



A Merry Misfit Christmas (The Twisted Misfits MC #1)

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Category: Fantasy

Description: Paws, Claws, Jaws Welcome to Yukon Bluff, home of the Shifted Misfits MC.

After years spent on the run and living on the outside looking in, a group of shifters form a motorcycle club where the men become a blended family of sorts. Determined to find their place and form a home, they start up several businesses to help their somewhat impoverished community. Their only desire? To finally fit in somewhere. Finding their mates will be a wild, unexpected ride!

Its Christmas time, and when the local foster care organization reaches out, the president of the Misfits offers up one of the members to play Santa Claus for the kids ...

Hes grumpy, surly, and cant believe hes being forced to be around whiny, snotty children when all he wants to do is head into the woods and sulk. Until ... the most delectable scent wafts across his nose, and he realizes his mate is nearby.

But with a chance encounter, an overturned cup of hot cocoa, and his fumbling fingers, shes stomping away from him instead of into his arms. Thats not acceptable. Hes determined to win her heart no matter what it takes, even if that means donning a white beard and shouting ho, ho, ho in front of every member of the club.

A grumpy/sunshine, fated mates, holiday romance with a rowdy bear, and his sweet but sinful Christmas gift.

****Suitable for ages 18+ due to adult language, content, and situations***

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Chapter One

Kodiak

“Fuck, this is going to be a shitty day,” I grumble when the glass carafe to my coffee pot shatters as soon as the coffee begins brewing. It’s a mad scramble to find a towel to toss over the mess as I curse under my breath. If I don’t have at least two mugs before leaving my house, there’s no way I’m going to be able to deal with the bullshit that happens down at the gym the club runs.

Forget it. I’ll just snag something on the way.

Figuring I’ll leave a few minutes earlier than usual, I quickly dress and then head out the door to my bike. It might be winter, but I’m a bear shifter, so I’m always hotblooded. No coat is needed.

Since the roads are clear, I’ll run on two wheels instead of taking my truck. Six inches of snow dumped on us last night, but the city got the plows out early, and I can’t resist the wind on my back or the freedom that calls to me. Always has if I’m honest.

As I travel the mountain roads of Yukon Bluff toward town, I think back to what drew me to the area and how I came to join the MC and grin. Each of our members is a shifter, but what makes us unique, besides the obvious of being different species, is that most of us would be considered predators of one another. But it’s not like that. Usually. I smirk, thinking of a few times when tempers flared.

Spike managed to create what we call a 'found' family. A brotherhood of misfits, so to speak, since most of us left our packs, clowders, murders, or congregations for one reason or another. Usually, it was because we were unwilling to challenge our own flesh and blood for the dominant alpha role, so it was just easier to leave. However, those aren't my stories to tell.

I left because my uncle decided to challenge my father, and after some underhandedness, he killed my father, as well as my mother and siblings. The only reason I survived? I was out sowing my wild oats, so to speak. Thankfully, one of my friends slipped away and found me, so I was able to escape while other friends went into my home and gathered what they could to help.

For six months, I traveled around the country, moving as far from the place I called home as possible. The day Spike found me, I was tired, past hungry, and dehydrated. He took one look at me, shifted into his dragon, and flew me to where he had hunkered down. The place was near Yukon Bluff, incidentally. There, he nursed me back to health and explained his idea to me, which I wholeheartedly embraced, knowing there were others like us who needed a place to belong.

We bought the old ski lodge on a hill that overlooked town as well as the thousand acres that surrounded it, then basically put out the word that any shifters who didn't have a home, who needed a place to belong and fit in, were welcome to join us in Yukon Bluff as we built a new motorcycle club. And that's how Shifted Misfits started. We even have shifters in town who didn't join the club who merely wanted the peace that Yukon Bluff offered to those who were misunderstood. They've become unlikely allies in many ways simply because they keep their eyes and ears open and let one of us know if trouble is coming.

I snicker out loud, the sound reverberating through the mountainside as I remember how hard it was for us to learn to ride when we first began all those years ago. Too fucking stubborn to take the classes offered at the local Harley dealer, we decided

we'd figure it out on our own. Now, however, each of us is more than capable of handling our Harleys regardless of the weather, but there were a few mishaps along the way, that's for damn sure.

"Good times," I mutter, remembering when Spike got so pissed off at his ride, he threw it over the cliff after laying it down for the tenth time in one day. I mean, I'm unsure why he had such an attitude; the fucker has the ability to partially shift his arms and legs, so they're beyond protected when he rides. He just needed to find a way to channel all that hot air. I think he's found it now.

I slow down as I enter the town proper. We may have a good relationship with the local police, but there's no reason for me to fly through town on my bike. Nothing's that important. Well, my coffee, maybe, but that's more for the safety of others, and I don't think our sheriff would appreciate me using that as my explanation for why I'm speeding.

Grinning, I pull in front of the local coffee shop, Beanie's Brew. Best fucking coffee I've ever had, but I know for a fact that their hot cocoa is in high demand as well, especially this time of the year. Beanie, of course, always has both available regardless of whether or not it's about to snow, or the sun is heating up the state.

Once I've shut my girl down, I pocket my key and remove my helmet, hanging it off the handlebar. Something sweet catches my nose on the current of the wind, and I'm instantly sporting a hard-on. It's odd, but I don't understand the reason since it's never happened before. My long strides quickly have me at the door, which I open when I see someone trying to exit at the same time.

Unfortunately, in my effort to help, because the cute woman seems to be struggling, I manage to bump her and watch in absolute horror as the drink she's holding smashes against her sweater.

Her white sweater.

“Fuck. I’m so sorry, Darlin’. Can I get you another drink?” I ask.

“What? No. I think you’ve done quite enough,” she snarls, tossing the empty cup into the trash and storming past me out the door.

I can’t help but watch the swish of her ass as she stomps toward her car. She’s got a curvy figure and the type of bottom that’s round and jiggles with every step. A surge of lust flashes through me before I shrug it off. Just as I’m about to enter through the door, she gives me a frustrated glare. Green eyes flash with wicked, sexy fire.

“Huh. Well, now I’ve ruined her day,” I mutter as I head inside to grab myself some coffee. Looks like I’m going to need Beanie to add a few extra shots because this day is just getting better and better, and I haven’t even dealt with one of the asinine gym-goers yet. At this rate, I may need to go back home and start all over again.

As I wait in line, the scent that’s been teasing my nose since I arrived here, growing stronger ever since I crashed into the pretty redhead, wraps around my soul, and my eyes widen. In an instant, I know what it means.

“Fuck my life. Really? What did I do to piss off the gods?” I grumble. “Of all days to meet my mate, it would be today. Was it a smooth, ‘Hey, you’re mine, wanna get together meeting?’ No, no, it was not. It was a ‘hey, let me spill your drink all over your pretty sweater and ruin it’ kind of disaster.”

“You okay, Kodiak?” Beanie asks, looking at me with a frown on her face. “You’re talking to yourself.”

Great. “Sorry, Beanie. Just crashed into someone and spilled her drink. I need two large coffees, black, but give me a few hits of espresso. Gotta deal with month-end

bullshit today, and my pot gave up the ghost.”

“Oh, the redhead? That was Callie. She’s really sweet. I just hired her to do a job for me here at the shop.”

My curiosity got the better of me. There’s no way I’m passing up this opportunity.

“What kind of work does she do?” I ask, trying not to be too obvious as I gather all the information I can about my mate. I’m going to need everything I can learn in order to turn her opinion of me around. I didn’t leave a good impression the first time we met.

“She’s a professional organizer,” Beanie replies, placing the first coffee on the counter before she starts working on the second one.

I can’t help the chuckle that bursts through. “A what?”

“They’re all the rage these days,” Beanie says, handing me the second coffee before she heads to the cash register. “I just think it’ll help me with respect to my inventory. Plus, she claims the aesthetics or something like that will promote feelings of calm.”

“Sounds like a bunch of bullshit to me, Beanie,” I retort, handing her a twenty. “Keep the change. It’s getting to be that time of the year.”

“Thanks, Kodiak.”

“Thank you , Beanie,” I state before I head out to my bike so I can get to the gym.

As my ass plants on my seat, I think about what Beanie told me. A professional organizer? How is that a job? I shake my head before pulling on my helmet and firing up my ride, heading to work.

The gym is packed when I arrive. It's common to see the lot full on most days, but with the snow, I thought fewer members would show up. Not the case today. I circle around to the back and park in the designated employee lot, specifically the space next to Peanut. Since we own the gym, we painted our spaces so no one else will park in them. Both say manager in white.

I don't want anyone to hit my Harley or ding it like what happened at the damn grocery store a few months ago, so I get pissed if anyone parks close. Just thinking about that incident gets my blood heated. Being on two wheels instead of four doesn't mean I don't have as much right on the road. Peanut understands this, and we both like the designated spots. Plus, it's our fuckin' gym.

I've chugged the first coffee as I stand in the cold, letting the caffeine hit my stomach, and the warmth seep into my body. The second is in my hand in a flash. I gulp it down, too, noting that it's still hot, but nothing I can't handle.

I head inside, stopping at my locker to grab my gym bag. I need to change and get in a workout because this restless feeling in my body won't go away. It's gotten worse in the time since I left Beanie's Brew. I try not to think about the reason and fail.

Callie, the redhead. My mate.

Thinking about how I spilled her drink all over the front of her sweater has me amped up, and I snarl as I change, going straight to the treadmill where I push my body for forty-five minutes. It doesn't help. I move to the punching bag and pull on my boxing gloves. I'm getting a good rhythm going until her face appears in my mind. Those big green eyes. Pillow-soft, kissable lips. The bag pops out of sync and bounces off my chin.

Fuck.

I rip off the gloves and toss them on the floor, deciding I should shower. Maybe the hot water will soothe my aching muscles and calm the raging storm inside me. But it doesn't work either. I grow hard while I scrub my body with soap, giving my cock a few sharp tugs as I shiver. Callie's face is all I can see in my mind's eye, and I want more. I want her .

This isn't the place to jerk off or fantasize about my woman. I'm not painting the fucking wall with my cum in a public shower, whether or not the club owns the fucking place. I shut off the water and towel dry, yanking on my clothes. I'm fucking frustrated in more ways than one.

Peanut spots me as I leave the locker room and waves me over. "The fuck has you all worked up?"

"What do you mean?" I growl, ignoring the curious looks of the staff.

Peanut grins. "A woman got you twisted, huh?"

How the fuck does he know that? "Shut up."

"It is a woman," he snickers. "You meet your mate or something?"

He's joking. I know he is until he sees the look on my face. "Kodiak?"

"Not here," I grumble, marching toward the office we share. It's a large space we sectioned off when we first bought this building. I have my office across from his, and there's a reception area in the front with a few chairs and tall plants. It's supposed to make the space feel welcoming or some shit. No one ever comes in here except the two of us unless someone needs to use the copier or fax something, but that isn't often. The copier is in Peanut's office because the noise irritates me. We never hired a receptionist because we never needed one. The staff answers the phone,

and we have a messaging service for the main gym line.

Peanut shuts the door behind him as he enters after me, watching me pace. He stays quiet, sensing I need to work through what's going on in my head. He's right. I do.

All my brothers share a connection. It's difficult to explain to outsiders. We're linked by brotherhood and enjoyment of the open road, freedom, and the wind on our backs as we ride, but that's only part of it. It's not mind-reading or anything too complex. Just the ability to sense each other's mood and if there's danger. Maybe it's the shifter in us all that reads body language and understands unspoken cues.

"I found her," I finally mutter, clenching my fists. "And I fucked it up."

"Wait." Peanut holds up a meaty hand. Elephant shifters aren't exactly delicate. "You sayin' you found your mate? As in your mate?"

"Is there any other?" I snarl with agitation.

"Damn." He stares at me for a few seconds. "What did you do?"

"I bumped into her and spilled her hot chocolate down the front of her sweater. Fucking ruined it. She stomped off, pissed at me. Wouldn't even accept a new drink or my apology."

Peanut is laughing by the time I finish. "You fucker," I growl.

"What are you gonna do about it?" he teases, quickly stepping back when I fake a jump at him. He might be my brother, but right now, I wanna bust his face in.

His question is a valid one. What the fuck am I gonna do?

“I want to grab her and make her stay with me until I can convince her never to leave. Maybe if I force her to stay locked up with me during hibernation?—”

“Kodiak. Fuck.”

“I know. I sound fucking crazy. I can’t help it. My bear is already fighting to claim her. I can feel it.”

He sits in one of the empty chairs like he’s shocked. “Have you talked to Spike?”

I shake my head. “Not yet.”

“Go. He needs to know about this.”

Yeah. He does. “Alright. I’ll swing by later.”

Peanut nods, but he’s not paying attention. His eyes are glazed, and I know he’s thinking about what this can mean for all of us.

Mates. Family. Fatherhood.

Our fated mates. The one female destined to be ours. None of us really consider it. We don’t sit around and talk about it. But it’s been a secret longing for each of us.

We’re outcasts. A group of twisted outlaws. Misfits that don’t fit in anywhere else. Every one of us has a story to tell. But none of us expect this to happen. Finding love? Not in the realm of possibility.

Until now.

I rush outside and fire up my bike, hauling ass to the clubhouse. The cold doesn’t

register in my head. I'm hot. Burning up. Sleet sizzles over the bare skin on my arms. I barely park my bike and shut down the engine before I smell her.

Callie's scent slams into my body. It wraps around me with sensual fingers and digs in deep with sharp claws, burrowing under my skin. Instant lust fogs up my brain, followed by rage. It's not her scent alone. It's tangled with another male.

My pres.

And my bear is furious .

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Chapter Two

Callie

“ I can’t believe this,” I mutter as I place my car in park, tilting the rearview mirror down to get a better look at the stain on my sweater. My white sweater. Or it used to be before hot cocoa spilled down the front of it ten minutes ago. The mocha-colored blob looks horrendous, and I don’t have a choice but to suck it up and head inside for my appointment.

There’s no way I have time to head back to my apartment and change before my meeting with the Shifted Misfits MC president, Spike. Knowing he’s going to see me like this only increases my irritation. Of all the days to bump into someone and ruin my outfit, it had to be today. I just hope I’m able to soak it later before I try to get the stain out. It’s one of my favorites and I’m not sure I’ll be able to find another one like it.

With a sigh, I readjust the mirror, gather up my purse and the folder of information I collected, and open my door. A cold blast of wind whips my hair around my head as I shiver, slamming the door shut as I balance everything in my hands. I’m hoping the lot isn’t full of ice because the last thing I need is to slip and fall after the disastrous start to my morning.

I don’t have to worry, though, because the lot is freshly shoveled, and salt covers every available inch, ensuring no one slips. I appreciate that attention to detail since I’m a detail-oriented type of girl. Organization is my life. It’s what I do for a living. Helping people rid their lives of clutter gives me a happy boost.

My gaze sweeps the front entrance of the Misfits property. It's far bigger than I anticipated, not that it's a bad thing. The place was a ski resort at one point, but it's been remodeled. I love the open floor plan. I can see through the wide windows as I step up to the front door, revealing the clean lines and polished wood.

Before I have a chance to knock, the door swings wide. My vision is filled with easily the biggest man I've ever seen. He's almost the same size as the guy from the coffee shop. A big behemoth with shoulders so wide they fill up the entire doorway, which has to be larger than a normal build. He's stocky but not overweight, and I see tattoos peeking out from the long sleeves that stretch to his wrists.

"You must be Callie. Cheryl said to expect you."

I blink at his deep, raspy voice which sounds like he's smoked two packs a day all his life, but something tells me he isn't a smoker. He seems like the type that works out every day since he's got to maintain all that muscle. For some reason, I think of the guy from the coffee shop. When we collided, I noticed the bulging muscles on his arms and bounced right off the solid wall of his chest. He only wore a tee shirt and a red flannel despite the winter weather. How odd.

"I'm Spike," the biker continues, and I cringe as his gaze sweeps over the stain on my sweater. "Rough morning?"

"You have no idea."

He chuckles, and somehow, it eases the tension I feel. "Get in here. It's cold as shit out there."

He's not wrong. I step through the door and shiver as he closes it. "Thanks."

"I figure we can sit in the kitchen. It's warm from the ovens being in use this

morning.”

“Okay. Lead the way.”

I follow Spike, and we end up in an enormous kitchen. It’s the size you would expect to see in an assisted living facility or a hospital. Everything is stainless steel. The commercial feel contrasts with the plants hanging from the ceiling close to the big window above the double sink that’s probably used for prep and utility as much as dishwashing. It’s clean too. Spotless. Like someone regularly wipes it all down to ensure no fingerprints smudge the smooth surfaces.

It’s silly I notice things like this, but my eye is drawn to it because of my career. There’s not a thing I would change in this room from an organizational standpoint. Shelving with neatly stacked pots and pans, closed cupboards, arranged spices in a rack, and various fresh herbs growing in little pots all lined up in a row on the deep windowsill meet my standards for cleanliness and orderliness.

Spike clears his throat and gestures to a square table with four chairs across from the entry to the kitchen. The dark wood adds a bit of warmth to the room. It’s a nice touch with all the stainless steel and matches the cabinetry on one wall. In the center of the table is a deep wooden bowl filled with peanuts. I noticed a bulk bag of them on one of the shelves.

“Peanut is fond of,” he chuckles, “peanuts.”

“Peanut?” I ask, wondering if he’s referring to one of his biker friends or someone else. Surely, they don’t have a pet elephant on the premises. This property is huge, so it’s not like I’ll notice, especially if they keep one indoors. I can’t think of any other animal that likes peanuts enough to buy them in bulk.

“He’s a member of the Shifted Misfits. My Enforcer.”

I nod, not really understanding what an enforcer is or why he's needed. "Ah, okay." I settle across from Spike and relax in my chair. The room is warm and cozy. I can feel the heat, like the ovens are warming the kitchen, but they're not. I blink when I realize most of the heat is coming from the big guy across from me. He gives a whole new meaning to the term 'hot-blooded'.

It's not important. I have his attention, and I need to make the most of the minutes he spares me today. Cheryl mentioned the president of this club is a busy guy, and he can only spare an hour of his time. I open the folder and hand him the flyer I made, not wasting any time.

"Did Cheryl mention the reason for my visit today?" I ask, wondering how much information he learned from the call.

"Well, I know she runs Mercy Falls Refuge. Helps out families with domestic violence and orphans. She said something about needing help this Christmas. She really seems to care about the kids."

"Yes. Cheryl is selfless. She's got a big heart." I point to the flyer. "That's where we need help. These kids deserve a great Christmas. I want to help give them that."

"What do you need?"

"A few things. Help with the toy drive and donations. Maybe gift cards for items the kids need like coats, hats, and mittens. Possibly food too but I plan to speak to the food pantry for that. Then there's Santa."

"Santa?" He says the name hesitantly, like he's apprehensive.

"Yeah," I joke. "The big guy with a white beard dressed in red who shows up to the Christmas party to brighten the children's day."

A boisterous laugh, deep while also rumbling his chest, startles me. “I’ve got just the man for the job.”

“Good.”

He strokes the light scruff on his jaw before looking into my eyes. He’s got a penetrating stare like he’s trying to figure out why I’m here. “You got me curious, Callie.”

“About the toy drive?”

“Not exactly. We’re helping. Not gonna turn my back on those kids.” He leans back into his chair and ticks his head at me. “But I want to know why you’re so invested. I can hear it in your voice. This means something to you, too.”

“It does,” I admit. “It’s personal.”

He slowly nods, not pushing for more, although I can see he’s still curious. “Consider it done. The Shifted Misfits will help with the toy drive and donations. We’ll send in a Santa and make sure those kids have a holiday to remember.”

I’m so thrilled I almost cry. “Thank you so much. This is awesome.”

“Where do we drop off the toys? At the facility?”

“Actually, no. I’m going to keep them at my apartment until the Christmas party. Cheryl is worried the kids might find them early.”

Spike smirks. “Yeah, I bet they would.”

“I can stop by and pick them up once a week until the Christmas party, and then I’ll

come one more time on Christmas Eve in case anyone donates late.”

“Fine by me. I’ll fill in the club during church.”

Did bikers go to church?

“It’s not the type of church you’re thinkin’,” he laughs, accurately reading my expression.

Yeah, probably not.

“I’ll leave the wish list and flyer with you. It has my number since I’m the contact person for the event. If you have any questions or need anything, let me know. I’ll try to help. Cheryl has been a bit overwhelmed with the amount of need this year. I want to take some of the pressure off her.”

“Understandable.”

“I appreciate the Shifted Misfits helping our community. It’s a good look for the club, too.”

He frowns. “That’s not a motivation for us.”

Oops. “I don’t mean to offend you, but bikers don’t always have the best reputation.”

A snort follows my words. “A fact we’re trying to change.”

“This will help.”

He agrees as I stand.

“Thanks for hearing me out. I’ll see you in a week.”

Spike rises to his feet, unfolding his long legs until he’s towering over me. “Nice to meet you, Callie. Next time you see Cheryl, tell her I said hello.” He reaches out and shakes my hand in a strong grip, but it’s not painful.

“I will,” I promise, releasing his hand and leaving the kitchen, passing through the entryway and heading outdoors.

The sun is shining as I exit, almost blinding as it bounces off the piles of plowed snow. I toss my purse into the passenger seat after I open the driver’s side door and sit down. Hope blossoms in my chest as I think about the smiles on the kids’ faces on Christmas Eve. All the hard work will be worth it. For the first time in years, I look forward to the holidays, happy I won’t spend them alone in misery.

The local food pantry in Yukon Bluff is only a fifteen-minute drive from the Shifted Misfits clubhouse. I take a quick detour and head home to change out of my sweater and pull on a bright red one before heading back out into the chilly day. It’s growing colder by the minute, and I shiver as I stop at a traffic light.

Turning up the heat, I stare out my rearview mirror. A black SUV is behind me. The windows are tinted so dark I can’t see who’s behind the wheel. Odd. I didn’t think people usually tinted front windows. Isn’t that illegal?

I step on the gas as the light turns green and pull to a stop in front of the food pantry. I’m parked before I notice the black SUV across the street. I can hear the engine idling.

That’s all it takes for my past to surface. I tremble as I decide to stay in the car, waiting to see if the SUV will leave. It doesn’t. After ten minutes, I open the car door and decide to head inside the food pantry. If they don’t leave, I’ll call the cops.

I have a restraining order. My ex isn't allowed to have any contact with me or approach me for any reason. He's not supposed to know where I am. I moved to Yukon Bluff to get away from him and start over. It's a small town where I can hide.

Shit. I hope I'm wrong.

The SUV finally pulls away from the curb and drives off as I let out a sigh of relief.

I'm probably overthinking this.

I click the fob on my car, lock it, and enter the food pantry, dismissing the SUV from my mind.

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Chapter Three

Kodiak

I smell her. My Callie.

Her scent is all over the fucking parking lot and clubhouse. It tickles my nose as it's carried on the crisp wind. When I walk inside, the scent grows stronger, pulling on my body as my hands clench. I follow the trail as it leads into the kitchen, entangling with Spike's earthy, ashen smell. Dragon. Male. With my female.

I fucking lose it.

A rumble starts low in my belly and steadily gathers power until a massive roar launches from my throat. The fucking walls shake with the magnitude as I stomp toward Spike.

My pres looks up from where he's sitting at the bar, slinging back a shot of whiskey. His dark gaze slides over me and then turns back to the bar, dismissing me as if I'm not a threat. It pisses me off more, and I roar again, picking up a chair and tossing it out of my way. The wood splinters as it crashes into a nearby wall.

Brothers move out of my way. A few seem amused. Others want to watch the show.

"You don't want to do this," Spike says calmly.

Yeah, I do. Rational thought is gone. Only fury remains. "You were with my female."

My nose lifts, inhaling, knowing, fucking knowing that his fingers touched what belongs to me. “You touched my mate!”

My brothers freeze in place around the bar, and a few jaws drop open. They don’t have a fucking clue.

“Callie is MINE!” I yell, shoving a pool table so hard it slides across the hardwood floor and slams into a billiard rack. Pool cues and sticks scatter across the floor.

“VP,” Spike warns.

Nope. I don’t want to hear it. “You. Touched. Her.”

A sigh leaves his lips before he stands and faces me. “Is Callie your mate?”

The question is ridiculous to my bear. He’s so fucking angry he snarls. “YES!”

“I didn’t know that when I met Callie.”

“Mine,” I say through clenched teeth.

Spike shrugs. “Never said I wanted her, Kodiak.”

“Never said you don’t,” I growl.

He flashes me a grin. “No. I didn’t.”

My bear growls as if my pres is denying my claim on Callie. Fucking dragon .

“Get your head on straight, VP. I shook her hand. That’s fucking it.”

Before I can think it through, I'm charging toward him. I can feel the shift in my body. The crackle on my spine that comes before the bear takes over, a lightning strike that zips over my skin in warning. He's about to tear apart the whole fucking bar.

That's when I realize I'm not just pissed. I'm jealous . Jealous because Spike sat and spoke to her when she stomped off and glared at me. Jealous that he got to touch her when she recoiled after I spilled her drink all over her sweater. My shoulders roll, and my neck pops as I try to wrangle my bear and the rage controlling us both.

"Callie is my mate . MINE," I repeat. My bear likes to hear those words. He wants everyone to know. If he had his way, I would roar it from one end of Yukon Bluff to the other.

I'm about a foot from Spike, puffing out my chest and snarling like an uncontrollable beast.

"Calm the fuck down, Kodiak." Smoke leaves his nostrils and curls around his face, poofing in a cloud that circles our heads. "Don't fuck with the dragon."

"Don't poke the fucking bear," I growl back.

The left corner of his mouth twitches. We're more alike than both of us will ever admit. Stubborn as fuck too. "Callie needs help. Your mate needs help."

Those words throw a bucket of ice water on the wildfire of my fury. "Is she in trouble?"

"No, but she's asking the club to help give the kids at Mercy Falls Refuge a merry Christmas. She needs a Santa." He slaps a hand on my shoulder. "I'll tell her she can expect you to deliver the toys to the kids."

“The fuck ?” Spike has to be joking.

“You. Santa. Just need a beard, a suit, and a jolly ho-ho-ho.” A grin spreads across his face so wide I know he isn’t fucking with me. He’s serious.

“A Santa?” I croak, trying not to lose my shit.

“Yep. Callie needs a guy she can count on. That’s you, right, VP?”

FUCK. He knows I can’t say no when he puts it like that. I can’t let my mate down. But all those snotty, dirty, sticky-fingered kids ... “Fine,” I manage to grind out through clenched teeth.

Whatever my mate wants, she gets. Whatever she needs, I’ll provide.

“Good. That settles it.”

Almost. Calmer this time, I repeat my earlier words. “Callie is mine.”

He dips his chin. It’s slight, but I don’t miss it. “Yours.”

The second the words leave his lips, my bear retreats. A warm, fuzzy, foreign feeling of euphoria coats my skin and douses the last of my anger. I feel giddy. It’s fucking ridiculous. At the same time, I kinda love it.

Callie needs a Santa. I’ll be her jolly St. Nick. And maybe I can get her to forgive me for bumping into her outside of Beanie’s Brew.

It’s so quiet in the clubhouse that I can hear everyone breathing. It’s weird. As I glance around the bar, I notice all my brothers staring at me with something akin to awe.

Chomp, an alligator shifter, clears his throat before he takes a step in my direction. “Kodiak, you found your mate?”

A collective intake of breath awaits my answer. “Yes. My Callie. She’s fucking beautiful,” I brag. “Sweet like peppermint and spicy like cinnamon. She smells so good I want to gobble her up.”

I probably don’t need to add that last part, but I can’t seem to resist.

Spike snorts. “I could smell you on her. As brief as your interaction was, she carries a bit of you on her already.”

My bear likes that. A lot. Rumbling echoes in my chest.

I need to smear more of my essence on her. My sweat. My cum. Skin on skin. Nibbling, sucking, licking Callie until she’s so full of me the whole fucking world knows it.

Fuck. I’m fucking hard again, straining against the zipper of my jeans. I press on my dick, groaning at the thought of claiming her. She’s consuming me, and I’ve only known her for a few hours.

“Well, shit,” Spike curses. “We’re all on edge now.”

I don’t have a clue what he means until I see my brothers all lost in their thoughts, bodies tense, and eagerness bleeding into the connection we all share as shifters. Their emotions are all over the place, but I sense the one thing driving each of us in this moment: longing.

We yearn for the one thing that’s been denied to each of us. With sudden clarity, I realize what this means for my brothers, Spike, and the club. We can all find mates.

I laugh and pump my fist in the air. “I’m just the first,” I state with a grin.

Tension eases from the room, and I feel their hope gathering like a building storm. Electricity crackles on my skin and the urge to shift is almost overwhelming. We all want to scatter, roaming over the town until we find the woman created for each of us. It feels less like a possibility and more like a certainty. The power of that hope surges through me, and I spin on my heel.

I need to find Callie.

Callie

“Shit,” I curse as I yank on the handle of my door for the third time. It’s stuck. The snow outside has become wetter and mixed into an icy sleet that coats the entire exterior of my vehicle. I won’t be able to pry it open with my hands; that much is certain.

Think, Callie.

I don’t have access to warm water. The food pantry is shut down and closing early due to inclement weather. I already waved goodbye to the owner after our meeting. I’m here alone in the freezing wind, trying hard not to cry as I stand in the parking lot. An idea occurs to me.

Hand sanitizer. That works, right? I think I saw it on a TikTok video.

I have to give it a try.

I’m digging in my purse, desperate to find the small bottle I keep on hand when I hear the sound of a vehicle approaching. My head snaps up, and I lock on a black SUV. It’s the same one I spotted earlier when I parked my car. Whoever it is, they’re back.

Shit.

I ditch the idea of using the hand sanitizer and go for my phone instead. My glove wraps around the smooth surface as I lift my hand free, realizing too late that my cold fingers aren't gripping it tight enough. The device slips out of my grasp and arcs on a current of icy wind. I watch in horror as my cell lands in the snow, sliding downhill away from me as it picks up speed.

The phone glides to an eventful stop, smashing into a parking spot's concrete slab. I hear it crack before it shatters, and I wince.

This is officially the worst day of my entire life.

In case things can't get any worse, fate decides to fuck with me. The engine of the SUV revs, and the vehicle turns in my direction, slowly moving into the empty parking spot. Frightened, I back into my car, watching as the SUV's slick black body begins to rock. In a few moments, it'll have enough momentum to rise over the block and head up the hill. . . toward me .

I do the only thing I can. I scream. The sound launches from my throat with an equal mix of terror and frustration, belting from my lungs with a desperation that makes my knees quake.

And then, in the distance, I hear the rumble of a motorcycle's engine. My heart thrums louder, almost slamming into my ribcage as I stare at the street, recognizing the big man riding toward me, his massive shoulders covered in steam. The snow and sleet melt off him as fast as they land, almost like he's as hot as the sun.

The SUV backs up, turns, and speeds away seconds before the biker pulls to a stop. Before I can say a word, he's kicking down the stand, running toward me with all the grace and power of a predator. But I don't feel threatened. Just the opposite.

Something about him feels safe.

“It’s you,” I whisper, at a loss to say more.

The guy from the coffee shop. The clumsy brute who spilled my hot cocoa all over my sweater.

“Kodiak,” he growls as he reaches me. “Are you okay, Callie?”

He knows my name. How? It’s my first thought after I recover from the surprise.

“I can’t get into my car,” I finally reply, blinking as snow falls harder, landing on my eyelashes. “The door is stuck.”

“The ice. I bet it’s frozen over.”

I nod.

He frowns and walks away from me, returning to his bike. I’m almost angry until I notice what he’s doing. Kodiak reaches into his saddlebags and pulls out a blanket. He returns to me with quick, purposeful strides, wrapping the thick fabric around me without a word.

I huddle into the warmth, grateful as I realize he’s pulling a portion of it over my head and keeping some of the snowflakes out of my face. Shivering, I watch as he approaches my car. A quick pull on the handle yields the same result I had. Nothing.

“Gonna try something else.”

Sanitizer? I almost suggest it until I see him turn his back. What’s he doing?

There's a sickening crunch that sounds like the metal frame of my car groaning in protest. Then I watch in shock as the whole door is torn from the hinges, dangling from his hand before he drops it on the snow-covered ground.

Holy shit! He just tore off my door!

Wait. How strong does a person have to be to do something like that? Shit. He's fixing that, right?

I take a couple of steps backward, biting my lip as Kodiak turns my way.

He shakes his head when he sees my expression. "Fuck. Sorry. Shit." He sighs. "I'm fucking everything up."

Silence. I don't know what to say. It's ridiculous. The whole damn day has been a comedy of errors from the moment I met him. It's so awful that I shake my head and giggle. But it doesn't stop there. Oh, no. That giggle turns into a chuckle. And before I know it, I'm laughing. Nearly hysterical.

It only takes about ten seconds before he joins me. Our combined laughter loosens something in my chest, and I feel lighter. Less stressed. More relaxed.

I don't dwell on the reason. It doesn't matter.

Kodiak shrugs. "Well, I'm calling in a tow. In the meantime, let's get out of this weather."

"Where?" I ask, already knowing that I'll go with him. I don't want to stay here alone.

In the back of my mind is the reminder of the black SUV, but I push it away. That's a

conversation for later.

“You pick the spot, but I need to get you warm and out of this storm.”

“And my car?”

“I’ll pay for the repairs. No worries.”

That’s enough to satisfy me. “My place. I want to change clothes.”

“You’ll have to give me the address, and I’ll need to stow the blanket, so it doesn’t cause an accident during the ride. I don’t like that you’ll be at the mercy of the weather, but we have no choice. I do have a helmet for you. That should help.”

I reluctantly give up the blanket as he stores it, pulling out a helmet. He straps it on me and shrugs out of his leather vest, draping it around my body and zipping it up around me. It’s warm from his body heat, and I fight the urge to lower my head and sniff the material.

How odd.

“You’re going to be cold,” I point out, gesturing to his white tee shirt and the thin red flannel over it.

“I’m good.”

Okay. I’m glad I have my gloves and a jacket since my arms aren’t covered nearly as well as the rest of my body. His leather vest covers me almost as well as the blanket, nearly reaching my knees. With the helmet, I won’t get slapped in the face with snow and ice.

Him? He's going to freeze and turn into a human popsicle.

"Get on my bike, Beautiful." He ticks his chin at the sky. "It's about to get worse. We need to move."

I don't hesitate to settle on his seat as he takes his place in front of me. Once I give him my address, he plugs it into his phone and uses the GPS for directions.

Kodiak's touch is gentle as he reaches for my hands, wrapping them around his torso. "Hold tight. Whatever you do, don't let go."

Right.

"You're safe, Sweetheart. You're with me."

It's the last thing he says, alleviating my worry and fear before he starts the motorcycle, the bike rumbling to life beneath us, and we ride from the parking lot.

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Chapter Four

Kodiak

I follow the directions to Callie's address, hoping the overprotective, possessive temperament of my bear won't scare her. He's fucking obsessed, which is a bit worrisome. I don't know if he's acting like this because of the fact she's our mate or because we haven't claimed her yet. Unfortunately, none of my brothers will know either since she's the first one to come along for any of us.

As I follow the directions, I realize she lives in one of the club's rental houses. We have an LLC, which we use for our businesses, and since other shifters are also in Yukon Bluff, we bought quite a few vacant properties, fixed them up, and rented them out.

But Callie's not a shifter, I think, so how did she manage to get one?

We rent them somewhat 'under the table' since some of those moving here want to stay as off the grid as possible. While our businesses are legit, and we pay our taxes, the cash from the rental houses isn't.

Our mate is in trouble, my bear grumbles, pacing inside of me.

Stupid fucker better not try to take over. Not only would it scare the ever-loving hell out of Callie, but it would definitely cause an uproar with the townspeople. Not that there haven't been rumors over the years, but one of the reasons we bought so much property was so we could shift without fear of being caught. Our feathered brothers

have it much easier since birds are everywhere, and not a lot of people can distinguish between one breed and another. The rest of us? Not so much, especially Spike since he's a fucking dragon.

I manage to pull into her driveway without him showing his fuzzy ass and shut down my bike. "Let's get you inside and warmed up," I say once we're both off the bike and heading to the front door.

"Oh, um, you don't have to stick around," Callie says as she pulls her keys from her pocket and unlocks the door.

"Wanted to get a fire going for you. This weather's getting worse," I reply, looking up at the sleet that's now mixed with heavy, wet snow.

She shivers; whether it's because she's cold or because the storm is growing worse is anybody's guess. Maybe it's a combination of the two. "Come on in, then," she says.

I barely manage to hide my grin. My mate has some fire in her, and I can't wait to find out how hot she'll burn for me.

For us, my bear grumbles.

Fine, for us, I mentally retort.

"There's some wood out," she starts.

"On the back porch," I finish her sentence, causing her to give me a startled look.

"How... how did you know that?" she asks, slipping out of my cut and laying it across the back of a recliner.

“Because this is one of the rental properties our club owns,” I reply. “Which is something we can discuss more once you’ve gotten some warmer clothes on.”

She mutters something under her breath, but my shifter hearing allows me to hear her loud and clear.

“Bossy man!”

I manage to keep from laughing my ass off because she sounds so disgruntled right now as I head through the house and out to the covered back porch where the firewood is stacked. Grabbing an armful, I go back inside. Within a few minutes, I have a roaring fire going. She’s no longer in sight, so I presume she’s gone to change, which gives me an opportunity to glance around at her space.

She’s neat. Organized. Everything is tidy and in its place. Nothing out of order and I get the impression she controls everything in her life with the same attention to detail. It makes me want to find ways to help her lose that control, giving into her deepest fantasies. I’d like to ruffle those professional organizer feathers.

Her scent, which is everywhere and is driving me absolutely crazy, grows stronger. As I turn, I realize the essence of her is more potent than I realized during our morning collision. Candy cane, brown sugar, and cinnamon dance in the air. The sweet aroma fills my nose and my bear growls inside me. He wants to push her down and burrow his snout in the apex of her thighs.

Callie’s about average height but definitely shorter than me, with curves in all the right places. Her waist dips inward and flares into generous hips that I already envision wrapping my hands around as I plunge into her from behind. She’s got the thickest, sturdiest thighs, and I know she can take the pounding I want to give her. Just the thought of her slick, warm center. . .

And... another hard-on starts pushing against my zipper. At this rate, my dick's going to have a permanent imprint. Inhaling deeply, I force myself to get under control, so I don't freak her out. "Do you have any emergency candles?" I question. "Because the way this storm's going, it won't be long before the power goes out."

"Oh, no! What about your motorcycle? Should you bring it into my garage? I can't let you leave in this weather," she rambles, her hands now twisting together. Anxiety twists her features.

"Might not be a bad idea," I drawl, congratulating myself on the thought that I'm sticking around for the foreseeable future. Alone. With my mate. My bear rumbles his agreement. There's a carport that extends beyond the garage, which is where I parked initially, but if I can put my girl in the garage, that's even better. "Go find some candles or flashlights, whichever you have, and I'll get my bike moved."

"Okay. Um, what should I call you? I mean, your vest thingie says Kodiak. Is that your name?"

"It's called a cut, Sweetheart, and yeah, I'm Kodiak," I tell her. "Road name and the one I got at birth are the same. I'll be right back."

She must be too cold or distracted. I already said my name when I found her earlier.

Not good, I think. She needs to get warmer. Now.

Callie

"Bossy man!" I grumble as I make my way to my bedroom. I'm equal parts frozen and aggravated, and both are due to the giant biker currently starting a fire in my living room. He's so large and imposing that it's hard not to stare at his bulging muscles when he's in front of me. A distraction I don't need. But there's also

something charming and sweet about him, even if our run-ins so far have been disastrous. Thinking about how he yanked the door off my car has me snickering a little under my breath. I'm not sure who was more shocked, him or me.

Grabbing some warm sweats and a pair of fuzzy socks, I go into my ensuite bathroom and quickly strip out of my sodden, frozen clothes. Despite the fact that Kodiak had a lot of heat emanating from him, I still feel like I got dipped into the local lake. Multiple times at that. Once I have my warm clothes on, I brush out my hair and braid it, then remove my makeup since I'm home for the rest of the day.

Probably the next few days, I think, remembering the storm. The weather here is so unpredictable, but it is December, so snow and icy precipitation isn't too far out of the realm of possibility, I guess. I wonder if Spike has mentioned what the club is going to do to help out Mercy Falls Refuge, then I giggle when I think that maybe he meant that Kodiak would be dressing up as Santa. I can't wait to see that big, burly man wear a red coat and chuckle with a ho-ho-ho. He just doesn't seem the type, either to do something like that or allow kids with sticky little fingers to sit on his lap.

Grabbing the flashlight that I keep in my nightstand, I wrap my hand around the base and walk down the hallway toward the living room. The smell of the beef vegetable soup I put in the crockpot before leaving this morning permeates the air, and I snicker because it means that Kodiak must've lifted the top.

"That smells delicious. What did you make?" he asks as I enter the kitchen.

"Beef vegetable soup. I like making it during the winter because soups are filling, and I can just toss it all in the crockpot and go." Moving to the cupboard, I pull out two bowls, grab a ladle, and set all of it next to the crockpot. "I have some crusty bread to warm up, and then it'll be ready."

I don't know if I'm a good cook or if he'll eat anything when he's hungry enough, but

Kodiak gobbles up three massive bowls of soup and most of the bread to my one bowl and a tiny hunk of the loaf. It doesn't bother me. It's kinda adorable.

He pats his stomach, giving me a lazy grin. "You're an amazing cook. Thanks for dinner."

"Thanks. My pleasure."

The power flickers before we're doused in darkness.

"Shit," Kodiak curses.

I flick on the flashlight. I know I've got a few three-wick candles in the living room from my favorite store. It's not Christmas without the scents of sugar cookies, pine trees, and candy canes. I rise off my seat and head that way, noting that Kodiak silently follows me. Once they're lit, I pull one of the blankets I keep hidden under the coffee table out and wrap it around me, snuggling on the cushion of the couch.

Kodiak settles beside me, tucking the blanket tighter around me as he frowns. "It's gonna get cold in here soon."

He's right. "I've got more blankets in the hall closet."

"I'll grab them."

I feel the loss of his body heat as he heads to the closet and realize that despite the warmth coming from the fire, it's still going to be colder than anything I've previously experienced. When he comes back, his arms laden, I watch him set up a pallet of sorts near the fire. "Do you have any pillows or a warm comforter?" he asks.

"In the spare room and also my bedroom," I reply, loathe to move from the toasty

enclosure I'm now snuggled into. When I start getting up, he motions me back and heads down the hallway again.

I'm so screwed. A fluttering begins low in my belly, and a wave of arousal follows. There's an ache to push beyond all my barriers and let Kodiak in. He's the first man who's ever elicited this kind of response from me. Even my ex didn't do so, which is one reason he's an ex.

Not that he was happy with that decision, but I still think it's because I 'got away' before he could get in my pants. I still remember the cruel twist of his lips when I refused him. Shivering as I remember the malevolence in his gaze the last time I saw him, I determinedly push those thoughts to the back of my mind and resolve to enjoy the time I have with the grumpy biker.

After all, it appears we're snowed in, and it's an opportunity to learn more about Kodiak.

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Chapter Five

Kodiak

“ I ’m so fucked,” I mumble as I make my way to her room. The more I’m around her, the deeper her scent envelops me. Hell, we haven’t even kissed yet, and I already have visions of her belly rounded with our cub. “Fuck me.”

It doesn’t enter my mind that there’s no possibility she’ll conceive. My bear knows it. That’s enough for me.

Her room sucks me in even deeper; the layered essences that epitomize her surround me as I quickly grab her pillows and toss them on top of the comforter before I roll it up and sling it over my shoulder. She’ll be comfortable with these when combined with my body heat. That’s the good part about the fact that we’ll have to snuggle and hunker down in her house. I’m like a personal heater, thanks to my shifter genes. Not that much different than Spike. The bad part? Well, from where my bear and I are standing, there’s not really a bad part to any of this.

Me + Callie = Hell yeah.

Unless... what if she’s not attracted to me? I haven’t exactly made the best impression on her. First, I ruined her pretty sweater. Then I ripped her driver’s door off its hinges. Damn. I sorta ate up all her soup, too.

Then we make her like us , my bear says as we return to the living room. She has to think we’re strong and attractive. We protect her. We brought her safely home.

I snort at how easy he's making it sound. I have two big strikes against me and a questionable third, and now I'm worried I'll be out of the game before I've made my first move.

"What are you doing?" I ask, seeing her moving around the living room.

"Lighting a few more candles," she replies, her brow raised, likely at my tone. "I also dug out my battery charger pack for our phones. It should be enough as long as you use the same cord as I do. We can at least have working cell phones, right?"

Our mate is smart, my bear says, pride filling his tone. But too neat. We need to mess her up a little bit. Cubs will help with that.

Since I wholly agree with his assessment, I don't respond. He won't let the idea of mating and filling her go, so I don't argue. Instead, while she moves around the room, I take the pillows and set them on the pallet, then cover the whole thing up with the heavy down comforter that was on her bed. "Too bad you don't have an air mattress," I state once I'm done.

"I do, but it's only a twin-size," she says. "I bought it in case I'd ever want to go camping."

I decide to tease her a little bit and say, "I can't see someone as organized as you roughing it like that."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Camping can be messy, Callie," I tease. "Bugs, dirt, weather... all of it is out there. You seem to appreciate cleanliness and organization."

"I do, but if you knew why, you'd understand," she quietly replies.

I sense I've hurt her feelings, which wasn't my intent at all, so I move to her side and pull her close, which soothes the ache now residing in my heart. "Then explain it to me," I say, gently leading her to the pallet. I lower onto it and bring her with me.

Once I have my mate snuggled against me, which has my bear chuffing in ecstasy inside me, she starts talking. "So, you've probably guessed I didn't grow up in Yukon Bluff, right? Well, my origins are awful, Kodiak." Her voice is barely above a whisper, the sound of the crackling fire nearly drowning her out, but I hear the lingering sadness in her tone. "I never knew my dad and lived with my mom until I was five."

"What happened then?" I ask, my hand rubbing up and down her arm to calm her.

"She uh... she died of a drug overdose in our apartment. The landlord gained access after no one had seen us for a week."

A week? Our mate was alone with a dead body for a week? She didn't eat or drink anything? A low growl rumbles in my chest, and thankfully, she doesn't ask me about it because it's taking all my control to keep from shifting and going on a rampage that even Spike wouldn't be able to quell.

"I went to live with my mom's aunt, and she was a hoarder," Callie continues. "Clutter was everywhere, Kodiak, and I didn't really know any better since my mom was heading in that direction herself. When social services stepped in, I was placed in foster care, and it was there I learned to appreciate that everything had a place."

"Did you get adopted out?"

She shakes her head, one lone tear streaking down her cheek. "I was too old by then. Most couples want either babies or toddlers, not an eight-year-old little girl who was still traumatized from her living situation."

I don't realize I'm grumbling and holding her tighter until she rests her head on my shoulder.

"It's okay, Kodiak. I've built a good life since then." She pats me and while my bear is ecstatic that she's touching us, my anger at what she endured as a child won't let me enjoy the sensation.

It's not fucking okay. My sweet mate had a life far too traumatic. "I'm sorry all that happened, Sweetheart, but life is messy sometimes."

"Not if I can help it," she replies. "Did Spike talk to you or the club yet?"

"About what?"

"I volunteer with Mercy Falls Refuge and am helping gather toys and donations so the children can have a good Christmas. He said he'd have one of you guys play Santa for the kids."

Yeah, Spike said as much when he told me my mate needed me. I stormed into the clubhouse, ready to throttle him, when I caught Callie's scent. The reason for her visit has everything to do with kids and Christmas, not Spike. My bear agrees and we decide that maybe we owe Spike an apology when we see him. Maybe. Because he did touch her, and regardless of whether or not it was innocent, we don't like it one bit.

"Santa, huh? What does that entail?" I ask, pushing thoughts of hurting my president for touching my mate aside.

May as well get all the details so I'm prepared. Out of all of us, I'm the best candidate because of my size, not that I will let anyone else this close to my mate. The fact that I'm not fond of sticky fingers is beside the point. I'll do it because Callie needs me,

but there's another facet to this. Spike tries to involve the club's members in as many community activities as he can since this is our town. We feel responsible for keeping it safe and helping it prosper.

If it means keeping my mate happy, I'll do whatever she wants. Even ho-ho-ho.

And maybe, if I'm lucky, I'll get a kiss under the mistletoe.

Or more, my bear whispers.

Callie

This feels a bit surreal. I'm shocked that I so willingly told Kodiak about my abysmal upbringing. Hell, I've only shared the tip of the iceberg since I was also born addicted to crack. It's a miracle that I didn't have a host of physical issues, all things considered. I had all the shitty makings of following a dark path, but I made sure once I was out on my own, I'd never live like that again. Oh, the foster homes were nice, of course, but still, there were a lot of kids, so it was often chaotic. I valued what little objects I owned and promised myself that when I had the money, I'd keep a tidy, pretty home I could be proud of. I've succeeded, even if it's only a rental. Someday, I'll own my own place, but for now, this home works for me. While I'd love to have the whole storybook scenario, with a man who loves and cherishes me, I'm realistic enough to know it might not happen.

I didn't intend to delve into the darkness of my past, but now that it's spoken, I feel a little lighter. Like its heaviness doesn't press down on me as hard and oppressive. Maybe there's some truth in sharing the darkness with others like a therapist I saw once said. Who knows? I just instinctively trust him, despite our inauspicious meeting.

Kodiak hugs me against his broad, muscular chest. His steady, calm breathing helps

to center me. Something is soothing about him. That feeling of safety, warmth, and strength surrounds me as my eyes flutter, and I almost fall asleep. I've never felt this way before but am too content to delve into why he seems to be made for me.

"Callie?"

"Mmmm?"

"Look out the window," he whispers, slightly louder than the crackling of the fire.

"Oh!" I gasp as I turn my head, gazing out at the winter wonderland of white already piling up. There's a foot of snow outside, and it's beautiful. The type of snow that packs hard but also swirls over the surface, glistening in the moonlight as the wind carries it over the growing mounds. Soft gusts twirl the flakes as they spin and jump, sparkling like dozens of tiny diamonds.

I love it when the snow gathers like this before anyone has placed a step over it or driven across to dirty its perfection. When it's pristine and pretty, bright white, and fragile, yet flawless.

"It's breathtaking," I observe. "My favorite type of snowfall."

"Mine too," he murmurs.

"Thank you," I say, the warm cocoon of his embrace loosening my lips once again.

"For what?" he asks.

"Listening. I don't know why I feel as though I can trust you with all my baggage, but I do, Kodiak," I reply. "There's more, obviously, but I can't look at it today."

“I’ll be here with an ear whenever you’re ready. And if you never are? That’s okay too, Callie,” he says. “Now, we have a warm fire and I for one am feeling drowsy. What say we take a nap?”

“You have the best ideas,” I mumble, already sliding into dreamland, his arms snugly around me to keep me safe and protected.

I nearly miss his reply, wondering if I dream about the kiss to my temple, when he whispers, “Wait until you see the others I have.”

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Chapter Six

Kodiak

Having never anticipated finding my mate, the fact she's curled in my arms right now, trusting me enough to sleep, is blowing my mind. As the fire crackles and the snow continues to fall, I let my mind wander to the future.

Our future.

First, I'm going to have to let her know what I am, which could send her running far from Yukon Bluff. I sense, however, that she wants some of the same things I do; a home, a family, someone to love her.

We will do that for our mate, my bear chuffs. We will give her cubs and love her with everything we have in us. She will never hurt like she did as a child again.

Since I agree with him, I merely nod. My heart aches at what she saw or dealt with at the tender age of five. My beginnings might not have been the best, but I wasn't stuck living with a dead body for a week. Just the thought of my mate going through that has me glad her mother is no longer among the living. Because I'd probably put her in the ground myself. Parents should cherish their children because kids didn't ask to be born.

My phone vibrates in my pocket, so I slide it out to see a message from Spike.

Spike: I take it you found Callie.

Me: Yes, at her house now. I fucked up her car but sent a text earlier for Nix to pick it up.

Spike: He got it and has it in the garage. How the hell did you manage to do that?

Me: Forgot my own strength.

I can imagine his reaction, chuckling because I'm not the only one who has to take that into consideration. My bear arms can crush a human if I'm not careful. Spike has to hold in his breath when his temper flares or he gets excited. He already burned down two rooms in the clubhouse that we've had to remodel earlier in the year. Fucking dragon.

Spike: Y'all need anything?

I smirk because Spike has acclimated to where we live, adopting a lot of the southern sayings, including 'y'all' even though he never stepped foot in the south until we came to Yukon Bluff and set up the club.

Me: I think we're good for now. Power's out, but there's enough wood for the fireplace.

Spike: Gonna get one of the brothers to grab some food and drop it off. Shit for sandwiches, that kind of thing. That work?

Me: Yeah, appreciate it, because I have no fucking clue how to cook over an open flame.

The fucker sends back a bunch of emojis, which I hate. Instead of responding, I make sure Callie is covered, then slide out from the pallet so I can check the house, grab more wood, and see what she's got in her cupboards in order to fix us something else

to eat when she wakes up.

True to his word, Spike gathered food and brought it to us, so I made sandwiches (five for me, one for her), then put everything back in the cooler he provided and placed it on the front porch to keep it cold. He also sent stuff for hot chocolate, and since I know my mate enjoys it, I managed to figure out how to heat water over the fire so I can make her a mug of it when she wakes up.

We need to protect her, my bear reminds me as I wave the sting from a burn away. No burning our mate. Growling in frustration at how demanding he's getting, I decide to ignore him for the time being and go back to what I was doing.

I feel like a creeper right now, though, because I've been watching her sleep. She's more restless since I'm not on the pallet right now. Judging by the expressions crossing her face, it's not impossible to figure out that while she may have shared a lot of her past already, she still has demons.

It's going to be my job to slay them, and I silently vow to do it, knowing that my brothers will help. I can't help smiling when I think about how the brothers will treat Callie. We named the club Shifted Misfits for a reason; none of us are what society would deem as 'normal', but what's that anyway besides a setting on a washing machine? I suspect she's going to charm all of them, and while my bear is chuffing over anyone coming near her, I know as does he that my brothers will treat her with the respect she deserves.

"Kodiak?" she mumbles, her voice raspy as though she's coming down with a cold.

Guilt assails me because she ended up soaked through to the skin by the time we got here thanks to me ripping her car door off its hinges. I don't know how long she was outside before I got there, either, and with the power out, the house is chilled even with the roaring fire.

“Right here, Callie,” I reply, standing from the chair I’ve been sitting in and walking toward her. “Spike brought some food since the power’s out. I made us sandwiches if you’re interested and can get you some hot cocoa if your throat’s sore.”

“It is a little bit, probably from earlier,” she says, rolling off the pallet to stand up.

Seeing her hair all tousled has my dick hardening because she looks like she’s spent the past few hours being well-fucked. It’s a vision I’m hoping will come to pass soon. “Let me get that stuff together for you,” I tell her, moving closer to tuck a stray strand of hair behind her ear.

“Thanks, Kodiak,” she says, blushing at my touch.

Our mate likes us, my bear tells me as she moves down the hall toward her bedroom. She’s probably off to use the restroom, which for some reason seems to embarrass females. I don’t get it but I’m not a woman, either. They’re definitely strange creatures because everyone goes; it’s a fact of nature.

Shrugging, I head into the kitchen and grab the kettle, then bring it back to hang it on the hook inside the fireplace so the water will heat for her cocoa. Then, I grab the sandwiches I made earlier, chips, pretzels, and a bag of chocolate chip cookies I found in the pantry and bring all of it out to the living room. I already have her mug, the cocoa, and some marshmallows in the living room ready to go.

“At least it’s warm in here,” I mutter to myself as I set everything down on the coffee table. Hearing the water bubbling in the kettle, I pull it off and place it on an oven mitt I found in the kitchen. I’m stirring her hot cocoa as she rejoins me.

“Wow, you’ve put together a feast,” she says as she takes a spot beside me.

It brings me pleasure that she doesn’t hesitate to move as close as she can to both me

and the fire.

Callie sounds a little better than when she first woke, so maybe she just needed some water or something. It's obvious she brushed her hair, since she now has it up in a high ponytail that showcases her shapely neck. Just a nibble? My bear asks. No. Not yet.

She has the sexiest, smoothest skin. It's flawless and pretty as a pearl. It's taking everything in me not to run my snout and fingertips over every inch.

"Just a sandwich, babe, nothing special," I reply. "Got you some cocoa, but if you want something else, I'll gladly grab it."

A look passes over her face. It's surprise, wonder, and something else I can't name. Has no one ever treated this gorgeous woman as she deserves?

"I should be taking care of you, not the other way around since you're a guest in my house," Callie teases as she pulls the paper plate closer.

I almost miss the shiver that follows her words but grab the nearest blanket and wrap it around her shoulders. "No reason to freeze while you eat," I quickly add as she gives me a questioning look.

"You're a sweetheart, Kodiak. A big cuddly bear of a man. It's adorable."

I can't resist wrinkling my nose at her words. At best, I'm a grouchy fucker most of the time and my brothers can all attest to that fact. Having her say that I'm cuddly may make my bear happy as fuck, but I'm not feeling it at all.

"Aw, look at you. All Mr. Grumpy Pants." Her giggle follows and I want to steal her away, hide in a deep, dark cave, and ensure no one ever touches or looks at her again.

MINE.

My bear chortles in my head. The possessive thoughts are growing from both of us, and I know it's only going to get worse. I can't get enough of Callie. The longer I'm with her, the harder it is to fight the urge to lay her down, rip off her clothes, and fuck her until she submits to my claim.

Fuck.

The meal is torture because every soft hum or noise sounds sexual to my bear, and I can't stop thinking about the noises she'll make when I'm driving my cock inside her. To give myself a break, I insist on cleaning up and boiling more water, leaving her on the pallet and curled up while I make her another hot cocoa. Although, as many marshmallows as she added to the mug, I think she may prefer them to the chocolate. Another female mystery I'll never solve, but as long as my mate is happy, I'm content.

When I feel more in control, I join her, enjoying the silence as she sips on her drink.

An hour later, my arm is falling asleep from where she's sleeping, and the fire is dying down, chilling the room too much for my liking. I can't let that happen and reluctantly pull away from Callie, tucking her in before I head outside for more firewood. It's late now, nearly eleven in the evening. With the snowstorm, it strikes me as odd that I hear a vehicle turn down Callie's street.

The side effect of sharing your body with a growly bear? He's got fantastic hearing. He knows when something is off. Anyone coming home will be eager to get inside where it's warm but the engine I hear is moving slow, intentionally creeping along and I don't like it. Neither does my bear who wants to shift and go on the offensive with this perceived threat.

“Callie? Any of your neighbors work late?” I ask, lingering by the open door.

“I don’t think so. Why?” she replies.

“Just wondering.”

I think back to the food pantry and finding Callie all alone outside, a black SUV gunning the engine and scaring her. Now I hear this new engine. It’s not the same SUV. I can tell right away, as the motor sounds are slightly off. But it’s also far too ominous given what happened earlier in the day.

My bear snarls in my head and forces me to face the road with a pile of logs resting in my arms. That’s when the driver of the vehicle steps on the gas and I hear it approach, far faster than necessary or safe. I run inside, dropping the firewood on the floor as I see a red Jeep slam on the brakes and turn into her driveway. Headlights nearly blind us as they grow larger, aiming through the front window.

Danger! My bear is roaring inside my head. He’s so loud I can’t hear much except for Callie’s gasp. She screams as the Jeep stops inches from entering her house and crashing through the bay window where we currently stand across the living room, close to the kitchen.

I’m moving her backward, noticing the stiff line of her shoulders and frozen body. She’s terrified. But there’s something else there too. It’s almost like she’s not surprised that someone is following her or trying to intimidate her.

As fast as the vehicle enters her driveway, it backs out, speeding off as I wrap my arms around my mate. She’s trembling. Something wet hits my arm and I realize it’s her silent tears.

I can’t allow her to keep secrets, not when her safety is at risk. She’s got to tell me

the rest of her story. It can't wait any longer.

I listen to be sure the Jeep is gone and then dial Spike. He listens as I explain about our unwanted guest, and he says he'll send a few of the guys to watch over the house so I can concentrate on Callie and calming my woman.

I'm set to demand answers when she turns around and lifts her head, staring into my eyes as fat tears drip over her cheeks. Fuck.

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Chapter Seven

Callie

He found me. I don't know how but I know it's my ex. There's no one else who would think to do something like this. He's a narcissist. Cruel. For Jeremy, it's a game. So, when I opted out of playing and fled my hometown, moving as far across the country as I could, I figured he would eventually give up.

Sadly, I was wrong, and since Kodiak was seen, he's going to be dragged into the hell I thought I'd escaped from. As tears stream down my face, sobs erupt from somewhere deep in my gut as his arms wrap around me. I know he has questions; I can see it in his very demeanor, but I'm afraid that if I open my mouth, I'll projectile vomit the bile that is steadily advancing up my throat.

That's how much Jeremy terrifies me.

One possible thought that he's found me and I'm a quivering, anxiety-filled mess. I reach for the coping skills my former therapist taught me, but they're just out of my grasp. Kodiak isn't, however, and he pulls me closer then lifts me into his arms and carries me back to the pallet, where he sets me down, covers me completely, then says, "I'll be right back and we'll talk, Sweetheart."

I nod, still unable to utter a word. How do I explain that I was young and foolish? That I bought the lies Jeremy was selling until I accidentally overheard something I shouldn't have even though that wasn't my fault whatsoever? I know when he and his goons beat me, they didn't expect me to survive, but I did and then I ran. The

question remains, how did he find me?

I mean, I changed my name from Calliope James to Callie Jones. It was close enough so I wouldn't forget, plus the people who helped me escape got me all new documents; a driver's license, social security number, and even a passport, although the likelihood of me ever traveling overseas is slim to none. I basically fell off the grid, although enough of a paper trail was created so it didn't look like I was 'just born'.

Long before I'm ready, Kodiak has restocked the wood inside and has the fire burning hot once again. When he returns to the pallet with two bottles of water and a box of tissue, I know my time is officially up. If nothing else, before the interest goes any higher on my part, I need to tell him who I really am so he can decide for himself if I'm even worth it.

He pulls me into the shelter of his legs, his arms cocooning me as he settles me against his chest and pulls one of the blankets around us. I'm warm and toasty and have zero desire to ruin the mood but know I must.

"I think that Jeep was either my ex or someone he knows," I whisper. "But I don't know how he found me."

An attack of the shivers hits, which has Kodiak running his hands up and down my arms as he murmurs nonsensical things that soothe a broken part of my soul. I like him so much already, a definite oddity considering I tend to take my time when it comes to trusting others.

"Tell me about him, Callie," he replies. "And before you start stressing about what you're going to say, know that I'll never judge you for your past. Ever."

He's so emphatic that I find myself relaxing even further, despite the present topic.

“So, as I told you, I ended up aging out of the foster care system. The state I was living in at the time offered two-year scholarships to the local community college as a way to help foster kids get a good start. I wasn’t sure what I wanted to do, so I decided on a business degree. I figured it could be used in a lot of different ways, of course. Anyhow, I met Jeremy when I went to a job fair right before graduation. He was a company headhunter and seemed interested in me as a person, not as a potential employee. I hadn’t really dated because I was ashamed of my meager beginnings. I didn’t have the fancy wardrobe a lot of girls my age had, you know?”

He nods, although he’s probably like a lot of men who don’t understand that a woman needs more than a few pair of jeans and some shirts. I have a respectable wardrobe now, but I’ve worked my ass off to achieve everything I have.

“He asked me out several times, but I wasn’t sure about him, so I kept saying no. Eventually, he wore me down and we began dating. He always portrayed himself as a gentleman, however, he treated waitstaff and anyone he considered beneath him with disdain. He was often mean to them, then he would play it off as a joke.”

I hear a rumble at my back as though Kodiak is growling but that’s not possible, is it? Turning, I quirk a brow at him, but he shakes his head as if to tell me I need to wait for any explanation he’s going to give me. Shrugging, I turn around and stare in the fireplace as I continue my story.

“About four months into dating him, he started pressuring for us to become intimate, but I wasn’t ready to go there. I was going to break up with him but honestly, I was scared to since there had been a few times where he pushed me when he didn’t like what I said to him.”

This time I know I hear a growling rumble at my words. “Kodiak, are you okay?”

“No one touches my mate,” he rumbles out, his voice hard to understand. I try to turn

to look at him, but he tightens his arms so I'm not able to do so.

What does he mean 'mate'? I push that thought back and sally forth, as one of my foster mothers used to say, just wanting to get this over with.

"One night, we were out for dinner and a man came to the table wanting to talk to him. I tried not to listen, but it sounded like they were discussing a drug deal or something like that. When I tried to ask Jeremy about it when he was taking me home, he became enraged and nearly crashed his car. Instead, when we pulled up in front of my apartment complex, he practically beat me to death while screaming that I better keep my mouth shut or he'd come back and finish the job. A neighbor found me and called 911 and I was taken to the hospital."

The big man behind me trembles and I have a feeling it's with a mixture of disgust and fury. It's weird I can sense that from him, but I know he isn't thinking those thoughts about me. Kodiak is upset that I was hurt. It makes what I'm saying a little easier to share.

"What happened then?" His voice is still gruff, but I can understand him again.

Sighing, I find myself stroking his arms, which is oddly soothing. His skin is warm and the tense muscles beneath my fingertips begin to relax which also releases some of the anxiety I feel. It's as if he has a magical essence or something, maybe pheromones, that are exuding a calming scent, because any other time I've either discussed what happened or thought about it, I end up having the mother of all panic attacks.

"I spent a week in the hospital because I ended up having to have surgery to remove my spleen, and also repair the damage he did to my left arm, hip, and face," I admit. "The police officer who came to take my statement is the one who helped me file a restraining order, and she also knew of an organization who would help me

disappear.”

“Why did she offer that if it was his first offense against you?” he asks. “Not that he should’ve laid his hands on you at all, but that seems kind of extreme to me. Just break up and go on with your life, right?”

“Because it wasn’t the first time Jeremy had physically assaulted someone he dated. One girl was permanently injured and is now in a nursing facility in a vegetative state,” I whisper. “Officer Bowlden was worried it would happen to me. Since I really had no ties to the area, it wasn’t a difficult decision to make, Kodiak.”

“Your instincts were warning you,” he replies, kissing the top of my head.

“I believe so. Jeremy wasn’t a good person or nice at all,” I tell him. “Officer Bowlden also told me that he was involved in the local drug trade, so he had a lot of sketchy friends who came around, which scared me.” Especially since they made sure I saw them when I was initially released from the hospital while I was regrouping to flee.

“You’re safe now,” Kodiak states, tightening his embrace to prove it.

“I just don’t know how he could’ve found me,” I muse. “Like I said, all my legal documentation was changed to my new name, and I moved as soon as I was able to drive. Officer Bowlden is the one who told me about Yukon Bluff. She said that it was one of the safest towns in the country.”

“We keep it that way,” he advises. “Well, we as in the club, that is. Callie, there’s a reason it’s one of the safest places.”

“Really? Why does Yukon Bluff carry that distinction?” I ask.

“Because the club is made up of shifters.” He swallows loud enough that I hear it. “People who can shift into animal forms and back again,” Kodiak clarifies.

My jaw drops and I start laughing. Surely, I misheard him, right? “There’s no such thing as shifters,” I manage to say between my giggles. “I mean, I’ve heard rumors in town, of course, but just figured they came from someone who had imbibed a little too much.”

When he doesn’t say anything to contradict my words, I sit there in silence, trying to wrap my head around his words. Shifters. Real.

No. That’s impossible. Right?

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Chapter Eight

Kodiak

My thoughts are all over the place, running wild in my head as my bear struggles with my distress and Callie's disbelief. I'm torn between handling her fucking ex and making him pay for what he did to her and trying to help my mate understand the truth. It's equally daunting as I hold her in my arms, debating if I want to see her expression and the doubt I can guess will be evident in her eyes.

I need to call Spike and get him updated, then see if Sly can run her ex's information. He'll be able to determine whether or not that fucker is sniffing around my mate. But first, I need to allay her fears about not being safe because I won't let anything happen to her.

Our mate, my bear grumbles. We won't let anything happen to her ever again.

I shake my head at his shenanigans. I'm well-aware that he and I are in this together, but for some possessed reason, he wants to be an asshole. Maybe it's because he's raging like I am at a man putting his hands on Callie in such a way she had to have surgery.

We'll make him suffer.

On that, we're united.

"The rumors are likely true," I admit, returning to our conversation. "Wolves running

around? An alligator in the water out at the kayak shop? The elephant in City Park? All truth, Sweetheart. Yukon Bluff is the perfect place for shifters who are misfits in their own packs, clans, clowders, or murders. While shifters as a whole don't advertise our existence, there are so many here in town that there's not much of a choice."

"So, they're real," she slowly concludes as she turns and faces me.

"Yes," I confirm, holding her gaze. I notice the moment she realizes what that means and how it connects to me.

"So, if shifters are real," she pauses as her eyes widen. "That means you're a shifter too, Kodiak."

"I am."

I watch as she blinks, nibbling on her bottom lip. "Uh, what kind?"

"A bear," I growl as my bear uses that moment to insert his gruff and powerful tone. The asshole's preening for our mate and it's not the right time!

Callie jumps.

Shit. She's scared.

My bear isn't upset. He's eager. I can feel his desire for her to see him and learn he's not a threat. He wants her to feel his fur and nuzzle into his warmth.

Before she can reply, I'm blurting out an offer to her. "I can show you."

"Show," she gulps, "me?"

“Yes.”

My bear is almost uncontrollable now. I’m wrestling him as I try to keep him from bursting free. He will never harm Callie but he’s so excited that it can end in disaster soon if I don’t give him the chance for a smooth transition.

“Say yes,” I breathe harshly, holding back another growl.

“Uh, okay?”

As soon as I have her agreement, I’m hauling her to her feet, and tugging her toward her backyard. Since I know the property so well and our club routinely follows up with clients, I don’t have to worry about someone seeing my bear. I’ve got a blanket wrapped tight around her shoulders as we exit the house, hurrying into the forest that borders the edge of the property.

My skin tingles as a shiver erupts all over my body. Heat follows as my limbs feel like they’re being pulled and stretched without my permission. The shift is never easy even after all these years, but it definitely beats those first few when I felt every single bone snap then reform into limbs. The pain of it doesn’t faze me but it’s a reminder that I’m not completely human.

I’m different than Callie. But she’s still my mate, even if I don’t understand how we’ll be compatible. The logistics don’t matter, only the fact that I’ve found her, and I won’t ever let her go. I’m her protector now and I’ll defend her viciously against any threat.

For the next few minutes, I go as far as I can into the forest until I’m forced to stop. My bones begin popping and snapping as we enter a small clearing, far enough from the neighborhood that my growls and snarls won’t alert anyone to danger or induce panic. Dark hair sprouts on my arms, legs, and face. The fur thickens as I lower to my

knees, keeping my gaze on Callie.

Her hands slap over her mouth as she stares, taking in the brutal changes overcoming me. “Oh, shit, Kodiak.”

My teeth elongate and I feel my jaw crack as the bone breaks. I finish the transformation with a roar, letting the wild beast inside me free. My vision sharpens. My hearing intensifies.

Callie’s heart is pumping fast as adrenaline spikes in her bloodstream. Her respiration rate increases. I see her pupils dilate. It’s a fight or flight response.

My mate is deciding on whether to run from me or toward me.

Everything inside my bear is on alert. He’s tracking her every movement, the rise and fall of her chest, her rapid breathing, and even her tense muscles as she stands before us, the blanket forgotten on the ground around her ankles. She dropped it without realizing it.

“Kodiak?” Her voice is only a whisper.

I slowly place my paws on the cold ground, moving in her direction. My head lowers as the bear submits to his mate in this instance only. He’s a predator. An alpha. He bows to no one but this slight female in a moment of vulnerability.

Callie blinks. Our eyes meet. And something. . . clicks . I see the hesitation disappear and her shoulders relax. It’s slight but my bear notices and a flash of white-hot desire courses through me. She accepts us.

I dare to close the remaining distance that separates us, bumping her hand with my snout.

She reaches out, sliding her hand over my muzzle, across my neck, and stops as she strokes the thick fur along my flank. “So soft.”

I’m in heaven. A low grunt leaves my chest and I resist burying my snout in her belly. There’s a strong pull to sink lower and press Callie into the grass on her back, sticking my nose into the apex of her thighs and scenting my female. I can already smell her musk and the need to taste her drives my bear wild. He’s salivating.

Callie doesn’t notice. She’s too busy petting my fur, digging her hands in and marveling at the wild beast being tamed by her touch. “You’re warm. Really warm. I’m not even cold, Kodiak.”

I huff at her comment. Bears are warm-blooded animals. We generate internal heat and maintain our temperature with ease no matter the weather.

Her head lowers and her cheek rests on my shoulder. “I thought this would scare me.”

I wait for her to continue as she pauses, anxious to hear more.

“But I’m not. I mean, I know you’re dangerous. You’re a bear.” She sighs. “I guess what I mean is that I know you won’t hurt me. Inside, you’re kind and good and everything Jeremy never was.”

With the reminder of her ex, I can’t hold back a growl, my teeth flashing at the thought of her being hurt.

“I know. You hate what happened to me. That’s why I know you’re not a violent person.”

I want to contradict that statement. I can be violent when it’s necessary. In my youth, it happened without my consent more than once. Every shifter has that ability. Our

beasts are animals with instincts that run contradictory to human nature, at least until we have better control of both halves.

“Kodiak? Will you change back now?” she asks.

I dip my head and agree.

Callie stands as I reverse the shift, returning to my human form. “Wow,” she gasps.

I glance down, noting my naked body and the large, muscled specimen she’s ogling. My cock is partially aroused by this experience and ready to impress my mate. Hanging low, it swings as I walk toward her, nearly reaching mid-thigh.

Noticing that she’s staring, I puff out my chest. “All yours whenever you want it.”

Her gaze snaps to mine. “Uh.” Her pink tongue flicks out, wetting her lips. “Okay.” That last part comes out like a little squeak.

My bear chortles inside, knowing it won’t be long before we claim her.

“Do you lose your clothes when you become the bear?”

“They’re torn apart during the process.” Maybe she missed that part because she focused on the changing limbs and popping bones.

I stride forward and pick up the blanket, wrapping it around her shoulders as I lead her back home. We’re silent until we’re inside and I lock the door. Knowing she might be uncomfortable seeing me naked, I sling a blanket around my hips and join her on the pallet.

A part of me wants to ask her thoughts about what she witnessed in the forest.

Another wants to kiss her and spend the rest of the night bringing her pleasure.

“You said something earlier. Will you elaborate on what you meant when you said the word ‘mate’?”

“For a shifter, it’s the equivalent of a spouse, but also much more. We believe we are fated to find the one woman who is our greatest love. A shifter’s mate is his other half. There’s a pull and connection so strong it forms a bond that’s unbreakable.”

“I see.” Her hands clench in her lap and she clears her throat. “And you think I’m your mate?”

“Not think. I know ,” I clarify, leaving no room for doubt.

“This is a lot to take in, Kodiak.”

I tilt her chin up until our eyes lock. “I know. I’m not making any demands, only being as honest as possible. For me, you’re it.” My mouth captures hers. It takes all the restraint I can muster to stay in control and pull away from her pillow-soft lips.

“Kodiak,” she breathes.

Fuck. I want her. This is torture , my bear whines.

“This is why I have to ask a question and I need an answer.”

She nods.

“What’s Jeremy’s last name, Callie?”

She doesn’t ask why because there’s only one reason and it’s obvious. “Jeremy

Thornberry.”

“Good girl,” I praise. “Thank you, Sweetheart. I need to make a call.”

Callie remains silent while I dial Sly.

After two rings, he answers. “Kodiak, what can I do for you, brother?”

“Someone is following my mate and harassing her,” I growl without being able to help myself.

Sly hisses. “Damn.”

“I think it might be her ex. His name is Jeremy Thornberry. Need you to dig deep and find whatever you can on this piece of shit.”

“I’m on it.”

“And there’s one more thing. We’re not sure how he found her. She changed her identity and moved away. There shouldn’t have been anything to lead him to Yukon Bluff.”

“I’ll see what I can dig up and swing by once I have anything.”

“Appreciate you, Sly.”

We end the call and I dial Spike, filling him in on everything that happened since we last spoke.

“Whoever drove that truck onto her driveway is dangerous. Her house isn’t secure.”

Callie winces and I kiss her temple.

“I’m sending Nix and Fang. Nothin’ should surprise you.”

Good. The storm has eased enough they can use one of the trucks. “No bikes. Don’t wanna tip off whoever is watchin’ her place.”

“You won’t know they’re there.”

He’s right. Fang’s wolf and Nix’s phoenix can handle the weather or any other issue without a problem. Both are excellent trackers and hunters.

“And one more thing. I need clothes,” I add.

“Why?” Spike asks, suspicion lacing his tone.

“Because Callie saw my bear.”

There’s silence on the line for a full ten seconds. “No shit?” he questions. He sounds shocked, which almost never happens.

“Yep. She loves him,” I reply, my bear preening inside of me at the way our mate reacted to him.

Callie arches a brow but doesn’t contradict me, which has me smirking back at her.

Love might not be the most accurate word to describe her reaction, but it will happen with time.

Of course. She won’t be able to resist us. My bear is nothing if not confident. We will bring her much pleasure, and cubs. Lots and lots of cubs.

He needs to get off his one track; I'd like a little bit of time of it just being the two of us before we're inundated with cubs.

"I'll send some shit for you to wear." I can hear the humor in Spike's voice.

"Thanks. More food too. We're gonna need it in the morning."

"I'll arrange it."

"Thanks, Pres."

After we finish the call, I pocket my phone. One glance at Callie and I can see she's exhausted. I don't plan to sleep in case her ex or any other threat shows up, so I pull her close, settling her between my legs as she snuggles against my chest. I'm careful to keep the blanket around my hips in place so Callie won't be poked by the persistent hard-on I've had since I shifted.

"Sleep, Sweetheart. I got you."

She yawns and I feel her relax. "Good night, Kodiak."

"Good night, Beautiful."

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Chapter Nine

Callie

Low voices wake me as my eyes blink, listening to the conversation a short distance away. I'm not coherent enough to understand the words, but somehow, I know it involves Jeremy. I yawn, noticing that I'm alone on the pallet and bundled in several blankets. The fire remains steady, and I know Kodiak is the reason. He never let the room grow cold or the fire die. Of course, his body heat kept me warm as well.

That bear of a man is handy to have around. I almost giggle at the double meaning.

Wow, a bear shifter. Kodiak isn't human.

The thoughts bounce around in my head as I sit up, blinking the sleep from my eyes. Last night almost feels like a dream but I can hear Kodiak in the kitchen and his deep timbre reminds me that all of it is real. He's speaking to someone I don't recognize, and I wonder if it's one of his shifter friends in his motorcycle club. Well, I won't find out if I don't go in there and see.

Standing up, I stretch, working out the kinks that sleeping on a pallet, no matter how comfortable, have given me. I miss my bed so much right now it's not funny! I know I'm a hot mess, so I scurry into the bathroom to freshen up and take care of business as well. Once I'm satisfied that I don't look like something the cat dragged in, I head into the kitchen.

"Good morning," I say, moving closer to Kodiak.

He leans down and kisses me on my temple, before pulling me into his side. “This is Sly, one of my club brothers. He’s our IT guru and the one I gave Jeremy’s information to last night. He brought over a few of his techie toys to check out the house. We have to figure out how Jeremy found you, Callie, especially since you virtually recreated yourself.”

“Hi, Sly, thanks for doing this,” I tell the tall, muscular man. I briefly wonder what kind of shifter he is, then figure that it might be rude of me to ask, so I keep quiet.

“Not a problem, Callie. Your ex and some of his buddies are in town, but we’ll get them sorted out. Unfortunately, the house is now compromised and you’re not safe staying here,” Sly replies.

“It’s my home,” I murmur, crushed that once again, Jeremy is trying to destroy me.

“We understand that, but for whatever reason, this prick is gunning for you, babe, and I can’t have that,” Kodiak says, growling a little bit. If the situation wasn’t so serious, I’d grin because his bear is showing.

“Where will I go? I have the Christmas party with Mercy Falls Refuge for the kids, Kodiak! I can’t... no, I won’t allow Jeremy to take from kids who often have less than nothing as it is! If I have to go somewhere else, it needs to be close enough so I can still help Cheryl,” I state.

Kodiak and Sly have a non-verbal conversation while I stand there, tapping my toes. Since they continue long after I think they should be done, I ask, “Did you find anything else out about Jeremy? When I met him and while we dated, he was a headhunter for a local corporation. But he was involved in some sketchy shit, including the drug deal I overheard, so maybe he’s decided crime pays better, who knows? What I still don’t understand is how he found me and why I’m even on his radar!”

Kodiak frowns and his grip tightens. He doesn't say anything, but I can tell he doesn't like being in the dark about Jeremy or his intentions. That makes two of us.

"I'll be checking the house in a few minutes for bugs or trackers," Sly replies. "As far as what he's involved in now, he's always been a member of the Lower East Primates. They're a gang who have moved up the food chain thanks to several of the members like Jeremy who are in the corporate setting. Jeremy and two others work for pharmaceutical companies. They've been repurposing the legitimate samples the company produces into street drugs. Unfortunately, their cooker isn't that good and there have been a shit ton of overdoses. As far as why he is after you, I have no clue, Callie."

"It's because you got away, Sweetheart," Kodiak says. "Pricks like him don't like to lose."

Maybe he's right. Or am I just a loose end?

"He tried to kill me," I remind Kodiak. "So, that doesn't make sense to me at all."

"Maybe it was meant to be a warning? He likely didn't think you'd run, Callie," Sly adds. "Let me check out the house before you pack stuff up. Kodiak, call Spike and let him know you'll be bringing her to the clubhouse. Between all of us, we'll keep her safe, so she doesn't miss out on what she's got planned."

Kodiak nods and pulls out his phone just as Sly grabs a small stick. He touches something on the side, and I see a red light glowing from the end, almost like one of those laser pointer things that cats go crazy over. The power's still out but with it being daylight, I open up the blinds and curtains so that we can all see.

"Callie, I just made you a hot cocoa," Kodiak says as he walks toward me, sliding his phone into his pocket. "Once Sly's done, we'll get you packed up and over to the

clubhouse, okay?"

I nod, taking the mug from him and inhaling the chocolatey goodness. "Mmm, this tastes so good," I reply after taking a sip. "I may keep you around just for this alone," I tease.

The heated look he gives me has other parts of me warming up and I realize that, despite us only knowing each other for such a brief time, he's my one. Of course, he says I'm his fated mate, so it's probably a good thing that I'm enamored of him as well. The only good thing about the awful relationship with Jeremy is that I know what I want now and Kodiak ticks off all those boxes. He's the holiday wish I never thought to ask for.

"Callie!" Sly calls out. "Can you come here, please?"

I rush over to where he's standing to see the stick is now flashing green as it's pointed to my... purse ? My favorite, festive, gorgeous holiday handbag. What in the world?

"Sly? Why is that stick that's pointed at my Christmas purse glowing green?" I ask.

"Because it has a tracker in it," he replies. "May I?" he questions, pointing to my bag. "I need to figure out where it is so I can disable it since I presume you still want to use this."

"I do," I say, "it's the one I use every Christmas."

"Is this one of the things you brought with you?" Kodiak questions.

I stop and think about when I left. It was close to the holidays, and I always use this purse since it brings me a lot of joy, even though I usually spend them alone. "Yeah, I

didn't take time to change purses when I finally left, just brought this with me, then swapped once I made it to Yukon Bluff."

"Here's the tracker," Sly says, pointing to the sparkly gem that opens and closes the purse. "You must've activated it when you swapped your purse this year."

I feel betrayed. Again. And, as my stomach roils. . . sick.

A violent tremor rips through me. The shaking starts and I feel my mug of cocoa slip from my grasp at the implication behind Sly's words. Before either man can move, I bolt toward the bathroom and drop to my knees in front of the toilet. I can't even be embarrassed right now that two extremely hot men are witnessing me lose the contents of my stomach because fear has clutched me so tightly, I'm not even aware of their presence.

"He's known where I was all along," I whisper as the sting of tears burns my eyes and they spill over, streaming down my face as my gut clenches.

"Shhh, I've got you, Callie," Kodiak murmurs, flushing the toilet then picking me up to set me on the bathroom counter. He takes a wet washcloth and gently cleans my face, his concerned gaze locking on my own. "Sly has taken the tracker out and destroyed it, so you can still use your special purse, Sweetheart."

I vehemently shake my head. There's no way I want to use something that he tainted with his need to keep tabs on me. "I'll get a new one, Kodiak," I reply.

"We'll do that, Callie, whatever you want," he promises. "Now, I need you to pack so we can get out of here. Spike is sending more brothers to keep an eye on the house while we're here and two of them will stay to protect your stuff, but I'm not leaving you alone. You're coming with me."

“There’s no other way, is there?” I ask, frustrated because Jeremy’s actions have once again forced me to leave somewhere I enjoy being. This house has become my home. It’s not fair!

“No.” His tone is commanding and while it’s one that would normally have me bristling with anger, I find it comforting that he’s willing to be responsible for my safety.

For so long now, it’s just been me. Even when I was in homes where there were a lot of children, I still felt like I was on the outside looking in, not really a part of anything. But with Kodiak, I feel included, as if I belong.

“Okay, let me brush my teeth then I’ll go pack. Has Sly checked out the rest of the house? I don’t want to accidentally bring anything that has a tracker in it,” I reply as he helps me off the counter.

“So far, the only one he found was in the clasp on your purse,” Kodiak says, kissing my forehead.

The fact he’s even willing to get near me after I threw up what felt like everything I’ve ever eaten says a lot about him as a man. Maybe it’s his shifter side, who knows? I have a ton of questions about how this will work; aren’t shifters immortal? Will I turn into one as well? My thoughts are running amuck as I brush my teeth and wash my face to get rid of the last of my tears.

You’re not getting any more of my tears, Jeremy, I think to myself as I make my way into my bedroom.

Going to the closet, I find my suitcase and roll it over to my bed before placing it on top and opening it. I take the smaller case that I use for my makeup and whatnot and head to my bathroom where I quickly pack up my stuff, including my shampoo and

conditioner. Satisfied that I have everything I'll need, I start pulling clothes out of the dresser. I mostly wear jeans with comfortable shirts, but with Christmas right around the corner, they're more festive in nature.

"Panties, bras, socks," I mutter to myself as I go back and forth from my dresser to my closet with items stacked in my arms. "Shoes, boots, pajamas," I continue. Once everything is folded neatly in my suitcase, I start getting my other necessities, like my phone charger, my laptop and charger, and my e-reader with its charger.

When I'm ready, I turn to Kodiak. "Let's go."

Chapter Ten

Kodiak

“We’re home,” I say as I shut off the engine on the truck. Nix brought it to me and offered to ride my bike back to the clubhouse. It’s far too cold for Callie to ride with me today but I can’t wait to get her on my bike again. I glance in her direction and see the worry lines etched into her flawless features.

She hasn’t said much since we left her house, and I’m worried that she’s overwhelmed. I hope like hell my brothers accept her because she’s my fated mate. She’s mine. Forever. Taking a deep breath, I exit the truck then head to the passenger side to help her out since the truck is higher than normal due to the fact that a lot of us are larger in stature because of our animals.

“You live here? I thought it was the clubhouse,” she finally says once she’s on firm ground.

“We bought the old ski lodge which has not only this building, but about thirty cabins. Some of us prefer more privacy, so we live in the cabins, but our club meetings are in the lodge itself,” I reply. “I do have a room here, but I also have my own cabin for those times when I need to be alone.” Hibernation is a real thing for this bear, but I suspect with a mate, those days may be over. “We redid a lot of the interior to suit our needs, so even here, we have suites that are more like mini apartments versus rooms like you’d find in a hotel. Since it was an active ski lodge before it shut down, there were many amenities already in place like the bar which we expanded, a game room, an indoor pool, and an exercise room.”

“Wow,” she says on a sigh. “The outside is gorgeous and what I saw the other day when I met with Spike was impressive.”

I hope she loves it here and feels safe because now that my mate has come with me, I can't handle the thought of her ever leaving. This is my home, but I want to share it with her. I've found my mate, so everything I own is hers. It's a given. My bear agrees. He's preening inside of me again, wanting to show all of his favorite places, but now is not the time for his shenanigans.

Seeing her shiver a little bit, I curl her into my body to take the brunt of the wind and maneuver us to the front door. “Let's get you inside, Callie. I'll get one of the guys to grab your bags.”

While I'd love to haul her off to what'll be her cabin, I suspect it'll be safer for her if all of us stay in the clubhouse. We'll be able to defend it a lot easier than if we were scattered throughout the property. First things first, I need to have Spike send out a message for Church. It's not our normal day at all, but we have to get ahead of this fucker Jeremy so my mate can enjoy the rest of the holiday season.

I suspect most of my club brothers are already aware of the threat but gathering in one place at the same time eliminates any miscommunication and places us all on the same page fast. I'm hoping we can handle business in less than an hour so I can spend my time with Callie. She's all I want and the need to solidify our bond is becoming impossible to wrangle.

I ignore my bear and his response to that because I'm fighting lust, need, and rage that my mate is a target. Anything else might push me over the edge.

We enter the clubhouse and I steer Callie toward the bar. It's open, bright, and warm. There are plenty of cozy spots for her to relax and I suspect she'll want to be close to the fireplace. Spike builds a fire year-round. The hills can get cool no matter what

season we're in and since he's a dragon, it seems to calm him when he's close to the flames.

We only make it a few feet inside when I stop. Everyone is here. All my brothers have gathered in the bar as if not a single one wants to miss meeting Callie. I'm annoyed for about two seconds until I realize the reason. She's their hope that mates for all of them exist and they'll find them someday. Plus, they're curious.

Callie instinctually moves into my chest, and I hold her to me, ticking my chin at the group of misfits. "These are my club brothers, but also the others I call family. You know Spike," I remind her, gesturing to my pres.

"Hi again, Spike."

"You're welcome here as long as you want to stay," Spike says. The glare he gives each of my brothers dares them to object to his command, which I know they won't do. None of us want to rile his dragon; he's fearsome enough as it is, but when he's in a rage, he's practically unstoppable.

Callie nods. "I appreciate that."

There are over a dozen shifters, and I take the time to introduce each one. It's important that she knows who friend and foe is because if someone manages to get inside, I don't want her to trust the wrong person. The introductions finish and Spike gestures to the chapel.

"Church. We've got shit to discuss."

The bar nearly empties. I'm standing with Callie and Spike when he grips my shoulder, squeezes, and leaves us alone.

“What’s going on?” She sounds tired, which has me itching to get this over with so I can get her settled.

“A mandatory meeting. We might be a few minutes. Anything you need before I go?” I ask.

“I don’t know.” She presses her hand to her forehead, and I lead her to the couch.

Callie flops down and turns on her side, facing the flickering flames of the logs. They won’t die down anytime soon. Spike seems to have a knack for creating the perfect, long-lasting fire.

“Babe, you okay?”

“Just tired.”

“The kitchen is stocked if you want anything to eat or drink.” I point to the closest hallway. “Bathrooms are that way.”

“Okay.”

I turn to leave when she reaches for my hand. “Wait. Am I going to be alone while you’re in church?”

I chuckle. “Sweetheart, you’re never alone. I might be behind a wall but there isn’t a single shifter here that won’t hear someone coming long before they attempt to open the door.”

Mollified, she smiles. “Then I’ll take a nap until you come back to me.”

I lift her hand and kiss her soft skin before letting go. “Rest. I won’t be long.”

Her eyes are closing as I walk away, and I know my bear will alert me the moment he senses that she's awake. I briefly wonder how much stronger our bond will become once I've fully claimed her, then push it to the side so I don't walk into the room with a raging hardon.

When I enter the chapel, all eyes are on me as I shut the door and take my seat.

Spike lifts the gavel and slams it down on the wooden table. "Church is in session. First order of business, Kodiak and his mate. Tell 'em what you did, V.P."

My grin is too fucking wide. "I showed Callie my bear."

Shocked, no one utters a word.

"She didn't freak out either." I shrug. "My pretty mate petted my fur," I brag. "She nuzzled my bear with her nose and said I was soft and warm."

"She didn't run?" Nix asked.

"Nope."

"Or scream?" Chomp clarified.

"No. She seemed to be in awe."

"That's 'cause your dick was swingin' in the breeze," Spike sputters out through a laugh.

I can't deny it helped. "She sure stared long enough."

Chuckles erupt around the table.

Any humor vanishes as I straighten, clenching my hands over the table's surface. "Her ex is stalking her. He already beat her badly enough to put her in a hospital once. She had to have surgery for fuck's sake. I'm not gonna allow him to get close enough for that to happen again."

My brothers pound the table with their fists in agreement.

Sly stops clicking keys on his laptop, speaking as the room quiets. "Jeremy Thornberry is bad news. His association with the Lower East Primates will probably cause the club problems. We engage him, it might start a war."

"Lower East Primates?" Kong asks, slamming his hand on the table. "That's the club who forced me out."

Shit. I forgot his connection to them.

"Are they in Yukon Bluff?" Kong stands, pushing away from the table. I can see his ape struggling as steam blows from his flaring nostrils.

Sly nods. "I believe so, yes."

"What's the connection to Callie?" Fang asks as he folds his arms across his chest. "I knew I smelled something off around her place."

Nix agrees, nodding his head but staying silent.

"So, her ex is a member?" Kong clarifies.

"He's using his pharmaceutical company's resources to make drugs for the Primates. They're pushing that shit in the area. So far, it hasn't touched Yukon Bluff," Sly informs us.

“But it might,” I fill in. “This asshole wants to hurt her again and sell drugs in our city. Ain’t happening,” I growl.

“No, it’s not.” Spike leans forward, holding the gaze of every member in the room. “Callie is Kodiak’s mate and his ol’ lady. She’s protected. We don’t back down from a threat or a fight.”

The loud outburst that follows soothes my bear as he hears the voices of his brethren promising to protect our female at any cost.

“Callie will be staying here in the clubhouse. If trouble comes, we’ll be ready,” Spike advises.

We form a plan and Spike ends church. I’m the first out of the door, heading directly to my precious mate. She’s in a deep sleep so I don’t wake her, gently sliding my hands underneath her body to lift her. Her warm breath tickles my neck as her head rests on my shoulder. Before I can stop myself, I’m nuzzling my nose to her cheek, inhaling the sweet scent of her that fills me with longing.

I don’t think I can wait much longer to claim her.

Until we arrived here, I didn’t think she was ready. I forced myself to be patient. But something changed after she saw my bear. Her acceptance opened the door for intimacy. I’m sure she has questions about how it all works. Hell, I do as well because I’m the first of all of us to find my mate.

Once I’m in my suite, I gently place her on the bed, then grab the suitcases that were left outside my door and bring them inside. I hate waking her up because I know she’s beyond exhausted, but she needs to eat at least.

“Callie? Sweetheart?” I call out. I don’t want to startle her, so I try to temper my

voice which tends to come out loud most of the time.

“Kodiak? Where are we?” she asks, rousing from her nap.

My bear chuffs inside at the fact we were able to carry her without her waking up. There are times I wonder about his sanity because the oddest things seem to impress him. Shaking my head, I look at her and reply, “Our suite, where we’ll stay until we find out what’s going on with Jeremy’s crew.”

“Oh. Um, do you think I could take a shower?”

The thought of her naked beneath the cascading water, all wet and warm, has me clenching my fists as desire courses through my body. Now is not the time, but it needs to happen soon because I’m holding on by a thread.

“Yeah, let me grab some fresh towels for you. We’ll go downstairs to eat when you’re ready, okay?” I ask as I go into the linen closet and pull out what I think she’ll need.

She walks toward me with her clothes in her arms, a smile gracing her beautiful face. It amazes me that despite everything she’s gone through, she has a gentle, kind soul and she’s willing to help others. Most people I know, whether they’re shifters or not, would’ve thrown up their middle finger at the world and looked out for themselves. But not Callie; she’s worried about the foster kids in the next town over having a nice Christmas.

We’ll get the brothers to help her, my bear advises. Cubs, er kids need presents and we’ll give them a good Christmas.

Yes, my club brothers will help. Since I agree with my bear, I don’t say anything else. I merely lean in and kiss Callie’s cheek. Once again, her delectable scent envelops

me, and I have to grind my teeth to keep from pulling her into my arms.

“Thank you, Kodiak,” she says. “For everything .”

As she closes the bathroom door behind her, I think of the gym. It’s a bit random but my bear is already working out how our mate will fit into every aspect of our life. I mentally start thinking of additional classes we can post at the gym for those who are into that kind of thing. We don’t do CrossFit per se, but we offer daily workouts for the diehard gym rats. Maybe it’s time to change things up and offer more variety. Peanut already spoke to me about it last week.

Sighing, I straighten up my room while Callie showers, emptying out two dresser drawers and making some space in the closet. It’s only temporary as I’ll order a dresser that’ll match my stuff, both here at the clubhouse and at my cabin.

Because what my mate needs, she’s going to get.

Chapter Eleven

Callie

It doesn't take me long to get cleaned up, although I'm beyond impressed at the size of Kodiak's shower. I swear it's as big as my whole bathroom at my house. I briefly wonder if the one at his cabin is as large, then push that thought to the back of my head. This feels so good I don't want to turn off the water. The rainfall design feels like I'm standing in the middle of a summer storm with soft droplets of warm water cascading over my body. I could get used to this.

My thoughts drift to Kodiak and I'm still a bit blown away at how attracted I am to him. I definitely don't trust others easily, especially after the debacle with Jeremy. The biggest thing that bothers me is that now Kodiak and his club brothers are involved. I don't want anyone to get hurt, especially not the bear of a man who has been steadily pulling me into his life. More than that, I don't want trouble brought to the club because of me.

"This isn't you, Callie," I murmur to myself as I turn off the water and wrap myself in fluffy brown towels. They're exactly what I would think a bear would use, extra thick, wide, and generous as I dry my hair, trying to pull as much water from the strands as I can before I leave the bathroom. I wasn't sure he'd have a blow dryer, but I found it underneath the sink cabinet, still in the box.

It's almost as if he was prepared for me, but that's not possible. Is it? Shrugging, I finish with my hair, get dressed, then waver between putting makeup on or not. Finally, I decide to just go with my moisturizer. Gathering up my dirty clothes, I

place them in the hamper so I can ask him where I can do some laundry. It feels oddly domesticated and when those butterflies start low in my gut, I have to take several calming breaths.

If this is how I feel and we've really only slept next to one another for warmth, I'm in big trouble where Kodiak's concerned. Oh, he's kissed me, but not my lips, although forehead and temple kisses are quickly becoming a favorite of mine, that's for sure. The thought of his lips against mine, however, have desire pooling in my lady bits.

A thought crosses my mind and I decide to ask Kodiak. Opening the bathroom door, a wave of steam precedes me which has him turning, a smirk on his face. Waving my hands, I look at him and say, "Sorry about that, I like warm water."

He chuckles while standing from the recliner that's off to the side near where the huge television is mounted on the wall. For this being a temporary room, it's definitely well appointed. It feels cozy and inviting, even though Kodiak tends to come across as grumpy and surly. At least with others; but with me, he's gentle.

"I have a question, Kodiak," I tell him, moving closer, taking care to let my hips sway a little and catch his attention.

"What's up, Sweetheart?" he asks as his gaze sweeps over me, dragging back to my eyes.

"Do you think it's possible that the reason Jeremy is so hellbent on finding me again is because I told him no?" I question. "I mean, he pushed for more, but my gut wouldn't let me go through with it, you know?"

A low growl comes from deep in his chest and I see him clenching his fists. Surprisingly, I'm not scared; I know he says I'm his mate, so it's probably got something to do with that whole male thing.

“Maybe? From what Sly unearthed about him, he doesn’t like to lose what he deems as his,” Kodiak finally says.

It’s clear he doesn’t like that anyone has a claim on me, especially another man. Is that part of the mating bond? Kodiak feeling overprotective, jealous, and possessive seems to fit with that notion. To be honest, I like it.

Maybe I’ve read too many romance novels, but I want to be desired, needed, and devoured by a brute of a man like my bear.

Wait. My bear. I’m already thinking of him as mine too. It’s surprising but not unwelcome.

Who wouldn’t fall for a handsome protective hero like Kodiak?

“It’s something to consider,” I reply, placing my palm on his chest as I reach him. “Now, you mentioned something about food?”

His large hand wraps around my lower spine and his teeth flash in a smile. “I’m here to satiate all your needs.”

Yeah, I don’t doubt that. The best part? I’m looking forward to it.

The kitchen is full of Kodiak’s brothers, and I feel all eyes on us as we enter. Suddenly shy, I find myself moving closer to him as he all but growls until they go back to their conversations. Food is served buffet style and the quantities of dishes and their overflowing metal pans are mind blowing to me. This is enough food to feed an army. But, seeing the size of some of these men and knowing that they’re shifters, it’s not totally out of the realm of possibility that they have to eat more. Another question for me to ask at some point.

I have a feeling this will happen often, and my curiosity will take time to be appeased. Kodiak leads me to the food and hands me a tray, placing silverware, a plate, a bowl, and napkins down before he gestures for me to go first. The smells hit my nose as the lids lift and my mouth waters as the aroma of bacon, sausage, syrup, buttery pancakes, and seasoned potatoes send my stomach rumbling. I add a bit of everything because it all looks so delicious, including the scrambled eggs with colored peppers, onions, and cheese. I add baked oatmeal and fresh fruit, finally moving toward the drinks.

“Go ahead and snag a spot, babe. I’ll bring whatever you want to drink to you.”

“Orange juice and coffee. Hazelnut creamer if you have it. Two sugars.”

“You got it.”

Kodiak joins me and we dig in, too hungry to make conversation until we’re nearly finished. Once our plates are empty and I’m sipping my coffee, Kodiak clears the dishes. As soon as he sits back down, club members join us.

Kodiak growls and stands, reaches for me, and pulls me onto his lap. A few of the guys smirk or laugh. I can tell my grumpy bear doesn’t care what they think about it and surprisingly, neither do I.

Spike sits closest to me and ticks his chin, something I’ve seen the guys do several times in the short time since I arrived. “So, this ex of yours,” he begins.

“Jeremy,” I interject as I sense he’s gathering his thoughts.

“Jeremy in a gang?” Spike asks.

A gang? I almost laugh. He’s a bully and an abusive prick but that’s only because I’m

weaker and smaller than him. “Not that I know of, Spike. If you’re asking if he’s a threat to any of you, I highly doubt it.”

Grins appear on multiple faces.

“No,” Spike answers with a slight head shake. “You ever see him wear a cut?”

A cut? I must look confused because Peanut, who isn’t tiny by any means, points to his leather vest. “That’s what we call these. They’re our colors. It signifies our allegiance to a specific club.”

“Shifted Misfits,” I murmur, understanding finally dawning. “Hmmm. No. I don’t think I ever did. I don’t remember ever seeing one.”

“That’s good,” Kodiak rumbles from his chest, holding me closer. “Ever see Jeremy with any guys who were wearing a cut?”

“Not that I recall.” I mean, it wasn’t like we lived together or anything. I only ever saw him in suits or business casual style clothes. I don’t even think he owns anything as casual as the jeans and t-shirts the men sitting around me wear like a uniform of sorts.

Some of the tension in the room eases. It catches me by surprise because I didn’t sense it before now. I was probably too caught up in Kodiak to notice. Not that it’s difficult to get lost in him; he’s everything I never knew I needed and while I’m still a little wary about him saying I’m his mate, I’m willing to explore a relationship with him.

“I hear you organize stuff,” Nix blurts out into the silence, and Kodiak snorts.

“I do.” The change of subject is welcome. I don’t like thinking about my ex. He’s

caused me enough heartache. “I’m a professional organizer. I help businesses or individuals better utilize their space and arrange their belongings or inventory to promote wellbeing, productivity, and better functionality.”

I almost giggle at the looks on their faces. It’s priceless. Most look confused while the rest look shocked that a person can make a career out of what I’m doing.

“The point is to reduce clutter, avoid costly errors, and develop good habits that will increase success,” I add. “So many people become overwhelmed, which impacts all aspects of their health. By organizing their homes, they’re able to enjoy their sanctuary, and at work, they’re able to be more productive, which helps their employer.”

I’m in my element so it’s hard not to continue but I don’t want to lose their attention now that I have it, so I rein it in and go back to what my focus is this year.

“But that’s not what’s driving me this Christmas. It’s the kids in foster care who don’t have much for the holidays or even many toys that are all their own. They need coats, gloves, and hats for the winter. Snow boots, scarves, and maybe their own blanket to snuggle with.”

Kodiak squeezes me and drops a kiss on my hair. He knows my personal experiences have given me insight others will never have. Someday, maybe, I’ll share it with his brothers. Because of how he reacted, the embarrassment and humiliation I’ve carried most of my life has eased to a dull roar. None of what I went through was my fault at all; I was merely an innocent byproduct of others. I’m proud of the life I’ve built from virtually nothing.

“I want them to rip into those presents and see their little faces light up with wonder because Santa knows what they need and he’s going to deliver,” I say.

“That’s why we want to help,” Fang replies.

“No kid should go without,” Chomp adds.

I’m beaming a smile at the guys when I poke Kodiak with my elbow. “And I’m really looking forward to seeing this big bear dress up like Santa and pass out those presents.”

Snickers follow as Kodiak grunts.

“You think you could find out some info on the kids? Sizes, wish lists, that sort of thing?” Spike questions, interrupting my mental thoughts of seeing Kodiak with little ones climbing on him.

I nod at Spike. “Sure.”

“Because all of us want to make sure this happens for the kids, and they have a Christmas to remember.”

Wow, I’m touched by their generosity. With the items we’re gathering from local businesses, it’ll put us in a surplus for the kids and provide all they need.

“I’m so thankful and I know the kids will be too,” I reply, eager to reach out to Cheryl so I can get the information Spike asked me to gather.

The afternoon passes quickly and soon I’m stifling a yawn, leaning my head on Kodiak’s shoulder. In front of us, the fire flickers, steadily providing heat that warms the entire floor.

“Let’s go back to the room,” he suggests, and I rise from the couch with him, curling my fingers around his as he leads me down the hall.

Outside, I lean against the wall as he turns his key in the lock, and the door swings open. “It’s hard to believe we’ve only known each other a few days.”

He turns to me, raking his gaze over my body from my toes up to my eyes. The hunger in them causes my stomach to flutter. Heat blooms between my thighs and I feel my nipples harden with desire.

Kodiak sniffs and his upper lip lifts in a snarl. “I love the smell of your arousal.”

I blink, surprised. “You can smell that?” I ask, shyness overcoming me that how I’m feeling isn’t a secret to him.

His lips twitch as he cages me in, his big body a solid wall of muscle I long to trace with my fingertips. I want to feel his body heat pressing to mine. I need to memorize every contour of his hard body and boy is he hard. I can feel the bulge pressing into my lower belly and I squirm, wanting more contact, less clothing. My arms lift and I brush my hands up to his biceps. His strength emanates from him, making me feel protected and safe.

“Mate,” he growls low. “Mine.”

Oh, I must be tapping into his bear. His voice sounds far deeper and grittier.

“Say it,” he orders.

“Yours,” I comply without hesitation. And it’s so very true. I’ve never wanted anyone like I do with this wild, burly man.

His pupils dilate as the words leave my lips. He’s staring at them, and it’s taking too long for him to claim my mouth. Now that I think about it, it’s time he claims me in every way.

“Kiss me, Kodiak.”

Need flashes in his eyes. His head lowers.

“My bear,” I whisper just as his lips touch mine.

That must unleash something primal in him because Kodiak picks me up, wraps my legs around his waist, and enters the room, kicking the door shut behind us with his boot. He doesn't waste time but goes straight to his bed where he lays me back against the dark comforter.

His eyes darken as his gaze sweeps over me. “Need to taste you.”

Oh. Yes! I'm all for that if he wants to do this first before we have sex. I'm in for every position and kinky idea he has because he makes me feel things I've never felt, and I don't want to hold back.

“Callie?”

I nod in reply, hardly able to keep the excitement from my voice as I answer. I've not had a lot of experience with intimacy and I'm guessing he senses that because my handsome protector is taking things slow. Our eyes stay locked as he reaches for the button on my jeans, unsnapping it with deft fingers and then tugging the zipper down. I hold my breath as he slips the denim over my hips and down my legs, taking a moment to stare into my eyes.

“I want this,” I assure him. “Please.”

A smirk rides his features before his gaze drops to my calves, glides over every inch as he makes his way up my thighs, and finally stops as he focuses on the apex, taking a ragged breath. His fingertips brush across my skin and I'm happy I chose black

silky underwear and not something less sexy.

As he pulls my panties down, exposing my pussy, I can hardly breathe. I'm trembling as he removes them, eager for more as Kodiak tugs my bottom toward the edge of the mattress.

"Open for me, baby."

I do.

"Wider."

God, that guttural tone as he orders what he wants me to do is addicting. Kodiak pauses to remove his boots, pants, flannel, and shirt. He's the hottest man I've ever seen. Powerfully built, I can't help but salivate as I see his muscles ripple with every movement and the dark hair on his chest. His shoulders seem even broader when he's undressed. He towers over the bed as I watch him, a grin twitching his lips. He knows I like what I see.

My gaze finds the tattoo on his chest. A bear paw in dark ink forever marking his left pectoral muscle. I wonder if that's a shifter thing or he got it because of another reason.

He's moving toward me before I think to ask. His palms circle my hips as he leans in, resting between my thighs as he drops to his knees. I'm thinking he's going to take forever to finally bring his mouth to my center, but my bear surprises me.

Kodiak drops his head, inhales, and dives in.

I jolt with surprise, arching my back at the rush of pleasure that fills me. His mouth is warm against my skin but it's his wicked tongue, lapping between my folds that

sends waves of desire through my lower body. It's so carnal and intimate that I moan.

"Taste so fucking good," he murmurs before he slides a thick finger inside me.

As he pumps in and out, his tongue moves from my core to my clit, sucking hard.

"Kodiak," I gasp. My hand moves to his head, and I grip his hair, trying to hold back as the urge to move my hips takes over.

"Do it," he answers with a growl. "Pull my hair. Ride my face. This is all for you."

He's right. I can let go. He's got me, and I trust him implicitly.

Kodiak adds another finger, stretching me as he pistons them in tandem with his assault on my clit. "Goddamn, you're tight. I know you're gonna grip my cock so fucking good."

I don't react to his dirty words, too caught up in the sensations coursing through my body, the heat that's steadily rising as I begin to sweat, and the tension building in my core. I can't get enough of his touch, his mouth, or the need that's taking over.

When Kodiak curls his fingers, reaching a spot deep inside me, I reach the peak and topple over, coming hard as I wail his name. The sloppy, wet sounds of my pussy and his fingers fill the room with my cries. It's so sinful that I keep riding his face, barely noticing that he's lapping at me with zeal, as turned on by my orgasm as I am.

It's the craziest, most erotic moment I've had. No man has ever done this to me before and now I understand why women enjoy it. I'm eager to turn and do the same for him but my eyes flutter as I come down from the high. My thighs are still shaky as he withdraws, licking his fingers clean as our eyes meet.

“Delicious. I want to taste you every fucking night, Callie.”

“That’s a first for me,” I say as I feel heat blossom in my cheeks, growing warmer as I admit what I haven’t up to now. “It was incredible.”

The lust fades as I see his expression soften. He’s pleased by my admission but also something else. I don’t know until he tells me, draping his body over mine as he rises.

“I’m honored to be your first.”

I almost cry at the gentleness in his tone. He’s serious and I can fall in love with him just from that sweet sentence alone.

Kodiak’s lips press to mine, and the kiss is everything. It’s hungry, sensual, and exploratory but also contented if that’s possible. I see it in his face as he pulls back. The man is happy and sated even if he didn’t come. It surprises me.

“We’ll get to more later,” he promises, picking me up to lift me higher up the bed.

As he’s wrapping a blanket around us, spooning me from behind, I whisper what’s in my heart. “I think I’m falling for you, Mr. Bear.”

“That’s good. You already have me and my bear.”

I close my eyes, listen to his steady breathing, snuggle into his warmth, and drift into peaceful slumber.

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Chapter Twelve

Kodiak

I 'm unsure how long we've been sleeping when I wake up to Callie's hands roaming over my chest. "Callie?" I murmur, my voice husky with sleep. "Are you okay, Sweetheart?"

"Need you, Kodiak," she whispers.

Well, that definitely wakes me up, especially my dick which has been rock hard since I got my first taste of her last night. Unfortunately for me, she came so hard, she pretty much went out like a light, although I suspect the past few days with her soon-to-be dead ex tracking her every move as well as the storm played a role as well.

Rolling toward her so we're face-to-face, I cup hers in my hand and kiss her, pouring out all my longing for her as my mate, my other half into it. From the little she's shared, I know she's likely got minimal experience, if any at all. The one thing that makes me and my bear gloat is she never let him near her intimately. I raise the t-shirt I slipped on her after she fell asleep and cup one of her swollen, heavy breasts in my hand and begin plumping it while stroking my thumb across the nipple until it's distended and she's making mewling noises in the back of her throat.

She pulls back slightly, her breath coming out in pants and says, "That feels so good, Kodiak."

"It's gonna feel even better," I promise, lowering my head to take her nipple into my

mouth. As I lick, lightly nip, and suckle it, her legs twist restlessly against me, occasionally brushing against my erection. The sensation is almost electric, and I'm suddenly grateful that I have solid control, otherwise her innocent movements would have this over before we got to the really good stuff.

I switch back and forth between her breasts until the scent of her arousal is so strong, I can't resist another taste. After last night's feast, I know I've found my favorite thing to enjoy; her. Moving down her body, I push her legs apart and settle between them before taking a deep breath.

"Are you... are you smelling me?" she asks, sounding shocked. I barely manage to hold back my chuckle because she obviously doesn't remember me doing it last night.

"Best perfume I've ever scented," I admit, leaning in and swiping my tongue through the lips of her pussy, which is already coated in her arousal.

"I don't even know what to say to that," she murmurs, almost to herself. "I should be embarrassed that you can tell when I want you, but I think it'll make it a lot easier, don't you?"

Chuckling against her pussy, I slip one of my fingers inside, and groan at how tightly her sheath grips me. If it feels this good and it's only my index finger, I may end up dying once my dick is buried deep inside of her. "For what?" I question, realizing I hadn't paid attention.

"For you to know when I want you," she shyly confesses. "You make me feel things I've never felt before, Kodiak."

Our mate likes us, my bear tells me. No shit, Sherlock, her dripping wet pussy is a good indicator. But I think I'll hold off mentioning that my brothers will also be able

to scent her arousal because I will not have my Callie, my reason for living, upset or mortified. I make a mental note to lay the law down the next time we have church, but for now, I've got a claiming to take care of with my Callie.

"I'm always gonna want you, my mate," I reply, adding a second finger to start stretching her. I come by my name honestly, and I'm big all over. The last thing I want to do is hurt her, although I know there'll likely be some pain when I finally enter her. My hope is I'll have her so full of lust that she'll barely feel it, so I begin a shallow thrusting while I flick my tongue over her distended clit.

"Kodiak," she keens out just as I feel her pussy begin fluttering then clamp down on my fingers when her orgasm hits. Glancing up, I see her back is arched as her fingers grip the sheets. I gentle my ministrations as she rides out her release until she shudders and tries to pull away, then I slowly make my way up her body, dropping kisses as I go.

"This may sting," I tell her before capturing her lips with mine once again as I notch the head of my cock at her entrance. Her slight moan has me stopping in my tracks, afraid I'm already hurting her.

"Don't stop," she pleads, her legs going around my waist as she lifts her hips, urging me forward.

Slowly, I enter her, my lips and tongue nipping and licking along her collarbone before I take a nipple into my mouth and begin sucking. I hear her gasp as her hands grip my shoulders while her pussy grows even wetter, allowing me to slide further inside. My dick feels like it's in a vise right now, and a trickle of sweat rolls down my forehead to fall onto her chest as she sighs in pleasure. When I feel a slight barrier, I know I need to forewarn her.

She's a virgin. Our perfect, innocent mate.

“Callie, are you ready?” I ask, not focusing on my bear or I’ll never be able to stay gentle. “This next bit... it might hurt, Sweetheart.”

“It’s okay, Kodiak,” she says, reassuring me.

Deciding to just rip it off like a bandaid, I thrust forward until I’m seated fully inside her, counting backward from one hundred to keep from blowing my load. The tiny hitch in her breathing has me leaning in to kiss her deeply until she starts to tentatively move, at which time I take over with long, steady thrusts as her passion grows higher.

“Fuck, Callie, you undo me,” I murmur, swiveling my hips so I hit her clit on each thrust. “You’re mine, Sweetheart,” I growl out as I feel tingles at the base of my spine.

She screams out my name, her body locking as her pussy tightens around my cock so tightly, I can barely move. Her eyes are wide with wonder and I’m grateful for my shifter sight which is allowing me to see her despite the fact our room is dark. I manage three more thrusts before I’m bellowing out her name as my cum fills her tight, wet sheath, before my canines elongate and I grip the area between her neck and shoulder with my teeth and bite down.

I feel the mate bond snap into place, which sends desire coursing through me again as though I never came mere seconds ago. As I begin moving again, I lave the area with my tongue, which seals the mark, and a sense of satisfaction rolls through me when I smell the difference in her scent.

She’s ours, my bear croons. Forever and ever.

Yes, yes, she is, but right now, my focus is on making my mate shatter once again.

I crack an eye open hours later, maybe longer. My body is fatigued but in the best sense. I had Callie so many times my cock throbs as I hold her. If she wakes and asks me, I'll go again. It's like I haven't already come ten times and I'm still in my youth, hardening again at the mere thought of filling her. Oh, I filled her a lot.

Even now, I can feel the stickiness between her thighs. She'll need a shower and I'll be careful with her tender, swollen bits. I hoped she wasn't in pain. My thoughts are interrupted when I catch the scent of blood. It's minimal but still present.

Moving Callie until her head rests on a pillow, I make sure she's comfortable before I check the sheets. There's a few droplets of blood and a mixture of our combined fluids. Guilt rushes through me. I tell myself it's the result of losing her virginity, but I worry that I got too eager in my claiming.

Wow. I claimed my mate.

She wears our mark. My bear is so fucking proud he's preening.

I forget the inspection of the sheets and my gaze locks on her neck. The tender, reddened flesh proves she's taken to our bite. This is all so new. I don't know if it'll hurt or take long to heal. Instinctually, I knew to lick over it, allowing my saliva to help with healing. But since Callie is the first human woman to accept one of us as a mate, I don't know how this is going to go.

None of us ever prepared for mates, let alone a human one.

I've never brought a woman into my den as I've done with Callie. She's the first to enter my suite and the rightness of it settles some of the uncertainty clawing at my composure. I love that she's here, tucked into my bed. It's where she belongs.

And where I plan to keep her.

The smell of our combined cum hits my nostrils and I inhale. No amount of sex will ever be enough for me. After that first deep thrust, burying deep in her tight pussy, I knew I was done. It won't be long before she's pregnant at this rate. Longing flashes through me. Cubs.

We'll have many, my bear informs me.

I hear the clatter of my phone on my nightstand and grab it to keep from waking Callie up. Glancing at the screen, I see that Spike started a group text between the brothers for the foster kids. Grinning, I start reading it, rolling my eyes at some of the comments.

Spike: Okay, brothers, here's where we'll discuss the kids.

Sly: We need lists first, Spike.

Spike: Callie will get them.

Kong: If they want bikes, the money we get from the rentals will cover those, we just need ages so we get the right sizes.

Sly: Don't forget helmets, Kong.

Kong: Got it noted.

Peanut: The gym will get the coats and winter stuff.

Phoenix: Don't forget, we'll be getting donations from the community as well.

Spike: We can use those to fill in, of course.

Chomp: What if we offer season passes to the kayak park for the older kids?

Fang: I can get some passes to the zoo too. The holiday lights are up.

Peanut: Good idea. Bet the kids haven't gotten to see that yet.

Spike: Several of us were in the system, brothers, so I think we're all pitching in whatever Callie and Cheryl needs.

Spike: But these ideas are all great.

Jet: Why isn't Kodiak answering?

I see several laugh emojis pop up. Fuckers. They know I've been claiming my mate.

Spike: I had to put in headphones.

Peanut: Shoved a pillow over my head.

Chomp: Went on a hunt.

Fang: Howled at the moon.

Sly: Took a cold shower.

There's an obscene amount of emojis now. I snicker at them all, shaking my head when I see a few eggplants. For fuck's sake. I swear I won't go easy on any of them when it's their turn. All I have to say is they better not cause Callie any stress at all with looks or gestures. Otherwise, I'll be insisting they meet me out back.

Still, I know they're joking. But I don't feel a bit sorry they heard anything. Because

their time is coming... hopefully soon.

Chapter Thirteen

Callie

Waking up, the first thing I notice is I'm warm and cozy, with a strong arm thrown over my waist as a soft, rumbling snore causes my hair to fall across my cheek. I smile even though every single muscle in my body is protesting at the strenuous activity Kodiak and I engaged in earlier.

Is it too soon for me to tell him I've fallen even further for him? I hope not, because for the first time in my entire life, I'm a priority to someone else. I can never forget the loneliness I endured growing up, but I've done everything in my power to build a life I enjoy. Adding Kodiak to the mix is like taking a box cake mix and adding chocolate chips or something; it's a bonus that I totally love. The extra sweet holiday treat that makes it special.

No one, from my mother to any of the foster parents I had, ever put me first. Her addiction ruled her life, and while a lot of the families I lived with were good, most also had their own children still under their roof, so while I wasn't exactly neglected, I was sometimes more of an afterthought. Now, though, I know that even though Kodiak's in a club, he'll put me first above even himself. It's a heady feeling which I'll never take for granted, because he's quickly becoming the center of my world as well.

When I feel him move, I quietly ask, "Kodiak? Are you awake?"

"Yeah." His voice is raspy sounding which surprisingly has my lady bits tingling.

I'm shocked because as many times as we made love, I would've thought I'd be good for a few days at least, but apparently all it takes is him speaking to rev my engine and get me going. I wonder if that has anything to do with the bite he gave me last night. The reminder has me lifting my hand to touch the raised mark on my flesh, marveling at the slight soreness but absence of any pain. It feels smooth and a little puffy and I'm hoping it won't take long to heal.

"It's almost silver," Kodiak replies with awe.

"Silver?"

"Yeah. It's going to scar but the flesh has a slightly iridescent sheen to it." He turns me so that I'm flat on my back and lowers his head, inspecting it before dropping a kiss on the wound. "It's beautiful."

The second his lips touch the spot, I feel an intense jolt of pleasure shoot through my core. In less than a second, I'm growing wetter, nearly aching for him to fill me.

Uh, what the hell is that? I'm not objecting, but wow.

Kodiak sniffs. "Babe?"

"When your lips touched the bite, it felt almost orgasmic."

He raises a brow and immediately kisses the spot again, watching my reaction. I don't disappoint as my back arches and my nipples harden into points. I'm clenching my thighs together as he dips a hand between my thighs, swiping through my folds to find my slick center.

"Damn. I wonder if that's because the claiming is so new."

“Did you know you were going to bite me?”

He nods. “Yes. I never thought it would be like this, though.” Kodiak flicks out his tongue and laps at the bite mark, causing me to squeal. I nearly gush from the contact.

“Oh, my God! Stop.”

He smirks.

“Wait. Don’t stop.”

A deep chuckle rumbles his chest. “Which is it?”

“Do it again.” I bite my lip, holding back a groan as he continues. “Do you think you can touch me while you do that?”

“No need to ask,” he murmurs, angling his hand so that his thumb brushes my clit, and two thick fingers slide inside me. He begins pumping them in and out as he continues to lick and lave the mark on my neck and it’s driving me wild with lust and need. Like a five-alarm fire, grab the hose, because I am going to explode all over him!

I’m humping his hand and not even ashamed about it as he murmurs wicked words in my ear, describing all the ways he intends to fuck me. I never knew how much dirty talk would turn me on. It’s adding to the experience, and I shudder as my body hurtles toward impending release.

“I love seeing you like this,” Kodiak whispers, “it’s fucking addicting. I want to taste your cum on my fingers.”

His teeth dig into the bite mark as he pinches my clit and that’s all it takes for me to

shout his name, becoming a writhing, wet, sticky mess as I come so hard my vision darkens for a few seconds. I'm rolling my hips and crying his name, oblivious to the world. The only thing that matters in this moment is the two of us.

He lifts his head and kisses me, two fingers still lodged inside my pussy, and then grins. "Now that was fun." My talented, seductive bear pulls his fingers from my pussy, lifting them to dip into his mouth. He sucks them clean, growling about the delicious taste. I'm not at all surprised when he kisses me again, thrusting his tongue into my mouth so that I can taste myself.

A minute later, Kodiak sits against the headboard, tugging me onto his lap. Beneath my ass, I can feel his erection, a constant presence since the first time we made love. Or mated, as I heard him say earlier. In his arms, I feel comfort, security, affection, and that emotion I don't dare to name. Not yet.

It's in the silence that follows that I start to have questions about all the things that can and will change as we form a bond and relationship together. I can't resist asking what's on my mind.

"Kodiak?"

"Hmmm?"

"Will I ever change into a bear?"

He snorts. "I doubt it."

"So, no shifting for me?"

"No. I don't have all the answers, but I don't believe you will."

“And our kids someday?” I pry, wondering how it would affect any offspring we have.

“Now that’s almost certain. I think so, but that’s dependent on your human DNA combining with my shifter genes. I believe I’m more dominant, so yes.”

Wow.

“How long will you live?” I ask, trying to hold in any fear I have about him leaving me any time in the near future.

“I’m not immortal but I have a longer lifespan than the average human,” he replies, tilting my chin up so our eyes meet. “And I believe the claiming, bond, and mark will give you the same longevity.”

“How does this bond work? Are we connected forever? Can it be broken?”

I know I’m firing questions at him left and right, but my knowledge about shifters is relegated to what I’ve read in books, and of course, what he’s told me so far.

“Babe.” He kisses the tip of my nose. “You’re the first. I’m hoping we’re compatible for offspring and will both have a long life. I can feel that our mate bond is unbreakable. My bear confirms it.”

Oh. That’s good. At least I’ll never be alone again, which makes me extremely happy.

“I guess I need to be patient,” I sigh with a smile.

“Yes.”

“Maybe I should get the information about the kids and their wish lists.”

“Good idea.” He kisses me, nibbling on my bottom lip. “First, we should shower.”

I agree but it’s still another hour before I’m dressed and dialing Cheryl’s number. She’s got all the info about the kids written down and decides to text me the information so that I can pass it on to Kodiak. He’ll distribute the lists, sizes, and ages to the guys who can shop for the necessary items.

The donations we’ve requested from the community are mostly clothes, but with Kodiak’s brothers’ input, I let her know that these kids also deserve some fun holiday activities, and that Spike will reach out to her to coordinate all of those things. Kodiak mentioned there was talk about going to the zoo to see the animals in their habitats all decked out for the holidays, but also taking one of the pontoon boats so they can see the way the area lakes are decorated with festive lights.

“Oh, I forgot one more thing,” I say as we’re about to hang up. “I think we should ask for donations of suitcases, Cheryl.”

“I like what you’re thinking, Callie. I’ll reach out to some of the local corporations to see if they can help with that kind of thing,” she replies.

“I’ve got a lot of ideas for next year since we’re so close on time,” I say.

“Go ahead and toss them out to me, who knows? Maybe we can manage to make a little magic happen this year instead of waiting,” she urges.

Glancing at the list she sent me, I see there are four teenage girls, but the rest of the kids are under the ages of ten. “Do you think we could put together girly girl kits for the four older girls? Makeup, hair stuff, maybe some tools for them to use? None of those things are cheap so I’m sure the foster parents don’t have money left over to

consider that and every girl needs to feel pretty. Plus, a good skincare routine is important.”

She starts laughing but agrees. “Let me see if I can reach out to the cosmetology school that’s here. Maybe they’d be willing to give the girls makeovers? Plus, they may be able to buy products at cost or something, which would help us create these kits. What do you think?”

And just like that, our Christmas party is sounding like a runaway train as we continue to toss ideas back and forth. “I’ll order the containers they can use to keep their things organized,” I promise, “since I can buy them in bulk and I’m sure there’ll be girls in the system next year who’ll be the right age. I’ll also go online and order enough stockings for all the kids so we can stuff those as well.”

One of the years I was in foster care, that was all we got, a filled stocking, but it was something I treasured because it had a coloring book, a new box of crayons, candy, and some fuzzy socks. I’m already thinking that little matchbox cars for the boys, and flavored chapstick for the little girls would be a great addition. I know my wallet’s about to take a hit, but I don’t particularly care because this is the worst time in these kids’ lives and if I can make it a little nicer, than that’s what I’m going to do.

“The best day of my life was when you walked into my office and asked to volunteer. I can feel my gray hair receding by the minute,” she teases before we end the call.

This is going to be the start of something special and I’m so thrilled to be part of it.

Kodiak kisses my temple. “You hungry?”

“Starving,” I admit.

He reaches for my hand, interlocking our fingers. “Let’s go, my beautiful mate.”

“Thanks for getting us the lists, Callie,” Spike says as Kodiak and I walk into the kitchen.

I’m a bit nervous because I feel like the men in the club have to know what Kodiak and I have been doing, but none of them say a word to me implying they heard anything at all, so I start to relax my guard.

“Sweet, we can go shopping!” Sly exclaims, clapping his hands together. Looking at Spike, he adds, “We’re doing this every year, right? Because these kids will always deserve a good Christmas given the shitty circumstances they’re presently living under.”

“Absolutely. We’ll talk in church about ways we can collect money and basic things all year round so we’re not going crazy two weeks before the party. I’m sure we’ll find both Yukon Bluff and Mercy Falls willing to help us out,” Spike replies.

Kodiak comes over with two plates laden with food and my eyes widen. “I can’t possibly eat all of that,” I tell him as he sets my food in front of me before Fang places a glass of orange juice by my plate while handing a cup of coffee to Kodiak.

“I know you worked up an appetite, Sweetheart,” he says, smirking at me, which has several of the guys suddenly having coughing fits as they look anywhere else in the room but at the two of us.

Shit. They heard Kodiak claim me. Repeatedly.

I feel my face flushing but opt to focus on eating rather than glaring at my formerly sweet bear of a man. I’m going to give him the benefit of the doubt that because I’m the first mate any of them have had, he wasn’t thinking about how his words would come across.

“So, when are we leaving to shop?” Fang asks, interrupting my internal monologue.

“Should we all go together or split up?” Sly questions.

“Together makes the most sense,” Spike advises. “If we do have to split off, remember to keep the receipts. While this will be a nice tax break, it’s not the reason we’re doing it, but our CPA will have my ass if she has to hunt anything like that down.”

The guys start snickering, so I presume there’s a story behind what he’s just said. “I have to go pick up some of the donations that have been collected and bring them back here so they can be sorted,” I say. “Oh, and I need to buy wrapping paper, tags, and bows, too!”

“I’ll add those to the list. I take it you’re going to be wrapping the gifts?” Spike questions.

I nod. “Yeah, since we have the lists of what the kids are wishing for, I can separate the stuff into piles, then wrap and tag it,” I reply, pushing the rest of my unfinished plate toward Kodiak, who pulls it in front of him to start eating.

“You’re going with Kodiak, then, correct?” Spike asks, adding the items I mentioned to his notes app on his phone. Well, I presume that’s what he’s doing since his fingers are flying over the keys.

“Fuck, I have to teach a class at the gym I can’t get out of,” Kodiak grumbles, his growl causing the plates on the table to rattle slightly.

“I’ll be fine,” I reply, understanding that he can’t always drop everything for me, and that he’s got responsibilities.

“Callie, we haven’t seen Jeremy recently, but that doesn’t mean he’s not watching and waiting for the right time,” Spike warns.

I shiver with apprehension. The last thing I want is to come face-to-face with that bastard ever again. I wish he’d just leave me alone.

“I can watch her,” Kong states. When everyone looks at him, he shrugs. “What? I know what the prick looks like and there’s no fucking way I’ll let him harm a hair on her head.”

“Then that’s settled. Let’s get going, brothers, so we can help these kids have a Merry Christmas. Kodiak, you’re going to have to get a Santa Claus suit, too.”

I start giggling at the glare Kodiak gives Spike, who merely crosses his hands over his chest and raises his brow.

Everyone leaves us as they head toward the parking lot, prepared to fill their shopping lists.

Kodiak slides an arm around my waist, hauling me into his chest. “Callie.”

I tip my chin up and notice he’s scowling. “You’re going to have to trust that I’ll be okay, and Kong will protect me.”

He snarls, and I know this is going to be a long day. Still, after he shoves some money and a card into my purse, he kisses me then walks toward the truck that Kong is waiting near. Glaring at Kong, he states, “Not a hair on her head, brother.”

As grumbly as he’s being, he’s still gentle as he helps me into the large truck. How I got so lucky as to have someone like him want me is beyond my capacity to understand, but I’ll never take him for granted.

“I promise, Kodiak,” Kong retorts. “I’d sooner cut off my own arm than let your mate be harmed, and I’m kind of partial to my arm, so you can understand how hard I’ll fight to keep her safe.”

Chapter Fourteen

Kodiak

Trust that someone other than me will protect my mate? My newly claimed, heavily bearing my scent, beautiful, vulnerable mate?

Hell no.

My bear is roaring and ready to rip apart anyone standing in our way.

“Kodiak.”

It’s Callie’s soft voice that calms him. And me.

“I won’t be gone long. Besides, it’s not like I’m so far away you can’t reach me quickly on your motorcycle.”

The roads are dry after being salted. I see the wisdom in her words but still don’t like it. “In here,” I say, pointing to my head, “I get it. But here,” I continue, pounding my chest above my heart, “I don’t like it at all.”

“Trust your brother. Trust all of your brothers,” she says, her small hand lightly rubbing my cheek.

Shaking my head, I lean in and buckle her seatbelt, then give her another kiss before I close her door and tap the roof of the truck. Why today of all days do I have

something I can't push off?

Because she's ours, my bear grumbles. Ours to protect and cherish.

He's right, but I instinctively know my brothers will lay their lives down to keep her safe. Still, it chafes at me that I have to leave it to their capable hands. Grumbling, I head back into the clubhouse to get ready for the gym. I hope like hell the clients are ready to sweat their asses off because I'm gonna work them hard.

I snicker when I hear the groans from the class as they read the workout of the day I just uncovered.

"What the hell? A five-hundred-meter row?" Angus asks. "Fuck, my arms are already exhausted from rechecking all the fucking lights my wife just had to have on every available surface at the house."

"Trying to outdo Clark Griswold again?" his buddy, Gerald, teases.

"Yeah, well, you've got those air lifts to look forward to," Angus rebuts. "Let's see how you're feeling once you're done with those."

"Alright everyone, take your places and let's get warmed up," I call out, interrupting the two men.

The next hour plus goes by somewhat quickly. While we don't offer an actual CrossFit class per se, we have some diehard athletes who asked for us to develop something similar. After discussing it with the brothers, we designed several different workouts once we determined we could properly teach the participants, and I was the lucky fucker designated to oversee the course.

"Lucky me," I grumble, grabbing my water bottle and taking a long swallow after

finishing the air squats. While my brothers and my mate are out shopping, I'm getting swamp ass. "Alright, ready for thirty sit-ups?"

Groans are heard as everyone gets in position on the mats as I count down. Once we start, I focus on watching everyone's form, since several are still learners so to speak. "Straighten your arms and pull from your core, not your neck," I bark out. "All you're doing right now is giving yourself a crick in your fucking neck and shoulders."

Snickers are heard, but I note that several are paying attention to what they're doing, which was the whole point of me calling out to them. "If you're gonna do this shit, do it right. Remember, with accuracy, comes speed."

Did our mate smell different this morning? my bear asks. Sometimes, his questions come from out of the blue but this one has me nearly stopping in my tracks.

Instead, I continue walking between everyone as I think about what he asked. She did seem a little different this morning, but that could be due to the fact that our bond snapped into place. I kind of wish we had the one where we could talk to each other telepathically, but I guess that only happens if each mate is a shifter. Who knows? It's not like there's an instruction manual, after all.

Two more exercises later and I'm cleaning the mats while everyone hits the showers. Once I'm done, I'll go into the office and take one in our private bathroom. Hopefully Peanut will be here soon so I can catch up to Callie and Kong. In the meantime, I'll see about catching up on some of the paperwork while sitting at the desk.

"We really need to think about hiring a few more instructors," I mutter as I walk through the gym, picking up used towels and wiping down the equipment. Our members are supposed to wipe things down, but sometimes, when we're focused on a class, they just keep going. "Or maybe reiterate the fucking rules," I snarl after

finding an empty water bottle behind the bench press.

Standing in the middle of the room, I yell out, “As far as I’m aware, we’re all fucking adults. Clean up after yourselves or find another fucking gym to trash!”

Even though we do have a cleaning crew that comes in to do a thorough clean every night, whoever’s working takes care of things so it’s not too bad. Still, I hate a messy gym or trash by the machines. Time for me to talk to Peanut and get some help wanted ads placed, because I’m nobody’s maid.

Except for our mate’s, my bear whispers. We will always wait on her.

Yeah, we will, but as far as I’m concerned, that’s a completely different situation. Stomping toward the office, I head inside then grab my bag to take a shower. The fuckers can watch over themselves for a few damn minutes because I need to get my head on straight.

I’m surly, tense, and missing my mate. A terrible combination.

My bear isn’t going to feel better either until we’re back with Callie.

Chapter Fifteen

Callie

I 'm humming a Christmas carol under my breath as Kong walks behind me pushing a very full cart. We already have three others up at Customer Service that they're holding for me, but this one is for all the stocking stuffers I decided the kids would need. I might have underestimated this a bit but I'm not unhappy about it since that means the kids will have plenty of gifts. In fact, I'm riding a high that's a combination of my bear mate and the holiday season.

"Why are you so happy? Some evil fucker's got his sights on you," Kong asks.

Since he sounds genuinely curious, I don't take offense. Instead, I turn and face him and say, "Because I know none of you guys will let him hurt me," I reply. "As for why I'm so happy, it's because these kids are currently in the worst place imaginable, at least to them, away from their families, and we're going to be able to bring a little bit of joy to their lives. It won't make up for the fact they're in foster care, but it will hopefully show them that there are people who do care about them."

"Well, that makes sense, I guess. What else is on your list?" he questions.

"We already have the donations, I'm just looking for stocking stuffers," I say. "I was hoping to get some of those large peppermint sticks, along with chapstick, some hot wheels cars, coloring books and crayons, and anything else I think will fit."

His chuckles reverberate around us, causing other shoppers to look in our direction. I

can't blame them; he's a handsome, well-built man. Not as good looking as Kodiak, of course, but I can definitely see his appeal.

"I'll help you look so we can get back to the clubhouse. I'm sure you're going to be wrapping up a storm from now until the party," Kong says.

"Unless some of you guys know how to wrap, it'll be up to me," I tease. "Since Cheryl's been so shorthanded, I told her I'd oversee the donations and gift buying part, as well as finding someone to play Santa Claus for the kids. That includes the wrapping."

Cheryl is handling all the catering for the party, thankfully, because several local businesses in Mercy Falls donated their services. They'll get a meal plus of course, the yummy desserts that Mamie from the Mercy Falls Bakery makes. Not only that, but one of the corporate sponsors she has is donating a Christmas dinner for each of the foster families who are attending with enough food inside to ensure a fun Christmas breakfast, as well as a traditional holiday meal. My hips are already groaning, and I briefly wonder if Kodiak will help me work off any Christmas excess. A thrill goes through me at the possible workouts he might have, which has me smiling from ear to ear.

"Do gift bags count?" Kong asks, snickering. "Because I can totally do those."

"Kong, you know little kids want to rip open paper, not dig inside a gift bag!" I exclaim, giggling.

He shakes his head but focuses on the aisle I'm on where a lot of the small stocking stuffers are poking out of rows of bins. I wince when I see him getting those small packs of PlayDoh. I make a mental note to put those in the older kids' stockings, because the younger ones will make a mess.

“What about some of these?” he questions, holding up some Christmas-y looking multicolored pens. “Maybe with these small notepads that are shaped like snowmen and Christmas trees?”

I take both from him and realize that the little girls would like these so nod and watch as he grabs all of them and tosses them into the cart. Shaking my head, I keep looking for a fidget toy, since Cheryl let me know one of the younger kids is on the spectrum for autism. “These might be good for several of them, don’t you think?” I muse, holding up what I was looking for to show Kong.

“What the fuck is that?” he asks.

“Kids with ADHD and autism sometimes need something to center them so they can focus. These are said to help,” I reply, grabbing a bunch and adding them to our haul.

“I wonder if they work,” he says.

“They’re supposed to, but I don’t have kids so I’m only going on what I’ve been told,” I tell him. “Okay, I think we’ve done all the damage we can do, don’t you?”

“This makes what, the fourth cart?” he asks with humor. “I think we have everything we need and if not, one of us can always either run back out or go online and order it. I’m about shopped out, Callie.”

I snicker but remember one last item on the list. Kodiak’s Santa suit. We manage to find one big enough to fit him and make our way to Customer Service. The clerk there said they’d ring us up, so we didn’t overload the lines, which are full even with a few weeks left to go before Christmas.

“Just be glad we don’t have to put anything together,” I remind him.

“Except the bikes,” he rebuts. Then he perks up and says, “Wait! All the brothers can help with that project while you wrap!”

They say the worst things happen when you’re the happiest or most distracted. That’s exactly what occurs while Kong is helping the two clerks load up the club truck with all the bags from our haul. I’m still humming Christmas songs, with Kong occasionally whistling along when I hear the unmistakable sound of a gun clicking nearby. I freeze where I am next to the passenger door, having just tossed my purse inside so I can help when I hear, “Been looking for you for a while now, Callie.”

He found me . As terror fills me, I turn my head and watch Jeremy’s nose crinkle before he sneers. He snuck up on us and the bastard is standing there, pointing a weapon at me in a busy parking lot in the middle of the day. He’s crazy!

Kodiak, I need you!

“Leave me alone, Jeremy. There’s no reason for you to be here.” I’m proud of the fact that I don’t sound scared even though inside, I feel like a puddle of goo and not the good kind, either.

“You smell rancid, like a bear ,” he spits, disgust dominating his haggard, worn features. He doesn’t look well, and I wonder what I ever saw in him. “Thought you were too good for me, you fucking bitch.”

“She is, fucker,” Kong bellows, coming out from the back of the truck.

“What the fuck?” Jeremy asks, now glaring at Kong even though his gun never wavers from where he’s pointing it at my chest. “What are you doing here?”

“The better question is, what are you doing here? This is Shifted Misfits territory, you prick. Don’t think my president is gonna be thrilled that the Lower East Primates are

skulking around.” His phone is already at his ear, and I can hear someone bellowing through the speaker.

I hope it’s not Kodiak. Please don’t let it be Kodiak, my mind whispers. As much as I want my bear right now, I don’t want a bloody confrontation that might end badly and hurt innocent people.

Kong continues speaking, “I’m right beside her. Not leaving Callie’s side.” His hard gaze remains on Jeremy, unwavering as I worry how this can be resolved without loss of life on either side.

“You should leave,” I say, standing my ground. “You’re not part of my life anymore, Jeremy. If you’re smart, you’ll put that gun down and walk away.”

Kong’s sharp tone follows, “Listen to her.”

“So, you went to some lowlife biker gang when we kicked your ass to the curb, huh?” Jeremy asks, taunting Kong. “You weren’t good enough to be in the Primates.”

“No, I’m better than you and it’s a club, not a fucking gang like what you’re running, asshole,” Kong retorts. “My brothers are my chosen family, and since Callie’s Kodiak’s old lady, that means she’s my family as well. You know what that means, right, Jer?”

It’s almost like Kong is goading Jeremy for some reason that I don’t understand, but I keep watching Jeremy’s face, which is like watching a commercial or something. Every possible emotion flits across his visage, from anger to disdain and dare I say it, a little bit of fear?

Does he know about the Shifted Misfits or does their reputation precede them? Jeremy has never been bold unless it’s to bully people he considers weaker than

himself. Size-wise, Kong is bigger than Jeremy and I know Kong's a shifter. Wait... is it possible that Jeremy is one as well? It's something to ponder and ask once we're all safe and sound once again. Now's definitely not the time for me to ask, that's for dang sure!

Kong ticks his chin. "You gonna make a choice or do I need to make it for ya?" The menace in his tone is a sharp contradiction from the lighthearted banter we shared while shopping. It's a reminder that Kong is dangerous but he's only a threat to those who threaten him personally, his club, or those he considers family.

Jeremy bristles, opens his mouth to speak, but doesn't get the chance to answer.

While my focus stays on Kong, who has been slowly moving closer to Jeremy, I hear the unmistakable sounds of several motorcycles coming into the parking lot. Not only that, but I can hear Kodiak's growl over the racing engines, which sends my heart into overdrive. I don't want him hurt; I just found him and while I don't know how that's gonna impact me in the long run, I can't lose him.

The bikers surround Jeremy; Spike, Kodiak, Peanut, Chomp, and Fang, each on beautiful, chromed bikes and for the first time, I see Jeremy shrink just a little bit. I'm sure it's my imagination, but Spike seems to have smoke coming from his nose, but surely that's because it's so cold?

When Sly pulls in right next to them in a van I know belongs to the club, I realize that the guys are here to take care of the problem away from prying eyes. They don't want an audience or anyone to get hurt either, which means they want a peaceful solution as badly as I do. The club cares about the town. I know this from their eagerness to help so all that remains is handling this situation with Jeremy as quickly as possible.

Lightning and Phoenix open the sliding side door and before I can blink, Lightning says, "You're going for a little ride, Jeremy," while Phoenix grabs the gun and

manages to zip tie Jeremy's arms. He's hustled into the van without putting up much of a fight and the guys jump back in and take off.

Huh. That almost seems a bit... anticlimactic to me, that's for sure. Kodiak jumps off his bike and pulls me into his arms. His body shudders. As he looks me up and down, his face fierce and kind of scary, he says, "I heard you call me."

"You... you heard me?" I ask, starting to shake.

"Yeah, Sweetheart. You said, 'Kodiak, I need you!' so I got here as quick as I could," he replies before capturing my mouth and kissing me in a way that chases away the chill. "I'll always come when you call me."

Chapter Sixteen

Kodiak

K odiak, I need you!

The fear that went through me when I heard Callie scream her need for me in my head is something I hope I never experience again. When the brothers saw me running out to my bike with shampoo still dripping from my hair and my clothes plastered to me, they followed, knowing something was up. But when Spike connected the call from Kong and I heard who was there, the rage that overcame me is something I knew I had to channel in order to keep my bike on the road.

Now that she's here, in my arms, I can breathe again. "I see you and Kong bought out the store," I say, trying to help calm her enough that she stops trembling. I know we'll deal with Jeremy once we get back to the clubhouse, but my first priority right now is my mate.

She grins. It's shaky and I can see her eyes are glassy, but she isn't falling apart, which tells me just how strong she really is.

Our mate can talk to us, my bear says. We didn't know if this would happen or not.

No, we didn't because none of us know of any shifter and human matings. All of this is new to us, as much as it is for Callie. But there's this feeling in my chest, a hint that almost feels like an omen of what's to come. This isn't all we'll experience together. As our bond strengthens, we'll connect in ways we never imagined. The hope that

gives me for myself and my brothers fills my chest with warmth. They'll have this too, my bear expresses with awe.

"Let's get you back to the clubhouse," I tell Callie, opening up the door and lifting her onto the seat. My bear is fighting to take over and the compromise is that I'm taking control, ensuring no other threats can get close to my mate. "It's far too cold out and I think you need a hot cocoa."

"I could've gotten in myself," she says as I lean in and put her seatbelt on. I can see a bit of irritation in her gaze.

"I needed to be able to touch you," I reply, leaning in and kissing her again. Her scent envelops me.

See? She smells different! my bear exclaims. There's excitement there I can't focus on.

I close the door and walk to where Kong is talking to the poor store clerks. They're both looking a little bit shellshocked which is understandable seeing as they had a madman pointing a gun at a customer they were helping. "So, nothing was seen, right?" Kong questions, practically glowering at the two teenagers. His gruff tone is pretty clear on what he means.

"N-n-no, sir," one of them says. "We didn't see anything at all."

He hands each of them a few Benjamins and says, "Appreciate the help loading up."

"Uh, we're not supposed to take tips," the shorter one states.

"Take it, you helped us out today," I state. "We're not gonna say a word about it and neither are you."

They head back into the store with the money and Kong opens the driver's side door, slipping behind the wheel. I snag the spot beside Callie. I'm too keyed up to drive so I'm happy Kong took the lead without me having to ask. Spike will get my bike back to the clubhouse; right now, I need to be within touching distance of my mate.

Callie's gaze meets mine. "So, about that hot chocolate."

I grin. I can't help it. My mate is tough as nails. She stood her ground. Refused to panic. And now she was handling any residual fear, anxiety, or trauma like a fucking champ. "Drive-thru or home?"

She smirks. "I want it from you."

"Done, Babe." My hand curls around hers and holds it, giving her my warmth as she leans against me. "As soon as we're back, I've got you covered."

True to my word, a half hour later Callie is sitting in front of a desk we'd cleared for her use, sipping from a large mug, and enjoying her hot chocolate with extra marshmallows.

"Got the room set up for you to wrap, Callie," Spike says. "We brought all the bags and donations up as well and set up a few tables. We'll use one of the other empty rooms to put the bikes together."

"Thank you, Spike. I appreciate everything the club has done to help me and Cheryl make this a success for the kids."

"It's what we do for family. Kodiak? We have some things to take care of," he says, giving me a look.

Nodding, I walk over to Callie and lean down to kiss her. It's time for the Shifted

Misfits to take out the trash.

“Have fun,” she says, grinning at me. I know she’s well aware that we’re not just going to talk to him and send him on his way.

She’s perfect for us.

Yes. Yes, she is.

“What I wanna know, motherfucker, is what you’re doing in Shifted Misfits territory,” Spike barks out, smoke billowing from his nostrils.

His dragon is right under the surface and I kind of hope that Jeremy fucks up so Spike can just incinerate him. Would be far less mess than what we’ve done in the past, which is let Chomp take them out to the deepest part of the lake, shift, then do his gator rolling shit.

Jeremy is a gorilla so it’s not like he doesn’t know what we’re capable of. While I sense a bit of fear, it’s not enough to convince me he’s not a threat to Callie if I let him live. My bear? He only wants him snuffed out. Gone. I have to admit it’s the most appealing option.

Jeremy is tied to a chair, at least for now, with his wrists and ankles bound. We don’t have to secure him further because if he’s stupid enough to fight us all at once, then he deserves the beating that will follow.

The stupid ape sneers at us. “Not gonna say shit.”

“Oh, I was hoping you’d say that,” Spike laughs. He ticks his chin at me. “Have at it.”

I crack my knuckles and move into his personal space, snarling as I'm inches from his face. "You touched what belongs to me."

Jeremy doesn't react which has me wondering if the only reason he's here was tracking down Callie, or if there's another nefarious reason. We have to find out because while I'm not amused at him coming after my mate, that's an easy fix. We either beat the shit out of him then let Spike have some fun with fire, or we make him hurt then let Chomp go swimming. But, if there's another purpose for the Lower East Primates to invade our sanctuary, it could hurt our town and that's not acceptable either.

Let Kong and Peanut at him, my bear whispers. Hurt him for thinking he could touch our mate, but we need answers.

Sometimes, I hate when my bear makes more sense than I do.

"First mistake, thinking you can come into our territory. Second, going after my mate," I growl out. It's taking everything in me not to shift and rip this pissant to shreds.

Peanut and Kong, our enforcers circle around him and I see Jeremy's facade crack just a little bit. Fear is now emanating from him.

"How's it going, cuz?" Kong spits out, glowering at Jeremy.

"He's your cousin?" Spike questions.

I shrug because most of us have our own stories of how or why we ended up in Yukon Bluff. Not everyone has shared why and while Spike may know, he doesn't share those confidences, allowing the brothers to as they assimilate into our family.

“Yeah,” Kong replies. “I know I haven’t shared, but fuck, how the hell can I explain why my own father banished me from our troop? I was barely out of puberty, for fuck’s sake. And that fucker,” he sneers, “is the reason!”

All of us are now glaring at Jeremy and the scent of fear has ramped even higher at Kong’s words. I can hear the pain in my brother’s voice and know it goes bone deep. I dig deep into my memories and realize when Kong arrived at the club, he was severely underweight and malnourished. Hell, he’s probably five to ten years younger than me, which pisses me the fuck off. Puberty hits each of us shifters at different ages, and that means he was on his own shortly after he hit his thirteenth or fourteenth birthday. How the fuck did he survive?

“He needs you to come home,” Jeremy finally stammers out.

“Fuck that!” Kong exclaims. “I am home!” I can see his gorilla rippling behind his eyes and know things are hitting him hard. He’s going to lose his shit soon and I can’t blame him.

Peanut looks at me then at Kong and hauls off, his fist slamming into Jeremy’s face. “That’s for trying to get my brother’s mate.” Then he slugs him again, the power behind the punch nearly knocking the chair over. “And that’s for whatever the fuck you did to my brother, Kong. No one fucks with a Twisted Misfit brother.”

Spike stands back, smoke billowing around him. Combined with his dragon eyes, it’s an eerie effect that typically scares the shit outta anyone who’s down in our wet room. Not that we’ve had too many over the years, but there’s a reason the town and surrounding areas like us as much as they do; we’ve taken out a lot of trash. Oh, there’s no proof whatsoever thanks to Spike’s abilities, but the rumors about us abound and we don’t do anything to stop them since it serves a dual purpose.

Don’t fuck with the Shifted Misfits because if you do, we’re gonna fuck back harder

until you're in Hell.

"Why are you coming after my mate?" I ask. It's the question I can't seem to shake.

I'm doing my best to keep calm, but my bear is right under the surface, ready to unleash a world of hurt. Granted, Peanut's punches are like being hit with a sledgehammer, so Jeremy's face is already swollen, bloody, and bruised, but I want to rip the skin from his body in shreds. Just the thought that he ever touched her has me seething.

"What do you want to do, Kodiak?" Spike asks after pulling me off to the side behind a wall we know shifters can't hear through. "Kong? You okay, brother?"

"We need to know more," I reply. "Something's kind of hinky with him showing up like he did. It's just a bit too coincidental, but it's important enough to warrant further investigation. We can keep him down here on ice, so to speak until we get Sly to find out more, can't we?"

"Yeah, I like that idea," Kong says. "Because I find it odd as hell that the father who kicked me out over a decade and a half ago now wants me back. He told me that day that my name would never be uttered again."

"Then let's get our guest settled in his temporary accommodations. We'll make sure he eats, of course, but outside of that, no other amenities. We'll get Sly to go through his phone as well. Also, I didn't notice anyone outside of him, but we need to make sure there aren't others lurking around."

After a brief but intense discussion, we return to where Jeremy's still sitting, now with a dark stain at his crotch which tells us all he pissed himself and gather around him in a semicircle. I consider myself a badass, but if I was tied to a chair and had the predators we are standing around me, I'd probably do the same.

“You’ve bought yourself some time, Jeremy,” Spike advises. “Unfortunately for you, our accommodations for guests isn’t all that fancy, but don’t worry, we’ll check on you frequently.”

The way he says it is so sinister sounding, especially with his arms showing his dragon scales that I have to hold back a shiver. There’s a reason Spike’s our president; he’s formidable and unstoppable, especially when the family he helped create is threatened.

“I’ve got him,” Peanut says. “You guys head on upstairs and I’ll be sure to get him a nice comfy spot.”

We’re all chuckling as we head back upstairs, content to let one of our two enforcers handle the task of putting Jeremy in a cell. Right now, I want to see my mate and make sure she’s still doing okay.

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Chapter Seventeen

Callie

“ I f you don’t stop, I’ll never get all of this wrapped before we go to the zoo tonight,” I murmur as Kodiak nuzzles my neck.

“You still have another week before the party. Let’s have one of our own before we go see the lights with the kids,” he replies, his husky whisper sending tingles all over my body.

I think about what he’s saying and realize he’s right. Spike gave me two huge rooms that weren’t being used for anything as my very own Santa’s workshop as he called it. It took me, Sly, Fang, and Nix two days to sort and organize everything that I bought according to each child we have on the list. I’ve spent the past week wrapping, taking breaks to eat, of course.

At night, while we’re all hanging in the common room, I bring the stockings down and work on them. It’s coming together and I honestly cannot wait to see the joy in the children’s’ eyes when they walk into the party. We decided to use the suitcases donated as the boxes for the clothes, and those have been nicely folded and placed inside, along with some personal care items on the other side in a nice bag I found online for a great price. Granted I had to order in bulk, but Sly set up a spreadsheet for me that has each kid listed and I’m able to denote whether or not they got a suitcase this year so if they’re still in care next year, they won’t get another one.

I make a mental note to buy boxes for clothes for next year when the after Christmas

sales hit, then stand up and practically leap into Kodiak's arms. "I'm feeling kinda sleepy, wanna take a nap with me?" I ask, licking my bottom lip.

"Hell yeah, Sweetheart, let's go get some rest," he replies, winking at me before he cradles me in his arms and heads off to his suite. We're still staying here versus his cabin since Sly's still checking into the possible threat from Jeremy. Until we have all the answers we need, I'm trusting my bear and staying in the clubhouse.

"I can't do it," Kodiak growls as I stand back, taking in the giant bear of a man dressed in his Santa suit, looking surly and nothing like the jolly man he's supposed to emulate.

I have to say, he looks like the sexiest Santa I've ever seen. Instead of a fake white beard, I found temporary hair dye that changed his dark brown to mostly white. The natural look is much more realistic, and I think the kids will be surprised.

"You can," I giggle. "Besides, it's for the kids."

"Hmmpf."

"Go ahead, give me your best ho-ho-ho," I encourage.

All I get is a rotten version of ho, which has me bending over at the gut, laughing because it's really not the right theme at all.

"Babe," I try to chastise, "Come on. Try harder."

"Oh, I've got harder," he growls, "but that's just for you."

I bite my lip and shake my head. He's incorrigible. "Do it for me?"

A heavy, exaggerated sigh escapes his pink lips. And yes, I dusted rose-colored powder on his nose and cheeks and mouth because Santa is supposed to be merry.

Kodiak? Not so much.

“Ho,” he finally says, “ho,” and another heavy sigh, “ho.”

“You’re about as jolly as a fucking turd in a toilet,” Spike observes as I notice him leaning against the doorjamb.

“You can do better than that,” Chomp jeers, joining us. “C’mon, brother, these are kids, remember?”

I tap my finger on my cheek trying to think of a way to turn my grumpy Santa into a festive one. “I’ve got it!” I exclaim.

“What?” Kodiak grumbles. He’s not quite glaring at me, but it’s close.

“What if you had an elf to help you and what if that elf was me?” I ask, leaning up to brush my lips against him.

“Maybe.”

“Hold that thought,” I tell him and run up to our suite to change. I suspected this might be difficult for him to do and I don’t want him to be totally uncomfortable, so I bought my own costume complete with a pair of tights and a sassy little skirt with white fuzz on the bottom to match him. Kind of like Mrs. Claus, I guess.

I quickly change and admire how I look in the mirror. “Yeah, that ought to make my bear a little less growly.” Giving myself a wink in the mirror to bolster my confidence, I head back to where everyone’s standing around staring at Kodiak,

who's now growling at his brothers.

Money exchanges hands and I see them bet on his success and failure. Plenty of teasing follows. My poor grumpy Santa bear.

"Damn, Santa didn't have elves who looked like you when I was a kid going to the mall," Sly states, whistling.

"Hubba hubba," Chomp adds.

I don't say anything, I just look at my bear whose eyes are so heated, I feel like I'm facing an inferno. "Kodiak?" I finally whisper.

I see him take in several deep breaths while his gaze never leaves mine. His lips curl upward in a semblance of a smile then he says, "Ho, ho, ho! Merry Christmas!" in a booming voice that sounds almost... happy!

"Oh my God, I think you might just pull this off," Spike announces, smirking at Kodiak.

"Let's get this done and over with, please," Kodiak retorts.

I blow him a kiss. "I'll reward you later."

"They're having such a great time!" Cheryl exclaims as we watch the kids opening their gifts. "I'm stunned by the support we got for this project, Callie."

I smile, my eyes glassy seeing the joy on the faces surrounding us. The cosmetology school that Cheryl reached out to not only helped us get the things we needed for the teenage girls' little kits, but they also offered them free salon services for makeovers. They'll have students working on them, but the instructors are all licensed so it

should go well. But the best thing of all, to me, is how many of the foster parents look relieved. I know there'll still be gifts for the children to open on Christmas Day, but this party helps the kids feel more normal. Some of the burden had been lifted though and I know these families will all have a merry Christmas now.

"Spike had an idea for next year, Cheryl," I say.

"What is it?" she asks.

"Well, I have two rooms at the clubhouse and we're going to get basic stuff all year long to stock up. We'll also get gift cards for the older kids for the local fast-food places so they can be like a lot of the other teenagers," I reply. "What do you think?"

"Like I said, the best thing that ever happened to this program was the day you walked in to volunteer. I think that with us working together, the foster kids in Mercy Falls are going to have the best possible lives given their circumstances," she says.

It touches my heart to hear those words and I blink back tears. Across the room, laughing like a jolly old elf, Kodiak is still listening to the kids, and I can see his smile is genuine.

Spike joins us and hands a glass of bubbly to Cheryl. "The club has really enjoyed being involved with helping the kids. Count us in as a yearly donation."

Cheryl sniffles as she fights the tears that pool in her eyes. "This wouldn't have been possible without all your help. I'm so thankful for your generosity."

"It's for the kids." Spike shrugs. "We're happy to do it."

Cheryl leaves us to greet a friend and I stand with Spike, taking in all the smiling faces.

“You know, I’ve never seen Kodiak happy like this. We’re all thrilled for him.”

“To be honest, I’ve never been happy like this before either. I haven’t told him yet, and it’s so quick that I don’t want to overwhelm him, but I love that big, grumpy, overprotective bear.”

Spike grins. “I know. We all see it. Wanna know something else?”

“Sure.”

“He’s one hundred percent, all in, crazy for you, in love. You know that, right?”

I did. “Yes. We just haven’t said it yet.”

Spike stroked his short beard. “Well, he might be waiting on you. His bear won’t want to push you into anything you’re not ready for. The first instinct for Kodiak is to protect you. He’ll do that every way that he can.”

“I see that.” I finish my drink and set the glass aside. “I think it’s time I got my Santa under the mistletoe.”

Spike laughs. “Go for it.”

Kodiak’s booming ho-ho-ho echoes across the room before I reach him and his gaze moves from the kids to me, locking in as I strut toward him. His eyes are quick to grow molten and I can almost feel the lust burning off him as I tug on his sleeve.

“There’s mistletoe out in the hall.”

His grin widens. “I think I should follow you out there to verify.”

“That’s my plan,” I reveal, reaching for his hand. He’s wearing black gloves and I pull them off as we walk out of the room and into the empty hall. I lead him around the corner where we can find some privacy and point to the mistletoe above our heads.

“How did that get here?” he wonders.

“I snuck out a few minutes ago.”

“Need me for something?” His tone is playful, oblivious to what I’m going to say.

Suddenly nervous, I bite my lip and release it. “There’s something I want to tell you.”

“Oh. What’s that, my gorgeous mate?”

“I love you, Kodiak,” I reveal, almost breathless.

His humor fades and it’s the overwhelming confirmation I see in return, blazing in his dark eyes that proves to me how he feels before he says the words. “I love you, Callie. So fucking much.”

When our lips meet, our kiss under the mistletoe is sweet, but also undeniably hungry. He claims my lips with unrelenting fervor until all I want is to feel him between my thighs and escape this party.

“Soon,” he promises as we part, already knowing what I need. “I’ll take care of you, my Callie. Always. That’s a promise.”

Source Creation Date: August 5, 2025, 7:35 am

Kodiak

“ You gonna shower with me?” I ask my sexy as fuck elf. Seeing her in that costume all night has me hard and ready, and I won’t be able to wait long before I’m sinking into her pussy and filling her up in every way possible.

“Is it really gonna be a shower?” she teases, sashaying her ass toward me.

“Mate, you’re the only reason I survived this party. I don’t like sticky fingers or snotty noses,” I retort. But for her? I gladly, okay, maybe reluctantly, played Santa.

“Well, what are you going to do when we have our own family?” she questions. “Because this will be a partnership. I’ll expect you to help with any kids we have, Kodiak.”

Oh, we like it when our mate is sassy, my bear states. Let’s have shower sex.

My thoughts exactly. I reach out and pull her into my arms and kiss her until we’re both breathless. “It’ll be different then, Sweetheart.”

“Whatever you say, I’m gonna hold you to that,” she sasses. “Now, are you gonna wash my back or what?”

“Gonna wash your back and your front,” I reply. “Let’s get naked and have our own party, shall we?”

After all, it’s not every day you hear the words ‘I love you’ from your fated mate,

right?

“Man, the zoo goes all out, don’t they?” Chomp asks as we follow behind the huge group of kids walking through one of the exhibits. It’s a few days after Christmas, but the zoo is decorated for the holidays until after the first of the year. I have an idea for next year and want to bring it to the brothers at church because I think it would benefit not only Yukon Bluff but also Mercy Falls.

There are lights everywhere and the glass houses have snowflakes and Christmas ornaments plastered to them. It’s rather festive, even though before Spike volunteered the club for this project, Christmas had little meaning for me. My attitude is changing, however, thanks to the sassy elf walking hand in hand with me. It probably doesn’t hurt that I’m beyond relaxed from our activities after the party, as is my mate.

We need to tell her, my bear insists. She needs to know she’s carrying our cub!

“Did the kids enjoy the pontoon rides?” Callie questions, interrupting my internal dialogue with my bear.

“They did. They were far more well-behaved than some of the kayaking tours we do during the season,” he tells her.

“Look, Mr. Kodiak! Snakes,” one of the little boys yells, running over to grab my arm.

Of all the creatures out there, I detest snakes. However, it’s right up this little boy’s alley and seeing his eyes glowing with excitement is forcing me to push down my aversion. “Let’s go see what they’ve done in the reptile house.”

“I’m gonna pass,” Callie says with a shudder. “Why don’t you and Chomp take the ones who want to go see the snakes and creepy crawlies and I’ll head over to the aviary.”

I chuckle before leaning in for a kiss. “Be careful, mate.”

“What’s to worry about? I’m surrounded by men who will protect me no matter what,” she says.

What’s to worry about? How about the fact she’s carrying our cub, my bear grumbles. Sometimes, I wish I could thump him on the head because now is not the time or the place.

“You’ve got that right.”

Walking behind the little boys who are all clamoring to see the various snakes, I see Chomp stop in his tracks and take a deep breath. His body goes rigid before he inhales again, deeper, and his eyes take on the reptilian look of the gator.

“You okay, brother?” I quietly ask. “Your gator is showing.”

He’s relatively laid back, so to see him so tense is a bit disconcerting. “I have a question,” he says, stopping to look at me. “When you... when you found Callie, how did you know she was your mate?”

Shock hits me like a lightning bolt. Holy shit, is he asking what I think he is? “Chomp, what are you smelling?” I query.

“Almost a beachy smell. Salt water, coconut, and a fresh, clean scent. It’s fucking intoxicating. I can’t seem to move because I don’t want to lose it. Why do you ask?”

“I think your mate is somewhere near,” I tell him. “Because when I first ran into Callie, all I could smell was peppermint and cinnamon. It got stronger every time I was around her or near where she’d been. Who do you think it is?” I ask, looking around. I see a small, almost waifish woman ahead of us corralling a few kids through the reptile house and wonder if it’s her.

“I don’t know! It’s just... it’s getting stronger,” he mutters, his eyes moving to and fro.

And then he locks in, his gator making a sound that only happens when Chomp hunts.

But this noise? It’s almost feral.

His shoulders roll back as he turns to me, determination in his gaze. “I’ve found her.”

The end ... for now

We hope you enjoyed Kodiak and Callie’s story as much as we loved writing it!