gaze nearly undid her.

Heat bloomed across her cheeks at his directness, but she couldn’t look away. His fingers circled faster, and she bit her lip to keep from crying out as pleasure coiled tighter and tighter within her.

“That’s it,” he encouraged, his voice a low growl. “Come for me, Cassia.”

The sound of her name on his lips was the final push she needed. Her release crashed over her in waves, her body trembling against his as she clung to his shoulders. Kris captured her mouth with his, swallowing her gasps of pleasure with his kiss, his body pressing firmly against hers as she rode out the waves of her climax.

When she finally came back to herself, breathing hard, she found him watching her with a mixture of tenderness and raw desire that made her heart skip. His fingers withdrew slowly, and he pressed a gentle kiss to her forehead.

“That was...” she began, unable to find words adequate enough.

“Just the beginning,” he promised, his voice rough with restraint. In the distance, voices grew clearer—his brothers approaching. “Later I am going to lay you down and taste you, savor you like the finest wine.”



The promise in his words sent a shiver down her spine, and for a moment, she wondered if her legs would hold her upright. She straightened her clothes with trembling hands, still feeling the aftershocks of pleasure coursing through her body.

Kris stepped back, giving her space to compose herself, though his eyes never left her face. “You’re beautiful,” he murmured. “Especially when you come undone like that.”

Heat rushed to her cheeks. “And you’re...surprisingly skilled,” she replied with a small smile.

“Shifter instincts,” he teased, though his eyes remained dark with unresolved desire. “I can sense exactly what my mate needs.”

The word ‘mate’ sent a flutter through her stomach all over again. Mate. The concept still felt new, yet somehow as ancient as the mountains surrounding them.

“Finn and Philip are almost here,” Kris said, reluctantly putting more distance between them.

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As she picked up her notes on the restaurant and the menus, she tried to figure out exactly what she was going to say to the man who was responsible for her being there.

For surely there was nothing she could ever say or do that would ever be enough to thank Finn for bringing her here, to this place, to this moment, to Kris.

### Chapter Seventeen – Kris

Kris loved his brothers. He truly did. But right now, he wished they were elsewhere.

As Finn and Philip appeared around the side of the barn and headed toward the doorway, he longed for them to vanish, to be anywhere but here, so he could take Cassia by the hand and lead her someplace secluded, show her just how fiercely he wanted her. His mind conjured the memory of her breath catching as he'd brought her to a shuddering climax mere moments ago, and he swallowed hard, battling the heat that threatened to flare back to life.

The thought of claiming his mate completely consumed him. Instead, he would have to muster all his self-control, keeping his demeanor pleasant and polite while every primal part of him screamed to warn his brothers off, to show them that Cassia was his, and only his.

They know, his bear reminded him.

I know they do, Kris replied in frustration. But it doesn't stop me from wanting them gone from here right now.

His hands tightened into fists as Finn and Philip stepped inside, their gazes flicking from him to Cassia and back again. He forced his shoulders to relax, releasing a controlled breath.

“Hey there,” Philip said, an amused tilt to his brows.

“Morning,” Kris managed, hoping he sounded normal even though nothing about this situation felt normal anymore.

Finn caught Kris’s eye and cleared his throat. “We were just—uh—checking on the barn progress,” he offered.

“Which is coming along,” Philip added, though his gaze lingered on Cassia’s flushed cheeks and Kris’s ruffled appearance. A knowing grin tugged at his mouth, but he tactfully didn’t comment.

Cassia drew a breath, pushing the hair from her face. “I hear you’re the one responsible for the advert that brought me here,” she said, giving Finn a small but friendly smile. The tremor in her voice might not have been obvious to anyone else, but Kris sensed it keenly, remembering the intimate moment they’d just shared.

Finn chuckled sheepishly, glancing at Kris in an unspoken apology. “I still have no idea how that happened. I swear it was only drafted as a joke. We were trying to show my brother here that there was more to life than work. It was never meant to be published. But apparently, fate had other ideas.”

Kris snorted softly. “Yeah, you might say that.”

Fate, indeed. His bear chuckled happily.

Cassia’s cheeks colored again. “I have to admit, I was never a believer in fate. But

now..." Her voice drifted off as she glanced at Kris, a small smile on her lips. "Kris has convinced me."

Finn's eyes darted back and forth between them. "So does this mean..."

Kris nodded, inhaling slowly. "Cassia knows we're mates. I showed her my bear just now."

Philip's eyes sparked with interest. "Just now?" He crossed his arms, looking amused. "I take it things got a little...personal?"

Kris's bear rumbled with annoyance. He did not want his brothers to dissect his private moments with Cassia. "Philip," Kris warned, his voice dropping to a low growl.

Philip raised his hands in surrender, though his eyes still danced with mischief. "Just making an observation."

Cassia shifted beside Kris, her fingers brushing against his. The simple touch grounded him and eased the territorial surge that had his bear pacing restlessly beneath his skin.

"Listen," Finn interjected, clearly sensing the tension, "if you want us to give you some time..."

Yes, Kris blurted to his bear.

But Cassia lifted her chin, shaking her head. "No, that's all right. We were about to dive into work, anyway." She glanced at Kris, reading the reluctance in his posture. "Weren't we? After all, this restaurant will not open itself, will it?"

Kris hesitated, torn between his impulses and the reality that any moment of stolen privacy was now lost. “We were,” he agreed at last, though that wasn’t exactly how he wanted to spend this special morning.

And it was a special morning. A one of a kind, never to be repeated.

True. You only meet your mate once, his bear agreed.

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But Cassia was right, they needed to focus on the restaurant. At least for now. There would be time enough for more later.

If something is worth waiting for...

Kris pushed his frustration aside, allowing himself one last longing look at Cassia before reluctantly shifting into work mode. "Okay, let's get to work."

Finn nodded in agreement and pulled a rolled sheet of paper from behind his back. "Great, because I've got a revised set of plans for the restaurant. I've been refining the layout and applying for some permits we'll need."

A flicker of confusion crossed Cassia's expression. "You have?" She scanned his face, then gave Kris a questioning look. "I didn't realize you were this far along."

Finn shrugged. "We might've been slow to commit before, but, well..." He glanced over at Kris. "I guess your arrival gave us a kick in the pants to move forward."

Cassia's brow furrowed. "Now that I know about the mate bond and that the ad was a...mistake." She paused, forming her words carefully. "I just want to confirm you're not doing all this purely because you think it'll make me happy. I don't want to be the reason you jump into something you're not ready for."

Kris let out a low, relieved laugh, stepping a fraction closer to her. "Not at all," he said firmly. "Fate might've brought you here, but fate also nudged us to finally take this project seriously. If you hadn't come, we might've dithered another year or more."

Philip nodded, smothering a wry grin. “What my brother is so eloquently trying to say is that we should have taken this step a long time ago. You showing up just gave us the momentum to do it.”

Cassia’s shoulders relaxed, a tiny smile tugging at her lips. Her gaze slid to Kris as if seeking confirmation. He merely lifted one hand and gently brushed her arm. A small, possessive gesture that made his bear hum with satisfaction.

“That’s...good,” she murmured, looking from Kris to Finn to Philip. “Then let’s take a look at those new plans.”

Finn laid the rolled-up documents on a workbench. “We can spread them out here.”

Kris stepped around Cassia, ignoring the simmer of desire that still coiled low in his gut, and helped unroll the paper so she could see. Their arms bumped as they leaned in, a reminder of how close they’d been moments ago, how intimately he’d touched her. He bit back the surge of longing, focusing on the well-worn lines of text and sketches that lay before them.

But even as his eyes scanned the restaurant layout, mentally picturing walls, seating, and a tasting bar, part of him remained intensely aware of the woman by his side—his mate—her warmth, her scent, and the promise in the air between them.

It might not be the privacy he craved, but as Cassia offered an insight about the best location for the entrance to the dining area, Kris felt an unexpected contentment settle in him. Because this was what he wanted: to stand beside her, building a shared future, one step at a time.

We’ll have our moment later, he told his bear. And when we do...we’ll make sure no one interrupts us.

Although he planned on spending more than a moment with his mate.

“So, what do we think?” Finn asked as they all leaned over the workbench and studied the plans.

“They’re great,” Cassia said as she looked them over.

“Very similar to the ideas Cassia showed me earlier,” Kris said, resting his hand on the small of her back.

A shiver ran up her spine, and she turned to look at him over her shoulder. As their eyes met, Kris felt his heart skip a beat. Even in this crowded barn, with his brothers hovering nearby, that single look between them felt intimate. A silent acknowledgment of what they’d shared and what still lay ahead.

“I think,” Cassia murmured, “we’re on the same page.”

Finn cleared his throat, breaking the moment. “Is that a first for this family?”

“Not when it comes to the vineyard,” Philip said defensively. “We’ve always pulled together in the same direction.”

“And this restaurant is not going to change that,” Kris added, backing up his brother.

“I’m glad you approve.” Finn chuckled good-naturedly. “As you can see, I’ve allocated more space for the kitchen than in the original plans. Figured our chef would appreciate that.”

Cassia’s eyes brightened. “Absolutely. A cramped kitchen is a nightmare for service flow.” She leaned forward, tracing her finger along the blueprint. “And I like how you’ve positioned the bar here, with a view of both the dining room and the vineyard



beyond.”

Philip nodded, looking pleased. “That was Kris’s suggestion, actually. He thought guests should be able to see the vines that produced the wine they’re drinking.”

“Perfect,” Cassia said with a smile at Kris.

Kris felt a flush of pride at the admiration in Cassia’s glance. “It makes for a better story,” he said simply. “People come here for more than just food and wine. They want the experience.”

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“Speaking of experience,” Finn interjected, “if this is going to work, we’re going to need a chef who knows what he is doing and is willing to work with us on the menu.”

“I can ask Uncle Leo if he has someone he can recommend,” Kris said.

“Good idea.” Philip nodded.

“Why don’t the two of you head over there now?” Finn suggested as he rolled up his plans.

“We were going to work on the barn,” Kris said.

“Finn is right. Finding a chef should take priority,” Philip said. “It won’t matter how good the recipes are and how wonderful the wine is if the dishes are not cooked to perfection.”

“Philip does have a point,” Cassia agreed.

“And I’m here,” Finn said. “I can spare a couple of hours to work on the barn. You two go and speak to Uncle Leo.”

Kris considered his brother’s words, his eyes drifting to Cassia. The thought of spending time alone with her, away from the vineyard, was too tempting to resist. Much too tempting, his bear rumbled in agreement.

“What do you think?” he asked Cassia.

She nodded. "I'd love to meet your uncle. And if he can recommend a chef who understands the vineyard's vision, that would be invaluable."

"It's settled then," Finn said, clapping his hands together. "You two head into town while we handle things here."

Don't look a gift bear in the mouth, his bear said. They both found their brothers' meddling amusing, since their hearts were, as always, in the right place.

"All right," he agreed, unable to keep the eagerness from his voice. "We'll be back in a few hours. Call if you need anything."

"Don't worry about us," Finn called out.

"Yeah," Philip added. "Take your time. No rush."

Kris shot his brother a warning look, but Cassia just smiled, her cheeks tinged with pink. "I'll grab my purse from inside."

As she stepped away, Finn moved closer to Kris, lowering his voice. "Fate, huh?"

"Fate," Kris replied, his eyes never leaving Cassia as she collected her things.

"Well, you certainly look...happier," Finn observed, a teasing note in his voice.

Kris rolled his eyes. "Don't start."

"What?" Philip joined in. "We're just noticing that our serious, all-work-no-play brother suddenly has a spring in his step."

Kris snorted softly. "You two are impossible."

“Maybe,” Philip conceded with a grin. “But you love us, anyway.”

“Most days,” Kris muttered as he stifled a grin.

Cassia reappeared, her purse slung over her shoulder, a light jacket draped over her arm. The sight of her made Kris’s heart stutter. Even in simple jeans and a blouse, she was breathtaking. His mate. The reality of it still felt surreal.

But the taste of her on his lips, the memory of her sighs, as he pleased her—these were very real, and they belonged to moments he would cherish forever.

## Chapter Eighteen – Cassia

Cassia walked toward Kris’s truck, her entire body still thrumming with the aftershocks of his revelation. And of the pleasure he’d given her moments ago. She couldn’t decide which had left her more lightheaded, learning that her mate could actually shift into a bear, or the memory of how he’d touched her, bringing her to a shuddering climax with a precision that felt almost impossibly intimate.

Maybe it was both. Definitely both.

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When she reached the passenger door, she paused, pressing one hand against the metal, trying to calm her racing thoughts. She closed her eyes, inhaling a deep breath, filled with the heady scent of sun-warmed grapes. It all seemed so impossible she feared she was dreamwalking.

No, she told herself. This isn't a dream. I saw it, felt it. Her mind lingered on the image of Kris in his bear form, massive yet somehow still...Kris. She'd looked into those dark, intelligent eyes and recognized him immediately.

Her cheeks flushed pink as she pictured him standing before her, their eyes locked together as his fingers worked their magic inside her. She clenched her thighs instinctively, heat flaring at the thought of him entering her fully, claiming her the way mates were meant to be claimed.

But then footsteps approached and her eyes flew open. She needed to compose herself. Somehow.

"Are you okay?" Kris murmured, rounding the front of the truck to stand beside her, his voice tinged with concern and an undercurrent of restrained desire.

She blinked, still caught in the afterglow of her own thoughts. "Uh huh," she said, though her voice came out hoarse. She cleared her throat. "I'm fine."

"You look a little flushed," he teased gently, stepping close enough for her to catch the distinct warmth of his body. The swirl of longing that had been simmering came roaring back, so she tore her gaze away, placing both hands on her cheeks in an attempt to hide the deepening flush.

She looked up, meeting his amused, searing stare, and promptly forgot how to breathe. Did he have any idea what he did to her?

Of course, he did. She could see it in the small self-satisfied smirk that played across his lips.

But, she suspected, she had the same effect on him.

“You look a little hot yourself,” she said, half-laughing but mostly just trying to control her nerves. She brushed past him, letting her body slide against his groin before hoisting herself onto the seat.

“Not fair,” he muttered under his breath, adjusting his jeans as the bulge there became more...pronounced.

Yes, her mind cooed. We definitely have the same effect on each other.

He climbed in beside her, and the air inside the cabin seemed to crackle with tension, sparking arcs of awareness between them. Cassia briefly considered yanking the door shut and asking him to drive them both to a place where they could lock themselves away, forgetting the world outside. But duty intervened, as it always did.

The restaurant had to come first.

She cleared her throat again, fiddling with her seat belt. “So...do you think your uncle will know a chef we could hire? A real professional who can handle a vineyard-focused menu?”

Kris exhaled, switching gears in his mind, even though the hunger in his eyes didn't fully subside. “I'm sure he can help. He's pretty well-connected and respected around here.”

Cassia nodded. “Aren’t all Thornbergs?” she asked, shooting him a half-smile.

Kris let out a short laugh. “I don’t know about that, but we try.”

“No skeletons in the closet?” Cassia teased, arching an eyebrow.

He snorted. “I didn’t say that. All families have secrets, and mine’s no different.”

She felt a flicker of curiosity but decided not to pry. This was not the time to poke around old family mysteries. Instead, she flashed a quick grin. “Finn’s plans are looking good,” she said, smoothly changing the subject.

Kris nodded, eyes lighting up with pride. “Yeah, I think he’s worked extra hard because he feels...” He paused, perhaps considering how to phrase it without throwing Finn under the bus. “Well, not guilty exactly, but...responsible.”

“Responsible for bringing us together under false pretenses,” Cassia finished, though she wore a smile to show she bore no grudges. After all, it hadn’t been false at all in the end, had it?

No, there was nothing false about the way she felt about Kris.

“Exactly. But I think fate’s a better word for it,” he said, glancing at her. “You might’ve come under odd circumstances, but I don’t regret a second of it.”

She suppressed a shiver of happiness. “Me neither.”

He flashed her a smile and turned his attention back to the road. They fell into a comfortable silence as the rolling fields gave way to scattered houses and then to the outer suburbs of Bear Creek. Kris took a left, then a right, before pulling into a small parking lot in front of a restaurant building that looked closed. But then it was still

early.

“Is anyone even here?” she asked. Perhaps they’d have time to kill while they waited for Kris’s uncle to arrive.

She had some ideas of how they could pass the time...



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But Kris cut the engine and unbuckled his seat belt. “My uncle and aunt live around the back, in an apartment.” He looked over at Cassia with a reassuring smile. “Ready to do this?”

She clutched her folder of menu ideas and nodded, though a flutter of nerves coursed through her. It was one thing for Kris and his family to like her menu. But would a restaurant owner respect her ideas or dismiss her as an amateur with fancy notions? There was only one way to find out. “Sure. Let’s do it.”

Outside, she rounded the truck to join him, then paused to take in the restaurant’s exterior. A warm stone facade topped by a pitched roof, with stained-glass windows, gave the place a homey yet classy vibe. It fit with Bear Creek’s rustic-chic aesthetic, blending tradition with subtle elegance.

Kris offered his hand, and without hesitation, she slid her fingers through his. Damn. The simplest touch from him set her on fire. She closed her eyes briefly as that tingling sense of recognition—that mate bond—flared up again.

“Do you have any idea how hard it is for me not to pick you up and carry you somewhere private?” he murmured roughly.

Her eyelids snapped open. The smolder in his gaze seized her breath. “Do you have any idea how much I want that, too?” she whispered.

A ragged chuckle fell from his lips as he gave a rueful shake of the head. “But duty calls,” he said softly, echoing her thoughts.

She forced herself to swallow the rising desire. “Duty calls,” she agreed. “I want to repay the trust you and your family have put in me.”

Kris reached out to gently cup her cheek, leaning in so close that his breath was like a caress on her skin. “It’s not just on you,” he reminded her. “As Philip said, we’ve wanted to do this for ages. You’re just the kick in the pants we needed.”

Her mouth curved into a lopsided smile. “I’ve never been called a ‘kick in the pants’ before. Let alone twice in a single day.”

His eyes danced with amusement. “I’ll try not to make it a habit.” Then he gave her a featherlight kiss that stole her breath before stepping back, leading her toward the building.

Instead of entering through the restaurant’s front door, they rounded the back. The apartment was not what she was expecting. The back of the building had been extended and remodeled, creating a home with large windows that overlooked a small but lushly planted garden. Cassia caught glimpses of herbs and vegetables growing in neat rows, and a patio area where someone had placed terracotta pots filled with trailing flowers.

It was a little oasis, and obviously well-tended and well-loved.

They followed a stone path to the front door, which was painted an emerald green, and Kris knocked briefly, not waiting for an answer before he opened it and stepped in.

“Uncle Leo! Aunt Elouise!” he called, guiding Cassia into a surprisingly spacious hallway. As they crossed the light and airy space, Cassia caught glimpses of the rooms beyond, which were tastefully decorated with finds that looked like souvenirs from traveling abroad. Shelves holding exotic spices, figurines from different

cultures, and paintings with distinctly European influences. Yet it felt homely, warm, and inviting.

“In the kitchen!” a woman’s voice called cheerfully.

Kris took Cassia’s hand again, leading her into a bright, well-equipped kitchen. There, a tall, broad-shouldered man with salt-and-pepper hair turned from the stove, a grin breaking across his face. There was no doubt that this man was a Thornberg. Next to him was a petite woman with laughter in her eyes, who immediately abandoned a bag of flour on the counter to greet them.

“This must be Cassia,” Elouise said, her gaze flicking over Cassia appraisingly, but not unkindly. “We heard you were the one behind these new restaurant plans. And a mate for Kris, too!” She clasped her hands in delight.

Leo set a spoon aside, crossing to Kris and delivering a hearty slap on the shoulder. “A mate, eh? Congratulations, boy!” He pulled Kris into a brief hug, leaving Kris ducking his head in a shy smile. Then he extended a warm handshake to Cassia. “Welcome to the family.”

Heat rushed to Cassia’s cheeks. This family wasted no time in making newcomers feel at home. “Thank you,” she managed, still not entirely used to being introduced in that capacity. But it felt...right. As if she was part of the Thornberg family and always had been. Just as she had always been Kris’s mate, even if they had never met.

“Come, come, have some coffee,” Elouise beckoned, bustling to set two cups on the island counter. “We want to hear about these plans. It’s about time you got around to this restaurant idea. You’ve been talking about it for long enough.”

Leo turned off the stove and wiped his hands, nodding at Cassia. “I hear you’ve been

putting together a thorough menu and you might need some recommendations for a chef.”

Cassia relaxed a little, feeling more confident as she took her folder from under her arm. Kris slid onto a barstool beside her, gently brushing his thigh against hers, a subtle hint of closeness that steadied her nerves. “Yes,” she said, clearing her throat. “I have the preliminary menu here—seasonal, local produce, with an emphasis on pairing each dish with a Thornberg wine.”

Elouise and Leo exchanged approving looks as they sipped coffee, leaning in to scan the neatly typed menu pages. Cassia explained her vision of small, rotating courses, a combination of hearty but refined dishes that would showcase each wine’s unique notes.

Kris chimed in occasionally, explaining how their family’s wines had certain distinctive flavors, and how seasonal differences affected each batch. Cassia was grateful for his eager support and her confidence grew as they discussed their plans.

“So you need a chef to bring this menu to life?” Elouise asked, tapping a manicured nail on the appetizer list. “I love that concept of a ‘summer orchard salad’ with the bright tangy dressing.”

Cassia shook her head. “We do. We were hoping you two might help. We want someone experienced, maybe with a background in vineyard restaurants or farm-to-table.”

Leo reached for a worn, leather-bound address book from a kitchen drawer, flipping through the dog-eared pages. “Let’s see, I know quite a few local chefs. Some stayed, some moved on... Ah. Here. Manfred. He worked here for a couple of months as my sous chef, but he really wanted to run his own kitchen. Great with pairing ideas, very methodical.” He lifted his gaze. “He might be ideal.”

Relief coursed through Cassia. Everything was coming together. She turned to Kris, seeing the spark of excitement in his eyes, reflecting her own. “Should we schedule a meeting with him?”

Kris nodded. “Absolutely.” He looked at Leo. “Could you pass along his contact info?”

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“Sure thing,” Leo said, scribbling a number onto a scrap of paper. “Tell him I recommended you. He’ll be thrilled at the chance to run a place from day one.”

“Perfect,” Cassia said.

Yes, life was just about perfect.

### Chapter Nineteen – Kris

Kris stood back, brushing the plaster dust from his hands, and admired the newly smoothed wall. It still needed a final coat of paint, but for now, he was satisfied. Keeping his hands busy had been a good distraction, a way to keep himself from dwelling on how much he wanted to be alone with his mate. Every time he stopped to catch his breath or realign a panel, his thoughts drifted back to Cassia. Her soft sighs, the taste of her lips, the way she molded against him like they’d been made for each other. He swallowed, heat flaring low in his belly.

Smiling to himself, he let his shifter senses roam. After they’d returned from their visit to his uncle and aunt’s restaurant, his mom had invited Cassia to help her pick out tablecloths and silverware for the new restaurant. It meant they had been apart for a couple of hours or more.

Probably a good thing, he mused. If she’d been in the barn with him, he doubted he could’ve resisted making love to her right then and there.

He glanced at the wall again, nodding in approval, before gathering up his tools. He took them to the outdoor tap and cleaned them off, then splashed cold water on his

face. The shock of it cleared some of the heat from his cheeks but did nothing for his heated thoughts.

Cassia was right, his bear teased. You're a little hot.

Maybe we should cool off under the trees, Kris replied, an idea sparking in his mind. A quiet trip to the stream near the top of the vineyard, just him and Cassia... That was exactly what they needed.

He dried his tools, put them neatly in the toolbox, and made his way out of the barn, stepping into the late afternoon sun. Yeah, a picnic near the stream sounds about perfect. On impulse, he detoured through the tasting room, grabbing a couple of bottles of the wine he'd blended the night Finn had drafted that ad. That same ad that had—strangely, wonderfully—brought Cassia into his life.

Fate, his bear rumbled softly.

No doubt, Kris agreed, holding the bottles to his chest and heading toward the house. He could sense Cassia even more clearly now. He could hear her laughter, her voice interspersed with his mom's as they talked. Only a few days ago, a moment like this had been a dream. Now it was their reality.

Climbing the porch steps two at a time, Kris swung open the door. As he stepped inside the kitchen, his gaze was instantly drawn to Cassia, who had her head bent over a stack of tablecloths while Leanne gestured at something. As if sensing him, Cassia glanced up, giving him a coy smile that tightened every muscle in his body until he felt like a coiled spring, ready to launch.

"Finished for the day?" Leanne asked, her gaze lingering on the wine bottles tucked under his arm.

“Yeah,” Kris said, walking over to the fridge. “I, um, thought we could walk up to the stream, and share a glass or two.” He deposited the bottles on a shelf and closed the fridge door, fighting the grin tugging at his mouth.

Leanne cocked an eyebrow at him. “Well, that sounds like an offer you can’t refuse,” she teased.

“It does,” Cassia agreed, her fingers lightly resting on a stack of fabric samples. “Once we finish up here.” He imagined her fingers trailing across his skin, and his heart skipped a beat.

“Great,” he said, backing out of the kitchen. “I’m gonna grab a shower. Take your time.” He caught the heated look in Cassia’s eyes as her gaze traveled over his body. The same look she’d given him that morning.

A powerful wave of longing built up inside of him. If only they could take that shower together...but he doubted Cassia would join him when Leanne was in the house.

We need a place of our own,his bear said with a huff.

Right?Kris shot back wryly, as he turned his back on his mom and his mate and bounded up the stairs. As much as he loved living at home, it was far from private. Neither was the guest house Cassia was staying at. He loved his aunt and uncle dearly, but he also did not want his and Cassia’s every movement relayed back to the rest of the family. The only secluded corner they could steal was the barn. And eventhatwas risky, with family members coming and going.

We’re going to have to leave home,his bear said.

We’re certainly old enough,Kris replied lightly.



He showered quickly, the hot easing away any lingering muscle stiffness from his day's work. But no amount of scrubbing erased the flickering images in his mind. Cassia's parted lips, her soft moans, the arch of her back as he drove her over the edge... The thought alone had him half-ready to jump out of the shower and take her to his bed right now.

Cool it, his bear rumbled with amusement. You've got your plan.

Yeah, Kris snorted inwardly. If I don't combust first. He finished his shower, toweled off, and then dressed in casual jeans and a fresh T-shirt. After dragging a comb through his hair, he hurried back downstairs, where he found Cassia alone in the kitchen, reorganizing a small collection of fabric samples. At the sight of him, her whole expression brightened, and Kris felt that tension inside him coil tighter. She straightened, resting a hand on a wicker basket he recognized instantly. It was the same one they had used for childhood picnics, barbecues, or any sort of family outing.

"Your mom insisted on making us a picnic dinner," Cassia said, patting the basket. "Thinks we'll need sustenance, I guess."

His bear let out a purr of approval. We do need our strength, he quipped, and Kris nearly laughed out loud.

Oh, we will, Kris said.

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“Mom does like to keep us fed,” he told his mate as he crossed the room.

“Well,” Cassia teased, reading the humor in his eyes, “I guess you have had a long day of work.” She lifted a corner of the basket’s lid and peered at the contents, releasing a little sigh of delight. “Smells incredible.”

Kris grabbed the wine from the fridge, then slipped the bottles into a small insulated pouch before looping the picnic basket over one arm. He extended his free arm to Cassia. “Shall we?”

Her face glowed as she slipped her hand through the crook of his elbow, nestling close to him as they stepped outside. The late-day sun cast golden light across the vineyard, highlighting each row of vines in a gentle glow. Cassia rested her head briefly against his shoulder, an easy, intimate gesture that left Kris’s chest so full of emotion he could hardly breathe.

He guided them up the gentle slope, through rows of leafy vines rustling in a mild breeze. Once they hit the wooded area, they paused to turn and look at the view of the vines and the house below.

“It’s stunning.” Cassia inhaled deeply, and then let the breath out slowly.

“So are you.” Kris pressed a kiss to the top of her head before they turned and continued uphill. They crossed a small clearing before reaching the spring, which trickled down from a rocky ledge, forming a small, babbling stream that ran down through the vineyard’s lower fields.

“This water is why Thornberg wine tastes so unique,” Kris told his mate. “That, and the valley’s microclimate.”

“Is it also what makes the Thornberg boys grow so big and strong?”

“Maybe.” Kris laughed, a rich, deep sound that seemed to warm the air around them. “I remember my grandfather used to bring us up here to drink from the spring water when we were kids.”

“Another Thornberg secret,” Cassia said.

“Why don’t you try the water?” Kris set the picnic basket down on the ground and then walked to the spring. “Come on. The water is delicious.”

Cassia approached the spring, kneeling beside it. She cupped her hands in the crystal-clear water and brought them to her lips, drinking deeply.

“Oh!” She turned to him with wide eyes. “It’s so cold and sweet.”

Kris uncorked one of the wine bottles and poured two glasses, the ruby liquid catching the late afternoon sunlight. He carried them over to where she kneeled by the spring, admiring how the dappled light through the trees played across her face. He could scarcely believe she was real—and that she was his.

How lucky can one man be?he murmured.

Very lucky, his bear said, contentment radiating through their bond.

“This is the wine I blended the night Finn made the ad,” he said softly, offering her a glass.

Cassia rose, taking the glass with a smile that made his heart skip. “The ad that brought me here.”

They stood close, the sound of the bubbling spring a gentle backdrop to the moment. Kris raised his glass. “To the restaurant,” he toasted.

“To the restaurant,” she echoed.

“And to us,” Kris added softly. They held each other’s gaze as they sipped the crisp white wine. Then Cassia set her glass on a flat rock, rose on her tiptoes, and brushed her lips over his in a slow, lingering kiss.

Kris slid an arm around her waist, pulling her flush against him, returning the kiss with equal fervor. The gentle rush of the stream, the whisper of the leaves above—everything faded except the taste of her, warm and sweet. His entire being hummed with the intensity of the mate bond, the unstoppable need to claim her fully. And he poured every ounce of longing into that kiss.

When they finally broke apart, both breathless, Kris rested his forehead against hers.

“I’ve been wanting to do that all day,” he murmured.

Cassia’s smile was radiant. “Just that?”

A low rumble of desire vibrated through him. “Not just that,” he admitted, his voice husky. “But I’m trying to be a gentleman.”

“What if I don’t want a gentleman right now?” she whispered, her fingers trailing up his chest.

His bear growled with approval, and Kris felt his control slipping. He captured her

wandering hand, bringing it to his lips to kiss her palm. “We should probably eat,” he said, though truthfully, his appetite for food was overshadowed by another hunger altogether.

She laughed, a sound that warmed his soul. “We probably should,” she agreed, though she didn’t release his hand. “But first...”

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Cassia leaned in and kissed him again, this time with a boldness that set his blood on fire. Her lips parted, inviting him deeper, and Kris responded with a groan that seemed to rise from his very soul. His hands cupped her face, thumbs caressing her cheeks as he savored the sweet taste of her.

When they finally pulled apart, Cassia's eyes were hazy with desire, her breathing uneven. "I've been thinking about this all day," she confessed. "About you."

"In what way?" he murmured huskily as he ducked his head and kissed her neck, inhaling her scent.

"In every way," she whispered, her fingers tracing the line of his jaw. "I keep thinking about how it felt when you held me, when you kissed me. When you..." She took hold of his hand and guided it down over her body and between her thighs.

Kris rubbed his hand over her mound through the fabric of her jeans, feeling her heat even through the denim. His bear growled, urging him to stake their claim, to make her theirs completely.

"Cassia," he breathed against her neck, his voice strained with need. "I want you so badly it hurts."

She arched against his touch, her body responding instantly. "Then take me," she whispered. "I'm yours, Kris. Aren't I?"

"You are," he growled.

Something primal and possessive roared to life inside him. In one swift movement, he pressed her back against the trunk of a nearby pine, his body flush against hers.

As he bent his head and kissed her, it was as if a primal part of him had awakened. A part that wanted, no, needed, to claim his mate. And roar from the highest peak that she was his. Forever.

And nothing, especially no cheating ex-fiancé, could change that!

## Chapter Twenty – Cassia

With her back pressed against the tree, Kris kissed her, his hand between her thighs, stroking her through her clothes, making her whimper softly against his mouth. Beside them, the stream gurgled and babbled as it made its way through the trees toward the vineyard, and Cassia felt as if she were drifting, too, carried away by the current of sensation.

Her breath caught in her throat as his lips traveled down her neck, tender yet insistent, and she curled her fingers into his hair. She'd never wanted anything as much as she wanted Kris right now.

It was as if she burned for him and only him. As if she craved him like air itself. Her body hummed with need, with a fierce, primal hunger that threatened to overwhelm her senses.

“Kris,” she whispered against his ear, her voice trembling. “I need you.”

He growled softly in response, the sound vibrating through his chest and into hers. His eyes, when he pulled back to look at her, were tinged with amber, as if his bear were shimmering just beneath the surface.

“Here? Are you sure?” he asked, his voice rough with restraint. “We could go back to the house...”

Cassia shook her head, fingers tracing the strong line of his jaw. “No. Here.” To back up her words, she reached between their bodies and tugged at his belt.

Kris’s eyes darkened further, his breathing ragged as he helped her with the buckle. Then the buttons of his jeans. As the last one popped open, she curled her fingers around the denim and pushed them down over his hips, taking his boxers with them. When they pooled at his feet, Kris stepped out of them and kicked them aside. His hardness pressed against her thigh and she curled her fingers around his length, stroking him, reveling in his sharp intake of breath. He bit his bottom lip as she caressed him, moving her hand up and down while he rocked his hips back and forth.

What a sight he made, as he groaned, deep and guttural. A sound that made her stomach clench and her body ache for him.

“Your turn,” Kris whispered with reverent slowness. He hooked his fingers into her waistband and inched them down. Cassia lifted her hips slightly as he slipped her pants and underwear down over her curvy thighs. The cool forest air kissed her heated skin, making her shiver with anticipation more than cold. Kris helped her step out of her clothes, then gently pressed her back against the tree trunk. The rough bark against her shoulder blades was a delicious contrast to the softness of his touch.

“You’re beautiful,” he murmured, his gaze traveling over her body with such raw admiration that Cassia felt herself flush. “So damn beautiful.”

He kneeled before her, pressing soft kisses to her stomach, her hipbones, and the sensitive skin of her inner thighs. Cassia threaded her fingers through his dark hair, holding on as if she might float away without his anchoring presence. When his mouth found her most sensitive bundle of nerves, she gasped, her head falling back



against the tree trunk with a soft thud.

The world narrowed to just this—Kris's talented tongue exploring her most intimate places, the whisper of leaves overhead, the distant call of birds, and her own quickening breath. She was vaguely aware of her soft moans echoing in the forest clearing but couldn't bring herself to care who might hear. Let all of Bear Creek know she belonged to this man, and he to her.

She was vaguely aware of his hand on her knees, urging her to inch her feet apart, exposing herself to him. Cassia complied. Any other man would have left her feeling vulnerable, but she trusted Kris completely. With her body, with her heart, and her soul.

And right at this moment, with her pleasure.

His tongue circled her mound, gently at first, then with more pressure as her fingers tightened in his hair. Cassia's breathing grew ragged, her thighs trembling as he slipped a finger inside her, then another, curling them upward as he brushed his fingertips against her inner walls.

She rocked her hips, her orgasm so close now...

But then he eased off, letting her come back down.

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Tears stung her eyes. Why hadn't he taken her over the edge?

But then he covered her mound with his mouth and flicked his tongue over her most sensitive spot, while his fingers curled inside her. He stroked her inner walls once more, exploring her intimately before he finally hit that perfect spot that made stars explode behind her eyelids. The pressure built rapidly, as his mouth and fingers worked in tandem to take her higher than she had ever been before.

Was he trying to prove something to her? Was he teaching her that no man could give her more pleasure than he?

If he was, then he succeeded. She came, her legs barely able to support her as her body pulsed around his fingers as wave after wave of pleasure washed over her. But Kris did not relent. Not until she was completely spent.

As she slumped back against the tree, he rose to his feet, his eyes locked on her face as he stripped his shirt from his back and stood there before her like a bronzed god. How could this man belong to her?

But the look in his eyes begged the same question, how could this woman belong to him?

"I think we need to lose the rest of your clothes," he growled.

Cassia nodded, breathless, as Kris reached for the hem of her shirt, pulling it up and over her head in one fluid motion. Her bra followed quickly, leaving her completely bare beneath the dappled sunlight filtering through the trees. The soft forest breeze

caressed her skin, raising goosebumps across her exposed flesh.

“You’re the most beautiful thing I’ve ever seen,” Kris whispered, his voice thick with emotion. His hands cupped her breasts reverently, thumbs brushing over her nipples until they hardened beneath his touch.

Cassia reached for him, drawing him closer until their bodies pressed together, skin to skin. The heat of him against her was intoxicating, his hard planes against her soft curves creating a delicious friction that made her gasp.

“I need you inside me,” she murmured against his lips. “Now, Kris.”

With surprising gentleness for a man of his size, Kris lifted her, his powerful hands gripping her thighs as he guided her legs around his waist. The rough bark of the tree supported her back as he positioned himself at her entrance, pausing to meet her gaze.

He slid into her impossibly slowly. She could feel every inch of him stretching her, filling her in the most exquisite way. Her head fell back against the tree as she gasped, overwhelmed by the sensation of completeness that washed over her.

“Look at me,” Kris commanded softly, his voice a rough whisper. “I want to see your eyes when I make love to you.”

Cassia obeyed, lifting her gaze to meet his. In that moment, she felt the connection between them—primal, unbreakable, destined. This wasn’t just physical; it was a claiming, a bonding that went deeper than flesh.

He began to move, each thrust deliberate and measured. The sounds of the forest faded away until all Cassia could hear was their mingled breathing, the soft sounds of pleasure escaping her lips, and Kris’s occasional growl of approval when she tightened around him.

“You’re perfect,” he murmured against her neck, his breath hot against her skin. “So perfect for me. My mate.”

Those wordsmy matesent a shiver of pleasure down her spine. She’d never dreamed this kind of relationship was real, and certainly not for her.

But here he was.

As he thrust into her, she explored his body, touching, stroking, teasing, and learning what he liked. When she sucked his earlobe, he thrust deeper. When she raked her nails down his back, his pace quickened. When she reached between them to touch where they were joined, he growled again, a sound so primal and possessive it sent fresh waves of desire coursing through her.

She was not the only one who liked to explore. Kris changed the angle of his hips, finding a new spot inside her that made her gasp and clutch at his shoulders. With a smile of devilish satisfaction, he lowered his head, cupped her breast in his hand, and sucked the hardened nipple into his mouth.

Cassia bit down on his shoulder to stop herself from crying out as he swirled his tongue around her sensitive peak. The dual sensations of his mouth on her breast and his hardness filling her completely were almost too much to bear.

Their bodies moved together in perfect rhythm now, as if they’d been lovers for years. Each thrust brought her closer to the edge, the coil of pleasure tightening low in her belly. Kris seemed to sense it, his movements becoming more urgent, more demanding. The tension that had been building inside her shattered, and Cassia cried out as pleasure crashed through her in powerful waves. Her inner muscles clenched around him rhythmically, drawing him deeper.

Kris followed her over the edge moments later, burying his face in her neck as he

growled her name. She felt the hot pulse of his release inside her, binding them together in the most intimate way possible.

For several long moments, they remained joined, their ragged breathing gradually slowing as they held each other. She didn't want this moment to end.

Didn't want to lose this feeling of closeness. As if she were part of something bigger than herself.

"Are you okay?" he murmured as he wrapped his arms around her and lowered her feet to the ground.

"Yes," she whispered, althoughokaydid not begin to describe how she felt. She had been claimed in the most primal way, and she felt...transformed.

Her body was still humming with the aftermath of their lovemaking, her skin hypersensitive where it touched his. With trembling hands, she cupped his face and pressed her lips to his.

"Are you sure?" he whispered as he brushed a stray tear from her cheek.

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“Yes. Although, I think ‘okay’ might be the understatement of the century,” she added with a soft laugh. “That was...incredible.”

“I am a man of many talents,” he said with a smile that made her insides turn to liquid fire.

She wanted him to make love to her all over again. And again. And again.

“I’ve noticed,” Cassia replied, running her hands over his broad shoulders. The cooler air under the trees finally registered on her naked skin, raising goosebumps along her arms. Kris noticed immediately, ever attentive to her needs.

“We should get dressed before you catch a cold,” he said, though reluctance colored his voice. He bent to retrieve their scattered clothing from the forest floor.

As they dressed in comfortable silence, Cassia couldn’t help stealing glances at him—the way the muscles in his back flexed as he pulled on his shirt, how his hands, so powerful yet gentle, fastened his belt. Everything about him called to something deep within her.

When they were both clothed again, Kris pulled her into his arms, pressing a tender kiss to her forehead. “Hungry?”

“You’re thinking of food at a time like this?” she asked incredulously.

“I think that I’m going to need all my strength if I am going to worship your body all night,” he said as he spread the picnic blanket on the ground and held out his hand to

her. Cassia felt her face flush at his words. She took his hand and settled onto the blanket, her body still humming with pleasure.

“All night, huh?” she teased, though the thought sent delicious shivers through her. “Pretty confident, aren’t you?”

“All night, every night, for the rest of our lives,” Kris said as he kissed the back of her hand and then reached inside the picnic basket. “Sandwich?”

“Thank you.” She laughed as she took one and Kris retrieved the wine glasses and refilled them.

“Another toast.” Kris touched his glass to hers. “To food, wine, and love. The perfect ingredients for life.”

“Food, wine, and love,” she agreed.

“Although not necessarily in that order,” he added.

No. Love would always come first.

## Chapter Twenty-One – Kris

Kris glanced around the restaurant, unable to suppress a rush of pride as he took in the soft glow of the polished wooden tables, the artfully folded napkins, and the subtle gleam of silverware. Golden late-summer sunlight streamed through the large windows, bathing everything in warmth and promise. Months of hard labor, countless late nights, and endless conversations had brought them to this moment—the restaurant’s trial launch.

And you forgot to mention that this place was responsible for bringing us and our

mate together,his bear added happily.

Kris smiled inwardly.How could I ever forget?

And Finn, of course,his bear added.

We still owe him one.Kris scanned the restaurant, his gaze resting on his brother who was talking to their chef, Manfred.

We certainly do,his bear agreed.

His smile widened as his gaze settled on Cassia. She was standing near the tasting counter, head bent in deep conversation with Philip, pointing out something on her clipboard. His heart skipped like it always did whenever he caught sight of her. Even now, several months after that unforgettable afternoon by the stream—when they'd finally claimed each other as mates—just seeing her could knock the breath from his lungs.

She glanced up, as if sensing his stare, and their eyes met across the room. A soft smile curved her lips, one filled with shared secrets and love. Kris's bear practically purred with satisfaction.

“Hey, lovebirds,” Finn teased, strolling up with a knowing smirk. “Plenty of time for mooning over each other later. Right now, we’ve got people to impress.”

“Don’t worry,” Kris said, slapping his brother lightly on the shoulder. “We’re ready.”

And they were ready, he was sure of it. But he couldn't deny the nervous energy simmering beneath his confidence. Food critics and wine connoisseurs had been invited to dine at the restaurant tonight, and their reactions would set the tone for the restaurant's future.



It'll be fine,his bear told him.

But Kris could not fight the fear that something could still go wrong.

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“Who would have thought it all started with an ad for a mail-order mate?” Finn asked.

“Who would?” Kris glanced around at his family. His mom and dad stood chatting quietly, Leanne adjusting Hugo’s tie affectionately. Philip fussed over a perfectly arranged centerpiece, and Alfie kept sneaking bites of appetizers when he thought no one was watching.

“But then it doesn’t matter where things start,” Finn began. “It’s where they end that is important.”

“Wise words,” Kris said as his gaze drifted back to Cassia once more. None of this would have happened without her. She had brought fresh ideas, contagious energy, and undeniable passion to the Thornberg Vineyard. But more importantly, she’d brought love, warmth, and joy into his life, filling spaces inside of him he hadn’t even realized were empty.

Leanne caught his eye as she came out of the kitchen, holding a tray of filled wine glasses. “I think we need a toast,” she announced, and everyone gathered around.

“There you are.” Kris wrapped his arm around Cassia’s waist, pulling her close.

“Here I am,” she replied, looking up at him with open adoration. He often wondered what she saw in him. But then again, it was best not to question fate.

Or your mate, his bear said happily as they all took a glass of wine.

“To Thornberg Vineyard and our new restaurant,” Leanne said, lifting her glass.

“To family,” Hugo added, raising his glass with a soft smile.

“And,” Kris spoke up, tightening his grip on Cassia, “to Cassia, for helping make our dream a reality. We couldn’t have done it without you.”

Everyone cheered, glasses clinking. Cassia’s cheeks flushed beautifully as she leaned into him. “It was all of us,” she said modestly, but he saw the glimmer of pride and happiness in her eyes.

It’s time, his bear said.

I have never been so nervous, Kris said as he reached discreetly into his jacket pocket, fingers brushing against the velvet box he’d carried for weeks. Now was the moment, surrounded by his family and their shared dream.

He stepped back slightly, drawing everyone’s attention. “Actually, there’s one more thing.”

Cassia’s brow furrowed slightly in confusion as he slowly sank to one knee, heart thudding wildly in his chest. Silence fell around them.

“Cassia,” he began, opening the box to reveal the glittering diamond ring nestled inside. “You’re my mate, my partner, my everything. I can’t imagine a single day without you by my side. Will you marry me?”

Cassia’s eyes welled up with tears, a shaky smile spreading across her face. “Yes,” she murmured, then more loudly, “Yes, Kris. A thousand times, yes!”

He slipped the ring onto her finger, relief and joy flooding inside him. Cheers

erupted, applause filled the room, and Cassia flung her arms around his neck. Their kiss was sweet, lingering, and full of promise.

Finally!his bear shouted triumphantly, practically doing backflips.About time we made it official!

When they finally broke apart, Leanne hugged Cassia, tears bright in her eyes, while Hugo proudly clapped Kris's shoulder.

"I am so jealous." Nero hugged Kris, patting him on the back.

"You'll time will come," Kris said as he hugged him back.

"Congratulations." Stanley raised his glass to the couple.

"How long have you been planning this?" Cassia asked after the congratulations were over and they finally managed to snatch a couple of minutes alone.

"My whole life," Kris said, stroking her back as she admired the ring. She looked stunning in a midnight blue gown, with her hair pulled up into a sophisticated bun.

"You've had this ring your whole life?" she asked with an arched eyebrow.

"No, the ring I have had for three weeks. I saw it in a jewelry store when I went to pick up some supplies from Bear Bluff. As soon as I saw it, I knew it was the ring I wanted to put on your finger."

"You are a man of good taste." Cassia slipped her arms around his neck, and he lowered his head and kissed her.

"All I know is I am the luckiest man alive to have you by my side," he murmured

against her ear.

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“Can you believe we did it?” Cassia said, looking around the restaurant.

“Yes,” Kris said. “We worked hard. We committed to our goal...”

“We did, didn’t we?” She laughed as she drank the last of her wine.

But then Kris stiffened. “They’re coming.”

“Shifters make such good early warning systems,” Cassia said as she took his glass and headed toward the kitchen.

Hugo held up his hands. He must have sensed the approaching vehicle, too. “Okay, celebration time later! Now we need to get back to work. Guests will be here soon!”

Everyone sprang into action, each heading to their tasks. Kris positioned himself near the front entrance, taking a deep, steadying breath. Soon, cars began pulling into the parking lot, and the guests entered the restaurant with smiles of anticipation. Kris greeted them warmly, introducing himself, proud of how impressed they seemed by the restaurant’s intimate, inviting atmosphere.

“It’s happening,” Cassia said as she came to join him.

“I just hope everyone enjoys their evening,” Kris said. Cassia had used all her best contacts to invite a slew of influential food critics and journalists. This evening might make or break the restaurant’s reputation.

“Relax, our chef is the best. The ingredients are fresh and flavorful. It’s going to be

okay.” She reached for his hand and squeezed it.

Then Cassia stiffened suddenly next to him, her eyes wide with shock as one particular couple approached. A smartly dressed woman, Kris recognized her as a renowned food critic, with a handsome man with hawkish features on her arm.

“Who is it?” Kris leaned down and hissed into Cassia’s ear.

“Dante,” Cassia murmured, so low he thought he’d misheard her. But the tension threading through her body told him otherwise.

So this was him. Dante. Cassia’s ex-fiancé. The man who’d shattered her heart.

Kris’s bear let out a low, dangerous growl, his muscles tensing instinctively. What is he doing here?

Nothing good, Kris replied as Dante smiled, his eyes cold as he extended his hand to Cassia.

Cassia hesitated for a second before she slipped her hand into his. “Dante.”

“Cassia,” Dante said smoothly, lifting her hand to his lips, his eyes locked onto hers. “It’s been too long.” His gaze flickered downward to the ring, his finger tracing the edge of the diamonds. “This is new.”

Cassia quickly pulled her hand away, glancing nervously at Kris. “I didn’t expect to see you here,” Cassia said stiffly, professional but guarded. “I’m certain I would recall sending you an invitation.”

“And there was I thinking it must have been lost in the post,” Dante replied coolly, glancing around the restaurant with a smug tilt of his lips. “But thankfully, Molly

here... You do remember Molly, don't you?"

"I do. Hello, Molly," Cassia said with a nod to the other woman.

"Cassia," Molly nodded. "Dante would not stop pestering me to be my plus one once he heard I had an invitation." Molly glanced at Dante. "But he has promised to be on his best behavior,"

"Did you check if he knows what that means?" Cassia asked with an arched eyebrow.

"No, I did not," Molly said and then kissed Cassia on each cheek. "But I promise to neuter him if he causes trouble. The place does look fabulous."

"I hope you enjoy your evening," Cassia said magnanimously.

Anger bubbled under Kris's skin, but he forced himself to remain calm, his arm tightening around Cassia's waist protectively. Kris said tersely, "Enjoy your evening."

"It speaks!" Dante replied, eyes glinting as he followed his companion into the dining area.

Cassia released a shaky breath, looking up at Kris with anxious eyes. "I didn't know..."

"I know," Kris reassured gently, brushing a thumb over her cheek. "Don't worry, he cannot spoil the evening."

Because if he dares try, I will tear his head from his shoulders, his bear ground out.



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Hopefully, there will be no need for violence,Kris told his bear.

Cassia nodded, but when she cast a nervous glance in Dante's direction, he knew she was not so sure.

However, the evening progressed smoothly, with compliments and appreciative murmurs from guests, easing Kris's earlier tension. Cassia moved confidently among the tables, her genuine warmth and knowledge of the Thornberg wine and delicious dishes winning smiles from even the harshest critics. But Kris couldn't help noticing how Dante's eyes followed her, especially lingering on the sparkling ring adorning her finger.

Our ring,his bear growled.Our mate.

Exactly, she is ours, not his,Kris said as he tried to calm his bear.

Kris circled the dining room, making sure everything was running smoothly. He stopped to chat with several influential guests, accepting their compliments with humble gratitude. But his attention kept drifting back to Dante's table, where the man seemed more interested in watching Cassia than the food or wine.

He's trouble,Kris's bear warned.

"Everything okay?" Philip appeared at his side, sensing his tension.

"Just keeping an eye on an unwelcome guest," Kris murmured, nodding subtly toward Dante.

Philip followed his gaze, eyes narrowing. “That’s him? The ex?”

“The very same.”

Philip let out a low whistle. “Want me to accidentally spill something on him? I’ve got a nice red wine that would look fantastic on that pretentious white shirt.”

Despite his mood, Kris chuckled. “Tempting, but let’s save that for Plan B.”

He’s watching her like she’s still his, his bear growled. We should make it clear she isn’t.

I think the ring on her finger makes that pretty clear, Kris replied, though he shared his bear’s irritation.

As if on cue, Dante rose from his table, smoothly excusing himself from his companion. Kris watched as he made his way toward the bar where Cassia was arranging a flight of wine samples for another table.

“I’ll handle this,” Kris told Philip, his voice steady despite the protective surge rising within him.

He intercepted Dante before he could reach Cassia, positioning himself casually but deliberately in the man’s path.

“Enjoying your meal?” Kris asked, his tone pleasant but cool.

Dante’s smile didn’t reach his eyes. “Immensely. Though I must say, I’m more surprised by the company than the cuisine.” He glanced over Kris’s shoulder at Cassia. “She’s certainly moved on quickly.”

Kris's bear bristled, but he maintained his composure. "Sometimes people recognize what they truly deserve."

"And what would that be? Life in a backwater town playing hostess at a vineyard?" Dante chuckled. "I knew Cassia when she had real ambition."

"The thing is, I don't think you ever truly knew the real Cassia," Kris replied evenly.

Dante's smile tightened. "Is that so? I shared her bed for two years. I think I know her better than you ever could."

It took every ounce of Kris's willpower not to let his bear take over right then and there. The primal part of him wanted nothing more than to show this arrogant human exactly what happened when someone threatened a shifter's mate.

"You may have shared her bed," Kris said quietly, his voice dropping to a dangerous register, "but I share her soul." He stepped closer, using his height advantage. "And I'd appreciate it if you kept your distance for the rest of the evening."

"Are you threatening me?" Dante asked, his voice light but his eyes hard.

"Just setting boundaries," Kris replied smoothly. "As the owner of this establishment and Cassia's fiancé."

Dante's gaze flickered to Cassia, who was now watching their interaction with concern. "Fiancé?" he repeated, tasting the word like it was bitter on his tongue. "Been there. Done that."

"You betrayed her trust. That's a mistake I'll never make," Kris said, his voice low and controlled despite the rage bubbling beneath his skin.

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“Kris, can you help me with the wine?” Philip said as he approached.

“Sure,” Kris said, and turned on his heel and walked toward Philip as he headed to the bar.

But Dante was not done. The brittle mask of politeness vanished as he followed Kris to the bar. His voice dropped dangerously low, almost a hiss as he leaned forward and said, “If you really want this restaurant to succeed, you’ll end things with Cassia. It’s the price you pay—you can’t have it all.”

Kris glared at him, his fists tightening at his sides. “That’s not how this works.”

Dante sneered, stepping closer. “Trust me, it is. You think people will take you seriously if I write a scathing review?”

Rage surged inside Kris, his bear roaring fiercely. But he kept his voice low, eyes flashing dangerously. “If you think you can threaten me into leaving her, you’re even dumber than I thought.”

“Careful, Thornberg,” Dante drawled, smoothing his jacket casually. “I always get what I want.”

Kris straightened, confidence radiating from every fiber of his being. “Not this time. Not Cassia. She’s mine—and I will always choose her.”

Dante’s eyes narrowed sharply, anger burning beneath the composed surface. But Kris turned away dismissively, refusing to let Dante see any hint of fear or doubt. His

heart belonged to Cassia, fully and unconditionally.

Nicely handled, his bear said approvingly, his tone deeply protective. He's no match for us.

Exactly, Kris agreed.

But deep down, he was afraid of what Dante might do. He was the kind of man used to getting his own way, no matter what.

My offer of tearing his head from his shoulders still stands, his bear said.

And Kris had to admit it was a very tempting offer. Very tempting indeed.

## Chapter Twenty-Two – Cassia

Cassia stood frozen near the kitchen doorway, her stomach in knots, barely able to believe what she had overheard.

How dare he!

The audacity of Dante to show up here—on the night of their restaurant's opening, no less—was one thing. But to try to manipulate Kris made her blood boil.

Who the hell does he think he is?

Her fists clenched at her sides as she watched Dante return to his table, smoothly sliding into his seat next to the elegant food critic, who seemed oblivious to his scheming. How could he sit there laughing, drinking Thornberg wine, eating their fine food, all while plotting their downfall in the most callous way?

How could he sit there, carefree and charming, as if he hadn't just threatened everything she and Kris had worked so hard to build? The way he could switch between faces so effortlessly sickened her.

How could she ever have been in love with this man? How could she ever have believed he was her future? She'd been so blind!

Cassia bit her bottom lip, swallowing down a wave of bitter anger that threatened to choke her. Her gaze swept around the softly lit restaurant, where Kris's family moved between the tables, talking to their guests. Guests who were smiling and savoring dishes she'd poured hours into perfecting alongside the chef. Everyone was relaxed, enjoying themselves, completely unaware of the poisonous threat Dante had brought with him.

A threat aimed at her, aimed at Kris.

No, she corrected herself bitterly. A threat aimed at destroying not only their dreams of opening the restaurant but also his family's legacy. The Thornbergs had put their hearts, souls, and livelihoods into this vineyard, this restaurant—and Dante thought nothing of tearing it down, just to win her back.

He'd almost ruined her life once; there was no way in hell she'd let him do it again.

She watched, her pulse quickening, as Dante casually snapped a photo of his food, no doubt preparing to post some arrogant, veiled critique. He was a repulsive excuse for a man.

But as he raised his phone, inspiration sparked inside her.

An idea—a perfect trap.

She turned sharply and walked into the kitchen, taking deep breaths to steady herself. The chef glanced up, brow furrowing. “Cassia, everything okay?”

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“Yes, everything’s fine,” she lied smoothly, forcing herself to smile. “You’ve got everything under control?”

“Of course,” Manfred said confidently. “Everything’s going great. Relax.”

She managed a nod, backing away just as Kris stepped into the kitchen, concern darkening his face. She felt a sudden ache of tenderness for this man—this incredible man who’d shown her the meaning of true love, of trust. His eyes searched hers deeply, clearly troubled, yet he said nothing.

Protecting her. Kris was willing to sacrifice his family’s dream to shield her from Dante’s manipulations. Love swelled in her chest, fierce and certain, sharpening her resolve.

She would protect Kris—and this restaurant—in return.

Cassia straightened her shoulders and grabbed the plates designated for Dante’s table. With every confident step forward, her heartbeat steadied. She wore a serene smile on her face, mirroring the one she had perfected during countless dinners with Dante, back when she’d thought he was her future.

“Cassia,” Dante said, voice silken and overly familiar as she placed the dishes down on the table. His eyes drifted lazily down her body, shamelessly possessive. “It’s wonderful to see you. Perhaps we can talk properly later?”

She let her smile widen. “It would be good to catch up.”



He leaned back, smug satisfaction written all over his face. “I’ll look forward to it.”

Without another word, she walked away, feeling his gaze trailing her as she headed deliberately toward the cloakroom. She knew Dante wouldn’t resist the bait for long.

Sure enough, seconds later, footsteps followed behind her, echoing softly across the polished wooden floor. Cassia paused, pretending to adjust the menus stacked neatly beside the coats.

“What’s a nice girl like you doing in a place like this?” Dante drawled, approaching her with the practiced swagger she once found charming. Now it only filled her with disgust.

Cassia turned slowly, eyes cool and calm. “Working,” she replied evenly. “Building a life.”

Dante laughed condescendingly, shaking his head with mock pity. “This isn’t a life, Cassia. You’re living in the back of beyond. You belong with me—in the city, where real things happen.”

She lifted her chin defiantly. “I’m happy here. Truly happy for the first time in my life.”

A shadow passed over Dante’s handsome features, and his eyes darkened dangerously. “We were happy.”

Cassia shook her head. “Not like this.”

He stepped forward, his voice lowering possessively. “You belong with me, Cassia. Not here.”

“You’re wrong,” she whispered, her voice unwavering.

Dante sneered, leaning in so close she could feel his breath on her cheek. “You don’t know what’s good for you. That’s why I’m here. Watching out for you. You’re lucky you have me.”

Cassia snorted sharply, her anger surging again. “You’re so full of shit.”

“Really?” Dante’s eyes glinted cruelly. “Then why is your new boyfriend ready to give you up to save this pathetic little place?”

“Save this place?” she repeated, feigning confusion, while such anger filled her, she could barely contain it.

“Yes,” Dante hissed, his tone dripping poison. “I told him if he wants the restaurant to survive, he’ll dump you. And guess what? He agreed.”

Cassia shook her head slowly, her breath coming in shallow, furious gasps. “He would never do that!”

Dante’s confidence was unshakeable. “Oh, but he did, Cassia. Poor you. All this work, all this passion wasted. It’s such a pity, really. This place has...potential.”

“You’d really lie about the restaurant just for your own ego?” she asked, fighting to keep her voice even.

He reached out suddenly, cupping her cheek in his palm. It took everything she had not to slap his smug face. “Cassia, people believe what they want to believe. And, darling, they believe me.” He leaned in even closer, his voice an icy whisper. “I’m God in the culinary world—and God wants you back. By my side, where you belong.”

She jerked her face away, eyes blazing. “I don’t think so.”

With that, she spun around, forcing herself to walk calmly from the cloakroom. Her entire body was shaking, adrenaline making her pulse pound painfully. She collided with a solid chest, strong arms instantly wrapping around her.

Kris.

“What’s wrong?” he asked urgently, holding her against him where she belonged. The warmth of his body instantly calmed the storm raging inside her.

She raised her face to meet his worried gaze. “I overheard your conversation with Dante,” she admitted, heart squeezing at the raw pain flashing briefly across Kris’s face.

He immediately cupped her face so tenderly that tears stung her eyes. “Cassia, I would never give you up. Not for him, not for anyone. We’re mates. Soulmates...you know that, right?”

She took a steadying breath, drawing strength from his unwavering gaze. “I know. And that’s why I laid a trap for Dante and his ego.”

Kris frowned slightly, confusion mixing with cautious hope. “What do you mean?”

Cassia reached into her pocket, pulling out her phone with trembling fingers. “He followed me, and I recorded our conversation.” She held his gaze and let out a long, shuddering breath. “He admitted he would use his influence and lie to destroy this restaurant’s reputation if you didn’t leave me. It’s all here, Kris.”

His expression shifted rapidly from shock to disbelief and finally fierce admiration. He listened closely as she pressed play, Dante’s cold, arrogant threats echoing clearly from the speaker.

“You recorded him?” Kris asked with a small laugh. “You are a smart woman, Cassia.”

Cassia nodded firmly, feeling lighter than she had in years. “I couldn’t let him hurt you, hurt your family. I won’t let him control our lives.”

Kris smiled with pride, and he leaned in, capturing her lips in a sweet, tender kiss. “You’re incredible, Cassia.”

“Just protecting what I love,” she whispered, resting her head on his chest.

“And what do you plan to do with that recording?” he asked quietly.

Cassia’s lips curved in a triumphant smile. “I could upload it online. Let everyone see the fraud he really is.”

He cupped her chin in his hand and tilted her face up to his. “Or?”

Cassia considered this for a long moment. She had it in her power to destroy Dante, just as he had thought to destroy them. “Or...I could give him a chance to leave quietly. Stop threatening us. Stop interfering with our lives.”

Kris studied her face, his dark eyes searching hers. “You’d do that? After everything he’s done?”

She nodded slowly. “Not for him. For us. I don’t want his shadow hanging over our opening night. I don’t want to think about him ever again.” She took a deep breath. “But he needs to understand there are consequences if he tries anything else.”

Kris’s lips curved into a slow smile that made her heart flutter. “Have I mentioned lately how remarkable you are?”

“Not in the last hour,” she teased.

His large hand enveloped hers, thumb stroking her palm. “You’re remarkable, Cassia Harper.” And then he lowered his head and kissed her.

And what a kiss it was. Tender, passionate, filled with promise. Cassia melted against him, her worries momentarily forgotten. When they finally pulled apart, she was more certain than ever that this was the right move. A way to get rid of Dante for good.

They walked back into the dining room together, shoulders brushing. Dante was already seated at his table again, looking entirely too pleased with himself as he swirled the wine in his glass.

Cassia approached with Kris at her side, her spine straight as steel. “Dante,” she said quietly. “A word outside, please?”

Dante’s eyes flitted between them, his smug expression faltering slightly at their united front. For a heartbeat, he hesitated, then recovered with practiced ease, setting down his wine glass with deliberate slowness. “Do you interrupt all your guests while they are eating?” he asked smoothly.

“Only the ones who try to ruin us,” Cassia replied, her tone equally smooth.

“Have you been a naughty boy again, Dante?” Molly asked as she set her fork down on her plate. “I wondered why you were so insistent on coming here when you had treated Cassia so abominably.”

“You can hear for yourself,” Cassia said, with a smile, not wanting the other guests to overhear.

“Cassia,” Dante hissed as she took her phone out of her pocket and pressed play. He paled as he heard himself start speaking. “I don’t think we need to share our private conversation.”

“That is exactly what I will do if you ever threaten us again,” Cassia said, placing a hand on the back of his chair and squeezing it tightly as she fought to keep her composure.

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“Now, I am intrigued,” Molly said, a steely glint in her eye.

“It’s nothing,” Dante said with a wave of his hand. “Just two old friends catching up.”

Cassia leaned down and hissed, “We are not friends.” Then she slipped her hand into Kris’s, who had stood next to her steadfast and true, and turned her back on Dante.

For he was her past and Kris was her future.

“You were incredible, as always,” Kris said as he circled his arm around her waist and pulled her into his arms once they were out of sight of their guests.

“No, we are incredible,” she replied, confidence shining through her smile. “And now the world will see that, too. With this restaurant. The wine. Your family.”

As Kris lowered his head and kissed her, she knew one thing for certain.

Dante’s hold over her was broken.

Her future was here, at Thornberg Vineyard, in Kris’s loving arms.

This mail-order mate was exactly where she belonged.

## Epilogue

Kris gently swirled the wine in his glass, watching the rich ruby liquid catch the moonlight filtering in through the tasting room windows. The scent filled his senses,



notes of ripe berries, a whisper of spice, and a lingering sweetness reminiscent of the very woman he'd created it for.

Cassia.

She had changed his life in so many ways. How had he lived before her? She was his mate, his partner, his best friend, the heart of his entire world.

She owns our heart,his bear said.

And our soul,Kris added.

He lifted the glass and took a slow, measured sip. Instantly, memories flooded his mind, carried on the delicate notes of the wine. Their first meeting, that accidental ad, Finn's innocent mistake. Which now felt like the most beautiful act of fate imaginable.

She'll love it,his bear said confidently.

Kris took another critical sip.You think so?

Of course,his bear replied with a soft growl.It tastes exactly how she makes us feel.

Kris chuckled. His bear was right. Cassia's warmth, her strength, her playful charm, and the undeniable fire of their bond were woven into every drop. He'd named this special vintageCassia's Heart. It was a declaration of his love for his mate.

Your version of shouting it from the highest mountain peak,his bear said.

Something like that,Kris agreed, his thoughts consumed by the woman he loved.

“Kris?” Cassia’s voice drifted softly from the doorway, pulling him from his musings. He turned, and his heart still skipped at the sight of her, silhouetted against the moonlight.

“I’m right here,” he called, setting the glass down.

“What are you doing in here all alone?” she asked lightly, slipping her hand into his. He closed his eyes for a moment, reveling in the current of recognition that flowed between them.

“I’ve been working on something,” he confessed. “Something special.”

Cassia raised an eyebrow, teasing. “You have been in here blending wine when you should have been in bed with me?”

He laughed, guiding her closer to the tasting table, closer to him. “Wait until you taste it.” He reached for a second glass, carefully pouring her a glass of Cassia’s Heart. “This one is unique.”

“Unique how?” She took the glass he offered and raised it to her nose, her eyes closing as she breathed in the aroma.

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“Unique, because it’s blended with everything that reminds me of you,” he said, suddenly shy.

What if she doesn’t like it?

Stop overthinking it,his bear warned him.

“Reminds you of me?” she asked as she took a sip.

“Your favorite notes, your warmth, your strength...and the sweetness that you have brought into my life.”

“Oh, Kris,” she whispered, pressing a gentle hand to her chest. “This is...incredible.”

He stepped closer, cupping her cheek tenderly. “I’m glad you think so. I named itCassia’s Heart.I blended it with every moment we’ve shared, every dream we’ve built together, and every hope I have for our future.”

She set the glass down carefully, eyes glistening with joyful tears. “You really know how to make a woman feel special, Kris Thornberg.”

He laughed softly, sliding his arms around her waist and drawing her close. “Only you, Cassia. Always and forever, only you.”

Forever sounds good.Hisbear sighed happily.

She tilted her head and smiled up at him. “Only me.”

He lowered his head and captured her lips. A small moan escaped her lips as the kiss deepened and his need for her threatened to overwhelm him.

In one fluid movement, he scooped her up in his arms and carried her to the workbench where he had been blending the wine.

Gently, he set her down on the smooth wooden surface, her eyes dark with desire as she gazed up at him. The moonlight streamed through the windows, casting silver patterns across her skin as he inched her knees apart and nestled his body between her thighs.

“I should be scandalized,” she whispered against his lips, her fingers tangling in his hair. “Wine making is serious business, Mr. Thornberg.”

“Very serious,” he agreed, his voice husky as he trailed kisses down her neck. “And what could be more serious than showing my mate exactly how much I adore her?”

She laughed, the sound spurring him on. “When you put it that way...”

He slipped his hand under her shirt, and cupped her breast in his hand, his thumb brushing over her taut nipple through the fabric of her bra.

“I love you,” Cassia breathed, arching into his touch. “More than I ever thought possible.”

The confession, though he’d heard it before, still hit him with the force of a revelation. This woman—this incredible, smart, beautiful woman—had chosen him. Had trusted him with her heart after it had been so carelessly broken.

“I will spend the rest of my life earning that love,” he promised. “Every day, Cassia.”

“You already have it, all of it. No earning required,” she whispered.

Kris lifted her hand to his lips, kissing her palm with reverence. “Then I’ll spend my life making sure you never regret giving it to me.”

A teasing smile curved her lips. “Well, you’re off to a good start with this wine.”

He laughed, the sound echoing through the tasting room. “Just wait until you see what else I have planned.”

“Oh?” Her eyebrow arched playfully. “Care to share these plans, Mr. Thornberg?”

Instead of answering, he pushed the cup of her bra down and lowered his head, sucking her taut nipple into his mouth. She gasped and wrapped her legs around his waist, drawing him closer as a soft moan escaped her lips.

“I’ll take that as approval,” he murmured against her skin.

“Enthusiastic approval,” she confirmed breathlessly as he circled his tongue around her nipple. She pressed herself closer, inching her body up and down, rubbing against his hardness.

With a growl, he let go of her and stripped off his clothes, standing before her naked, like some primal beast.

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Then he stepped forward and hooked his fingers into the waistband of her pants, she lifted her bottom off the bench allowing him to slowly pull them down over her thighs. When her pants were discarded on the floor beside his, he gazed down at her, drinking in the sight of her nearly naked body bathed in moonlight.

But he did not simply want to drink her in, he wanted to taste her. He pressed his hands against her thighs, gently spreading them as he dropped to his knees. Her eyes widened with anticipation as she watched him, her chest rising and falling with quickened breaths.

“Kris,” she whispered, her voice holding a tone of desperation that made him harden further. He longed to bury himself inside her, but not yet...

With reverent hands, he hooked his fingers into her lace panties and slid them down her legs, adding them to the growing pile of discarded clothing. Then he leaned forward, pressing soft kisses to her inner thighs, working his way slowly upward until his mouth found her center.

Cassia gasped, her back arching as his tongue swept over her most sensitive spot. Her fingers threaded through his hair, urging him closer as he worshipped her with his mouth. The taste of her was intoxicating, sweeter than any wine he'd ever created.

“Kris,” she moaned, her thighs trembling as he slipped two fingers inside her.

Her hips rocked against his hand and mouth, seeking more of the pleasure only he could give her. He felt her inner walls clench around his fingers as he stroked that special spot inside her, his tongue circling her sensitive bundle of nerves with

practiced movements he knew drove her wild.

“Oh,” she gasped, her body tensing.

He increased his tempo, growling with satisfaction as he brought her to the edge. With a final curl of his fingers and a deliberate flick of his tongue, he pushed her over the precipice. Her body shuddered, her soft cries filling the tasting room as waves of pleasure washed over her. He did not relent, drawing out her climax until she tugged at his hair, urging him upward and with deft hands, he pulled her sweater over her head, and unclasped her bra. He did not want any barrier between them.

“I love you,” he murmured as he stroked her breasts.

Her legs wrapped around his waist, pulling him closer. “Show me,” she challenged, eyes dark with renewed desire.

Kris didn’t need to be told twice. He guided himself into her, his eyes locked with hers as he slowly pushed forward. The sensation of her warmth enveloping him nearly undid him then and there. He paused, breathing deeply, savoring the connection that went beyond the physical.

When he regained his control, he began to move, rocking his hips as he thrust into her. Cassia leaned forward and kissed his chest, her tongue finding his nipple and curling around it. He groaned at the sensation and, for a moment, his pace faltered.

Cassia grazed his nipple with her teeth, knowing full well the effect she had on him. But he also knew the effect he had on her. Slipping his hand between their bodies, he tweaked her nipple, and her inner muscles tightened around him.

“Not fair,” she gasped, as he increased his pace, driving into her with more force, the workbench creaking beneath them.

Kris didn't answer as his mouth replaced his fingers and he flicked his tongue over her taut bud. Cassia dug her fingers into his shoulders, urging him on as her body responded to his every touch. She was close again. He could feel it, the way her inner muscles clenched around him, the way her breathing quickened.

He shifted the angle of his thrusts, hitting that sweet spot inside her that made her gasp his name.

He understood what she needed, increasing his pace as he thrust deeper, harder. The primal connection between them intensified, their bodies moving in perfect synchrony. Kris could feel his own release approaching, a delicious pressure building.

Then she came, her inner walls clenching around him in waves, her body shuddering against his. The sight of her—head thrown back, lips parted, completely lost in pleasure—pushed him over the edge. With a deep groan, he followed her into ecstasy, his release pulsing through him as he held her tightly against him.

“I love you,” he whispered as he slowly regained control of his senses.

“And I love you so very much.” Cassia's arms tightened around him as she nestled her face against his chest.

Kris closed his eyes, breathing her in, savoring every second. Their path hadn't always been smooth, and fate had played some strange tricks to bring them together. But here, now, wrapped in each other's arms, he knew every moment, every challenge had been worth it.

Together, they were the perfect blend.