



Bear It All (Bears in Love Duet Book 2)

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Category: Fantasy

Description: Four years ago, bear shifter Remy Ibhere found his fated mate. Four years ago, he was forced to let her go.

His bear has never forgiven him.

Now his bear refuses to stay away any longer, so Remy devises a plan to conquer the demons from her past in order to win her over.

When his plan is unexpectedly thwarted, suddenly, Remy and Mallory are charging across country in a race against time, against their enemy—and her past demons.

When they make it to their destination, will Mallory walk away again?

Will Remy let her this time?

This book contains bear shifters, found family, fated mates, and a second chance at love. While it can be read as a stand-alone, it is the companion novella to *Bear With Me*, which takes place four years prior. You guessed it...when Remy and Mallory first met.

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Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 9:30 am

Four years ago, Remy Ibhere met his fated mate.

At least, he thought he had.

Except they'd ultimately gone their separate ways without acknowledging that rather important bit of information.

His body, his mind—really, his bear was insisting it was time to figure it out. The idea of seeing her again, of making that connection, it was like a tick digging under his skin and refusing to let go. An uncomfortable analogy, yet accurate.

Maybe even more accurate was the sense that her bear was calling to him. Which also made no real sense because they hadn't spoken at all in those four years. Not once. Not a text or a follow on social media. Not an unannounced visit—and he'd told her where he lived; hell, he'd invited her to move to south Louisiana with him.

Instead, she'd said she had unfinished business to take care of, and truly, neither of them had been in the right headspace to deal with the monumental changes that came with accepting another person into their lives for the long haul.

He still wasn't sure he was prepared, but his bear was, and he was sick of fighting with the animal. They were supposed to be of one mind, yet the damn animal in his head refused to let him have his way.

He'd met Mallory, his potential mate, under extenuating circumstances. And she'd told him something she probably didn't share with many people.

She'd been abused as a teen. A young girl on the verge of becoming a woman, who had just experienced her first shift, which tended to happen when shifters reached thirteen or fourteen years of age.

Her pack leader's brother. Fucking prick.

Remy had no idea how old the man was, only that he'd been an adult and he'd taken liberties Mallory hadn't wanted him to take.

Remy had no other information about the man. Not his name, what he looked like, not even the specifics about where her pack was located.

All he knew was the man had violated Mallory and her pack was somewhere in northern Minnesota.

And Remy's bear had insisted they come up here, to the wilds of the north, to find this man and exact revenge on Mallory's behalf.

While his moral compass was admittedly gray, the needle had never drifted into murder territory.

First time for everything, he supposed.

He shivered, leaning against a tree on the edge of a beach that rolled out to Lake Superior. This downy coat was hardly making a difference against that wind whipping his shaggy hair into a frenzy.

He should've waited until summer to start this journey. By the time June hit, it was so freaking hot and humid in southern Louisiana, Remy would've been damn near ecstatic to take off on this mission.

His bear hadn't been willing to wait. The beast had decided enough was enough. It was time to find their mate. To avenge the wrongs that had been done against her.

Cold-ass weather be damned.

He watched the figure standing on the beach, huddled inside her own thick winter coat, staring out over the churning water.

It wasn't Mallory. This woman was much older than Remy or Mallory. A couple of decades older.

She was also a Kermode bear. He'd seen her in her bear form, with her pale, cream-colored fur.

Just like him when he shifted.

Kermodes were rare; in fact, there were probably less than five hundred in existence, and of those, probably less than fifty were shifters.

His friend Peter's mother was a Kermode bear. Peter's bastard father—now dead, and not even a little missed—had exiled her from his pack when Peter was a kid, too young to understand what was happening. Peter's pack was in Michigan's Upper Peninsula, just across the bay from here.

It wasn't too much of a stretch to think this lonely looking woman, who was staring wistfully out over the waves, might be Peter's estranged mother.

This wasn't the reason Remy had traveled all the way across the country, but maybe doing this good deed would offset the very bad one he planned to do as soon as he found Mallory's pack.

Pushing away from the tree, he stepped onto the sand and called out a hello. She whipped around, immediately taking a step away, definitely leery of his presence.

Understandable, since they were alone on a remote bit of beach, tucked away from any other civilization by a wide swath of trees. Except she was a bear shifter, which made her pretty badass, even in her human form. He suspected it was Peter's father who had put that fear in the depths of her dark eyes.

"My name is Remy," he said in greeting, letting his Southern drawl come out in full force so she'd know he wasn't from around here. "I'm not with his pack."

There it was, the flicker of relief in her eyes.

"He's dead," Remy said shortly.

She shook her head. "Who?"

"Arthur Karhu. He's dead. Winona Orzo is the pack leader now."

"Winona...I don't know that name."

"She's younger than your son, maybe five years."

Her eyes widened. "My son. How do you know?"

"I met him. Both of them. Good people." Although he'd not had that opinion when he first met Peter, but things changed. "She'll be good for the pack."

"My son?" she said again, sounding as if she didn't quite believe this conversation was happening. If she didn't know Winona, she'd been ousted from the pack a long-ass time ago. Remy could see where she'd be unsure.

“I think he’d like to see you. He doesn’t blame you for what happened. He knows it was all on Arthur.”

She pressed a hand to her chest. “This doesn’t feel like a trap. I mean, it’s been years, decades, since Arthur’s guard dogs have come sniffing around.”

“Not a trap,” Remy assured her, not that his assurances really mattered. She’d need to ultimately make the choice herself. She had no reason whatsoever to trust him.

“Thank you,” she finally said, glancing out over the water again, her eyes now filled with hope.

“Maybe you can help me,” Remy suggested. “I’m looking for a bear shifter pack. All I know about them is that they’re located in northern Minnesota. And the pack leader is an asshole who lets his brother get away with some bad shit.”

Her eyes widened again. “Weirdly, with only that little bit to go on, I think I know who you’re looking for. The pack lives near Island Lake. It’s north of Duluth.”

He’d passed through Duluth, had continued along the shore of Lake Superior instead of heading inland. So close. And yet, if he hadn’t made his way up here, he’d never have met Peter’s mom, possibly set up a reunion that was long overdue.

“They aren’t good people,” Peter’s mom added. “They shouldn’t be running that pack. Or any pack.”

As if he needed the confirmation. Still, it was reassuring to know he wasn’t heading off to kill a good man.

“Thanks for the warning.”

She nodded.

It was about to get awkward, so Remy lifted his hand in farewell and good luck—to both of them, really.

And then he turned away and headed back toward his old pickup truck.

Time to get a move on with this mission.

And then it would be time to find his mate.

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With a cardboard cup of steaming, shitty, in-room coffee in one hand, Mallory Arkto used the other hand to rub at her bleary eyes before taking that first highly unsatisfying sip.

She should have gone down to the lobby for a cupful of much higher quality coffee. Except she wasn't ready to interact with people just yet. Even for a decent tasting caffeinated beverage.

Grimacing, she took another sip and stared out the window overlooking the industrial side of downtown Duluth. She never expected to come back to this part of the world again, and that edgy sensation she'd had pretty much since meeting Remy four years ago was only getting worse.

Remy.

Closing her eyes, her mind's eye—or, more accurately, her bear—instantly pulled up an image of the rugged, tanned, sandy-haired, muscle-bound Southern man. She'd pleased herself countless times over the last four years to that image.

Probably because she knew firsthand just how spectacular he was in bed.

They'd shared a hotel in Detroit for a single afternoon, where they'd mostly slept, courtesy of the harrowing experiences of the prior days. But after a few hours, in those moments between sound sleep and full waking, they'd touched, gently, hesitantly at first.

Like a spark catching on a dried chunk of kindling, a fire had consumed them. They'd

made love, and she'd fallen so far, so fast into him, she'd had no choice but to bolt the moment they surfaced from drowsy, post-coital bliss.

She hadn't been ready, not for what Remy had been offering. Even now, after almost four long years of constantly wondering if she should have taken a chance, the idea still sent her heart stuttering in her chest.

Just when she began to think she'd never be ready for a real relationship, her bear had abruptly knocked around on the inside of her head and told her she was an idiot.

Do something about it, her bear had insisted. Do what you need to do to get your life back.

The damned bear hadn't provided any sort of ideas as to what "do what you need to do" might entail.

Yes, she'd considered going to Louisiana, looking up Remy, see if he was still as interested as he'd been four years ago. But she hesitated. Was losing herself in a man really what her bear meant by "get your life back"?

Didn't seem likely.

The only other thing she could possibly imagine significant enough to "get your life back" was exactly the last thing she ever wanted to do.

Go back to her pack.

Somehow, despite her hesitation, her very real fear, she was here in a hotel room in Duluth. It would take only thirty minutes by car to get to pack land. Such a short distance, considering most shifters tended to keep their distance from humans, even though most humans didn't know they existed. But, like pretty much all of

Minnesota—with the exception of Minneapolis—once you were outside the city limits, you were immediately surrounded by nature and more nature. And of course there were bears out in all that wilderness.

This coffee wasn't getting any better, and neither was the churning in her gut. "Let's go, Mallory. Shower, breakfast, more caffeine, and then let's figure out how we can get our life back."

Her bear gave a roar of approval in her head. With a sigh, she headed for the bathroom, and less than an hour later, she was packed up and stalking down the hall toward the lobby, dragging her roller bag behind her.

She stalled a little longer, sitting in the hotel's restaurant, pushing around the scrambled eggs on her plate while plying herself with coffee.

Finally, the lobby restaurant had cleared out and the staff was cleaning up around her, so she took the hint, paid her bill, and left.

The drive was uneventful. Pretty much a straight shot out of town then a cruise through the rural, mostly frozen countryside. The closer she drew to the lake, the more frequently she passed signs of human life: gas stations, boat storage, directions to the boat launch.

While humans had populated the south side of the lake, the pack lived on the north side. It was private property, and the guards at the checkpoints surrounding pack land were aggressive as all get-out, so humans had learned to stay away.

There were only two narrow dirt roads in and out, which, of course, was on purpose, another ploy to keep humans away. She was coming up on one of those security checkpoints, would have to make her presence known to whoever was on guard duty.

If she stayed in her vehicle.

If, however, she shifted into her bear and made her way cross-country, there was a good chance she could get pretty damn close before anyone noticed her.

It was the humans they wanted to deter, not other bears.

She hadn't left under the most desirable circumstances. She had no idea if the pack leader or his brother had mentioned the inciting incident—leaving out their own guilt, of course—to anyone else in the pack. She had no idea if they'd tried to track her down or if there was a directive that she not ever be allowed back on pack land.

She had no idea what she was walking into.

Hell, she wasn't even sure what she was going to say or do when she confronted her pack leader.

More than fifteen years ago, his brother had molested her when she was still too young to have any real experience with the opposite sex.

Experience aside, she was a big fan of no means no.

She'd gone to the pack leader, told him what happened, and his brother gave her a wide berth after that.

Fast-forward to four years ago, and out of the blue, the brother started hitting on her, as if, now that she was an adult, she'd suddenly develop an interest in the man who had taken liberties without her permission when she'd been far too young.

She shut him down. He wasn't pleased. And then one night, the pack leader and his brother showed up at her door, so drunk they were swaying on their feet, and the

brother insisted he had a right to take what was his.

And the fucking pack leader was going to give her to him. Like she was some kind of reward for a job well done.

That was the night she'd kicked the brother in the balls and punched the pack leader and took off without a backward glance.

Pulling the car over into a clearing on the side of the narrow road, she shoved the key fob under the mat and grabbed her small leather backpack, which had straps long enough to loop around her neck when she was in bear form. Convenient, since she had to strip naked in order to shift and would need clothing again whenever it was time to return to her human form.

Swinging the pack over her shoulder, she headed into the undergrowth. She'd shift eventually, but first, she wanted to make sure the chances of anyone stumbling upon her were as small as possible.

And maybe she just wanted to take a stroll through the woods. Because, yeah, despite how things had gone down, her reasons for leaving her pack, she did have a handful of positive memories tied to this place.

The area was currently stark and brown, the tree branches leafless, the ground still frozen, with plenty of snow covering the sodden, dead leaves that had dropped last fall. And yet there was beauty here.

Clusters of drooping white flowers, appropriately called snowdrops, and the pointed leaves of purple hyacinth pushing through the snow were determined to bloom despite the chill. The sun was out. Puffy white clouds drifted lazily across an azure sky, lending the impression that it was much nicer, much warmer than it really was.

Since it was March and Mallory had lived in the northern US for her entire life, she knew damn well they'd get more snow, more cold, probably ice, too, before spring finally won the battle and eased them into summer.

A summer that was always too short. She'd never been to Louisiana, but she knew it was far enough south that they did not have to deal with cold as hell winter and volatile springs each year.

She'd like to experience a snowless winter.

Especially if Remy came with the deal.

Rolling her shoulders, she pushed those thoughts away. First, figure out how to do what she needed to do to get her life back.

Then take the time to struggle with whether to reach out to Remy. One stressor at a time, please and thank you.

The crack of a branch made her fling around, scan her surroundings, her heart rate flittering like a damn hummingbird. Memories of hanging out in the UP, just being a bear bombarded her. Of being shot with a tranquilizer, of being carted down to Detroit and tossed into a cage.

But the people behind those kidnappings were either in prison or dead. Whoever was out here was not tied to what happened in Detroit four years ago.

But someone was out here.

She considered shifting, except realistically, whoever it was, they were from her pack, and they'd recognize her whether she was in human or bear form.

So she waited, standing still, her gaze bouncing along the uneven terrain, taking in all the details, watching for movement beyond the gentle swaying of the treetops in the breeze.

Finally, someone stepped out from behind a vast tree trunk only a few dozen feet away. He wore a puffy, down coat, a maroon wool beanie covering most of his sandy, shaggy hair. Jeans wrapped around his muscular legs, hiking boots on his feet. She could see his pale blue eyes even from this distance.

Remy? No, it couldn't be. He'd gone back to Louisiana, and he had no reason to be here, on her pack's land in northern Minnesota. She hadn't even told him her pack's precise location, only that she never intended to come back here.

And yet?—

“Well, this is unexpected.”

That silver-tongued Southern drawl was unmistakable.

It was Remy.

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Remy canted his head, his bear drinking in the sight of the woman he was now 100 percent certain was his mate. Or would be after he took care of that pesky revenge issue.

Her hair was as fiery red as ever, twisted into two braids, draped over each shoulder. Her skin was pale, those emerald green eyes standing out in stark contrast, framed by dark lashes.

She wore a hooded sweatshirt underneath a thigh-length overcoat, black leggings, and fur-lined, laced up ankle boots completing her look.

Definitely a pleasant sight for his poor, frustrated bear. Also...

“What are you doing here?” he asked. “I could have sworn you told me you’d never come back.”

She folded her arms across her chest. “Here’s a better question: what are you doing here? How did you even know this is where my pack is located?”

He certainly had that confirmation he’d been looking for, didn’t he?

He scratched his nose. “Just taking care of some business.”

“Some business?”

“I was planning to come find you when I was done. Thanks for making that part easy on me.” Although it certainly complicated the first part of his plan. He’d intended to

kill the pack leader's brother without her prior knowledge. And when he found her, he was going to simply tell her the man was dead.

End of story. But the beginning of her ability to get on with her life.

So he hoped.

"You came here looking for me, even though I said I'd never come back?"

"Nope." He popped the P. "I planned to go looking for you after I was done here."

"Done doing what?"

They really needed to get off this merry-go-round. "So, how have you been? Where have you been, anyway?" Why didn't you call? Why did you leave me in the first place? Are you ready to give us a chance yet?

Her gaze swept around the area while she adjusted the strap on her shoulder. The backpack was smallish, probably meant to hold her clothes while she was shifted into her bear. Was she deliberately planning to shift, or was she simply always prepared?

"I've been okay," she finally said. "Better than four years ago."

His bear did a little anticipatory jig.

"I didn't go all that far away, actually. Been living in Chicago." She chuckled while shaking her head. "It's hard to find a place to shift when you live in a big city teaming with humans."

"I seem to recall that had been Peter's issue too." And Peter had eventually settled on pack land with his mate, plenty far away from humans.

“I miss it,” she said, giving the area another sweep with her gaze. “Not here, literally, but the ruralness, I guess. Nature. Peace.”

There was lots of nature and peace in southern Louisiana. He bit back that comment, didn’t think she was ready to start that conversation.

Yet.

“So you came back for the nature?” he asked.

She laughed. “We’re both dancing around this subject, aren’t we?”

He took a step closer, and when she didn’t shy away, he took another, and another, until he stood before her, soaking in her beauty, wishing he could pull her into his arms and never, ever let her go again.

“You look good,” she said, and he groaned before he could bite it back.

Her brows arched.

“I just...I just want to hold you,” he finally admitted.

She gave a little shudder, and before he could worry that it was not a positive shudder, she practically collapsed against his chest, wrapping her arms around his waist and resting her head against his left pec, right over his heart, which had started beating with an almost desperate urgency.

Closing his arms around her, he laid his cheek against the top of her head and let his lids fall over his eyes with a deep sigh. If his bear were a cat, it would be purring right now. As it was, the animal was rubbing itself against the side of his head like it wanted to be petted.

“This is...” he started, but paused when he heard sounds.

Cracking branches and squawking birds. Heavy breathing. Heavier footfalls.

Someone was running toward them.

Mallory went rigid in his arms before extracting herself, her eyes hard as they scanned the area, clearly trying to determine where the sounds were coming from.

A bear came into view, running like its ass was on fire. It was young, adolescent probably. Possibly had only started shifting in the last year.

The bear had a tawny brown snout, wide, fearful eyes, and its ears were pressed flat against its head. It glanced over its shoulder, its front leg crashed into a fallen branch, and it went tumbling ass over tea kettle until it finally came to a halt on its side in a mound of dirty snow.

Mallory rushed over to the bear before Remy could tell her to be careful. Cursing under his breath, he hurried after her.

“...not going to hurt you,” Mallory was telling the young bear. The bear, a female, darted a distrustful gaze his way.

Mallory gave his arm a squeeze. “He’s with me. It’s okay. We aren’t”—she gave him a quick glance—“we aren’t with this pack.”

Interestingly, that seemed to calm the bear, who slowly rolled to its feet and shook like a dog. With another glance at Remy, the bear nosed at the pack on Mallory’s shoulder.

“Do you want to shift?” Mallory asked.

The animal nodded.

“I don’t have an extra set of clothes in here. I brought this pack for the clothes I’m wearing, in case I needed to shift. But I do have clothes in my car. It’s just beyond the border, over that way.” She pointed to the east.

The bear juttied its snout, then it took off at a jog, pausing a few yards away and pawing the ground impatiently.

“Either someone is following her or she suspects someone will be soon,” Remy noted.

“Definitely seems that way,” Mallory agreed. “Should we shift? I can stuff your clothes in here with mine.” She flipped the pack off her shoulder. The bear grunted and nodded, apparently agreeing with Mallory’s suggestion.

“Okay, you go first,” Remy joked, earning a smirk from Mallory. He pulled his beanie off his head and handed it to her. Then he shed his jacket, his fleece, and finally the T-shirt underneath.

Damn, it was cold out here. Although that look Mallory was giving him was definitely helping to stabilize his body temperature.

It was also perking up a certain part of his anatomy, which she was about to realize as he unlatched the button on his jeans and shoved them down his legs, taking his boxers with them.

Unfortunately, the chilled air was effectively emasculating his erection, so he quickly toed off his boots and shed his pants and summoned the magic of the shift.

His bear roared its approval in his head as his bones stretched, his nose elongated,

claws sprang from his fingers while fur sprouted all over his body. A moment later, he dropped to all fours, gave a shake, and hurried over to rub against the nearest tree. The shift, with its almost-instantaneous hair growth, always made his back itch.

While using the tree trunk as a backscratcher, he blatantly watched Mallory undress and stuff her clothes into the small pack.

Damn, she was beautiful. The memory of how she'd looked, naked and spread out before him on the sheets in that hotel room four years ago hadn't dimmed in the least, but he couldn't deny that seeing the real thing again was something akin to nirvana.

She finished stuffing her clothes into the pack and then waved him over while she stood there stark naked and seemingly entirely at ease, other than the goosebumps spreading across her creamy skin.

He trotted over, more than happy to get close to her. She looped the pack around his neck, magic sparked off her skin, and in the blink of an eye, she, too, was a bear, albeit with dark fur instead of white, like his.

If only they could simply romp around, being bears, getting reacquainted. Unfortunately, that other bear was pawing the ground, making grunting noises, clearly impatient to get out of here. Yeah, this was not a casual meetup, and they did not have time right now to remind themselves why they belonged together.

Forever.

Shaking it off, he nodded at Mallory to lead the way, and then he trotted along with her, flanking her to the left, while the other bear fell into step and flanked her on the right.

He kept his senses sharp, but he didn't notice anyone following them. When they

reached what he assumed was Mallory's vehicle parked on the side of a two-track lane leading to pack land, she stopped and summoned the magic of the shift again, and he got another eyeful of the most spectacular female body he'd ever seen in his life.

"Down, boy," she murmured as she slipped the pack from around his neck.

He snorted.

She pulled out their clothes, opening the door of the vehicle to lay them across the seat instead of on the wet, chilled ground. Once she'd covered all the good parts and was guiding the other bear around to the back of the vehicle, he shifted and dressed.

When Mallory next stepped into view, fully dressed, a scrawny young woman stood next to her, the borrowed clothes obviously too big for her form. She hovered next to Mallory while tossing Remy defiant looks.

She had curly dark hair, her skin was topaz, and her eyes were paler than Mallory's, more gray than blue. She was going to be a knockout when she grew into her gangly arms and legs and filled out a little. At the moment, though, she was practically a child with only hints of the woman she'd eventually become.

"Alaina, this is Remy," Mallory said, waving at him.

Alaina nodded but made no attempt to shake hands or move any closer to him. In fact, she looked as though she was ready to flee at any provocation.

"What happened?" he asked. "Who has you running scared?"

She glanced at Mallory. The two women had managed to bond in a very short period of time.

Yeah, Remy was jealous. He'd been waiting four long years to bond with Mallory.

"It's okay," Mallory soothed. "We're on your side."

Did she even know what happened?

Alaina's gaze kept darting around, like she was afraid someone was about to jump out from behind a tree. "Can we get out of here first? I—this place makes me uncomfortable."

"Yes, of course," Mallory said without pause. "Get in."

Before Remy could offer her the front seat, Alaina dove into the back. Remy wasn't exactly keen to have his back to the girl, although since she'd been in bear form when they came across her and Mallory had loaned her clothes, he was more than reasonably confident she did not have a weapon she could use against him.

With a little maneuvering, Mallory turned the vehicle around, heading away from pack land. No one spoke for long minutes that felt like a damn hour, until Mallory came to a stop at the main road that would take them back to Duluth if they headed south, or even deeper into the middle of nowhere if they went north.

She turned south.

"Okay, start talking. What happened back there? Why were you running like your ass was on fire?" Remy asked.

Alaina wrapped her arms around her middle and stared out the side window. Several heartbeats passed. Finally, she spoke.

"I killed the pack master's brother."

Well, hell. That was supposed to be Remy's job.

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Mallory clenched the steering wheel, staring straight ahead as she drove over the bridge that intersected a narrow part of the lake. They were heading back to Duluth, mostly because it was the closest human-populated area where they could feel reasonably safe until they figured out what the hell to do.

Alaina killed the pack leader's brother.

Deke. His name was Deke. Even in her head, Mallory hadn't liked to refer to him by name. It humanized him, and he didn't deserve anything but her deep-seated hatred.

Remy was half turned around in his seat. "Why?" he demanded, but Mallory knew. And honestly, so did Remy, but unlike her, he probably needed to hear it out loud.

The justification.

Did that make them bad people, that they were seeking justification for murder?

Through the rearview mirror, Mallory watched as Alaina swallowed thickly and licked her lips, her gaze landing anywhere but on the other two individuals in the vehicle with her.

"He...did things," she forced out. "Tried. With my best friend."

Oh God. How many years had it been since he did the same thing to Mallory?

"She was afraid to tell the pack leader, since it's his brother and all. Plus, the pack leader is kind of a dick." She thrust her chin, like she was challenging them to say

otherwise.

No worries there.

“She didn’t want to tell her parents either and possibly get them in trouble. So we came up with a plan.”

Two teenage girls, thinking they needed to solve this astronomical problem all on their own. Mallory was afraid her molars were going to crack she was clenching them so tightly.

“I spent the night with her last night, and we were walking back to my house this morning when he just popped up on the road next to us, walking along like he was our buddy or something.”

She shuddered.

“He wouldn’t leave, and we didn’t know what to do. We’d come up with a plan, but we hadn’t expected it to happen right then. But then I looked at Gina, and she nodded and...”

Mallory and Remy both remained silent, allowing her to collect her thoughts.

“We headed straight to my house. My parents are in Florida, so it would be just the two of us. Well, three of us, because he walked right in behind us, like he had every right to be there.”

“What was your plan?” Remy asked quietly.

“We were going to lure him over to my house, and we were going to scare him. There’s this big-ass butcher knife in the block in the kitchen. I was going to pull it

out, wave it around, warn him to leave us both alone. That's it. That's all we were going to do." Her voice cracked.

"So you decided to enact that plan this morning, since he showed up out of the blue?" Mallory guessed.

She nodded.

"But that isn't what ultimately happened," Remy murmured.

Alaina shook her head. "Gina got scared. She panicked. Took off running. Instead of chasing her, Deke turned to me, and the look in his eye..."

She closed her own eyes. "We were standing in the kitchen. The knife block was right there. I thought about how scared Gina was, how she felt like she had nowhere to go to feel safe. And then he smiled, but it wasn't a happy, cheery smile, y'know?"

"Yeah," Mallory said. "I know."

"I just grabbed the butcher knife. The biggest one in the block. I think...I think at that point I was still hoping I could scare him off. But the second he saw that knife in my hand, he came at me, and I..."

She blew out a deep, shuddering breath. "I stabbed him. Again and again, I just kept stabbing him. Until he fell to the floor. Until he stopped moving."

"And you're sure he's dead?" Remy asked, not sounding at all shocked or appalled by her story.

Alaina blinked her eyes open and stared at him. "I stabbed him so many times, I lost count."

Remy nodded and turned back around to face the front. “I’d say he’s likely dead.”

“Did anyone see you? Were you being followed?” Mallory asked while she forced herself not to press any harder on the gas pedal. Now was not the time to get pulled over for speeding.

“No. I dropped the knife, cleaned off the blood that had gotten on my hands and face, and then I shifted and ran. But they’ll figure it out. He’s lying in a pool of his own blood in my parents’ kitchen right now. The knife is still there. And my clothes, which are covered in blood.”

“Your parents are in Florida?” Remy prompted.

She nodded. “My grandparents—they live in one of those senior packs down there. My grandpa fell, hurt his hip. They went to make sure everything is okay. I didn’t want to miss school, so I stayed home.”

Alaina paused.

“I can’t go back. I don’t know what to do.” She blinked rapidly and swiped at the tears that trailed down her cheeks. “I want my parents,” she said, sounding like a frightened child.

Wordlessly, Remy pulled a napkin out of the center console and offered it to Alaina, who used it to wipe her eyes.

Mallory’s mind whirled, processing the information Alaina had just told them, combining it with what had happened to her when she was Alaina’s age—and then fifteen years later. Her mind added a dash of who else has he done this to?

She had a recipe for I’m glad he’s dead.

Right or wrong, she couldn't get that thought out of her head.

She didn't want that thought out of her head.

Through the rearview mirror, she watched Alaina sniffle and stare out the side window. Remy was watching Mallory intently.

"What?" she finally asked, glancing over at him. They'd reached the city center of Duluth. She merged onto US53 South. Remy barely flicked a glance at the road sign.

"I'm just waiting for you to say it out loud," he replied.

"Say what?"

"That we're going to help her."

She stole another look in the rearview mirror. "I don't expect anything from you. I'll drop you wherever you want me to. But yes, I'm going to help her."

She said the wrong thing. She could tell by the way his mouth pinched, the tension in his shoulders. She wanted to ask but was conscious of their audience in the backseat. Besides, what the hell had she said? This wasn't his battle. He had no ties to her pack, and she had no expectations of him.

They'd shared a harrowing experience followed by a remarkable afternoon in bed four years ago. And while she'd thought a thousand times since that she'd like to reach out to him, none of that added up to her having expectations of him.

He'd told her himself that he was a lone wolf; he hadn't been part of a pack since his teens, and he was perfectly okay with that lifestyle. Didn't sound like there was room in his life for whatever she may or may not have fantasized about a time or two or a

hundred.

And then there was her. She was a mess. She knew it, she knew she needed to fix herself; she just hadn't figured out how yet. Not wanting to burden him with her own issues was also a large part of the reason she'd stayed away for the past four years. Someone who was a self-proclaimed lone wolf would certainly have no interest in striking up a relationship with someone who had the amount of baggage she had.

Clutching the steering wheel and staring straight ahead, she asked, "What do you want me to do?"

She could practically hear the arching of his brows in his tone as he said, "That's a loaded question."

She gritted her teeth. "Where do you want me to take you? Were you staying somewhere nearby? Can I drop you at a hotel?"

"Yes, I was staying nearby, and no, you cannot drop me at a hotel. Although if you want to swing by and pick up my stuff, that'd be okay. And then I suggest we keep driving. At least until Indianapolis, I'd say. That's probably far enough away to stop for the night. And when we do stop, we need to make sure we are in the middle of a metropolitan area. The more humans around, the better. In case they figure out our plan and catch up to us. They are less likely to attack with human witnesses."

Mallory blinked rapidly, staring straight ahead, afraid to glance at him. "Are you...are you making a plan to go with us?"

Finally, she looked over, and noted the tension in his jaw. His words were almost a growl as he snapped out, "Yes, Mallory, I am going with you to Florida."

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Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 9:30 am

Remy wanted to demand his bear explain why it had chosen such a complicated, headstrong woman as their mate. Except he knew better.

It was all up to the fates. He had as much control over that as he did his hair color.

Well, he supposed he had more control over his hair color.

She, on the other hand, seemed to believe she had control over whether she would accept her fated mate. Either that or she didn't realize they were mates yet.

They hadn't actually discussed that sensation that had poured over him when they'd spent that afternoon together in that hotel in Detroit. The same sensation he'd assumed had poured over her.

That sense of destiny. Like he was meant to be with her for the rest of his life.

But then she'd taken off, and he'd assumed she'd simply been running scared. They'd been through a great ordeal, after all. He could hardly blame her for needing space.

Now, as he sat in the passenger seat of her vehicle and they headed southeast toward Chicago, he considered that maybe he'd been wrong. Maybe she hadn't realized what had occurred between them. He knew it was possible for bears not to realize their fated mate if they weren't in the right headspace. He'd been there, had witnessed it, with Peter Karhu and Winona Orzo.

So, yeah, it was possible. Especially for someone like Mallory, who, he suspected, felt like she had something to prove. She wasn't ready to let go of her demons, so

how could Remy expect her to embrace a future with her mate?

He curled his fingers into his jeans, bunching the material into his fists. He needed to prove to her that she wasn't alone. He needed to show her that whatever she was fighting, he was in her corner. He wanted to help.

He needed to help.

* * *

They cruised along, mostly in silence, until Alaina said she had to pee. Mallory asked if she was hungry, too, and the young woman admitted she was, so they pulled off in the Wisconsin Dells area.

Remy knew the place was a human tourist attraction, although he'd not expected it to be teeming with people in the middle of March.

And yet, it was. As it turned out, it was spring break, and apparently, indoor waterparks were a huge spring break destination in the upper Midwest.

While every restaurant was so packed they had to wait for a table no matter where they went, Remy saw that as a good thing. Generally, shifters preferred to stay away from areas heavily populated with humans. Since most humans didn't know shifters existed, even if whoever Mallory's pack leader might send after them caught up to them, they likely wouldn't attack and expose themselves in a crowd like this.

When they were finally seated in a booth tucked into a back corner near the restrooms, Remy broached the subject weighing heavily on all of them.

"Let's talk about your pack, the pack leader."

Both Alaina and Mallory, who were seated across from him, curled into themselves, as if they were afraid his words alone would make the enemy appear before them.

“I need to know what we’re up against,” he added.

Alaina darted fearful glances at Mallory. The girl had clearly decided to throw her trust entirely into Mallory’s corner, but she wasn’t yet sure about Remy. Not that he blamed her, given recent circumstances.

A server brought them a round of waters and took their orders before hurrying away again. Mallory snagged a napkin and began steadily shredding it.

“Now that I’ve been away for a while, I realize how cult-like our pack is.” She glanced at Alaina, who slowly nodded.

“You definitely can’t argue with the pack leader,” Alaina added. “It’s his way or the highway.”

“Sounds a lot like Peter’s pack used to be,” Remy said. Had his own pack been like that? It had been half a lifetime since he’d had anything to do with a pack of bear shifters, and he almost couldn’t remember.

Were they all the same?

No. Now that Winona was in charge of the pack in Michigan’s Upper Peninsula, things had surely changed. Remy hadn’t been back to visit since she took over, but he knew her personality, and he was certain she would not manage like that. It wasn’t in her nature.

“Arthur Karhu and our pack leader do share similar traits,” Mallory admitted. “For our pack leader, it’s a combination of him being raised a certain way and the power

of becoming leader going to his head.”

“How was he raised?” Remy asked.

“His father was a bully. His mother was meek, did what she was told. This all happened well before I was born, but the rumors around the pack are that he abused her as well as his sons. The current pack leader’s name is Orsen. And he grew up a carbon copy of his sire.”

“What about the brother? The one who...” Remy flapped his hand instead of saying the words.

The server returned, breaking the tension that had fallen. She slid each of their plates onto the table and disappeared again. Remy waited patiently while Mallory took a couple of bites before continuing her story.

“He was younger by a few years. Much closer to their mother than the father. While Orsen tried to emulate their father, Deke tried to keep a wide berth. Again, this was all before my time, but if you ask the older shifters in the pack, they’ll tell you that Deke grew up with his brother constantly calling him a mama’s boy, and he didn’t mean it as a compliment. Their mom died young.”

She gave Alaina a swift glance. “I’m not even sure Deke had shifted for the first time yet.”

Staring at her plate, she slowly shook her head. “Not that I can muster any sympathy for him whatsoever, but, after that, until their father died, Deke was basically a punching bag for both his dad and his brother. He had no one in his corner—the only person he was close to was his mother, and she was gone. I can see where that would break a person.”

“So his reaction was to abuse young girls?” Remy asked, his blood pressure probably pushing into high-alert territory.

Mallory blew out a breath. Abused or not, he could have made different choices. He should have.

“He couldn’t get a date to save his life,” Alaina piped up. “He was the joke of the pack. No woman his own age would even look at him. The pack leader would actually make fun of him during meetings.”

“Jesus,” Remy muttered. What a fucked up life.

A freak accident that killed Remy’s parents and younger sister had left him packless at fifteen. Now, in retrospect, he realized he probably could have returned to his pack afterward; their support might have even helped him come to terms with his lot in life much sooner than he had doing it alone. Carving a path through life alone.

But he’d been a scared, grieving kid, and he’d taken off on his own to lick his wounds.

He didn’t want to be alone anymore.

Although at least he hadn’t grown up fearing the person who was supposed to be responsible for his safety and protection.

Now that he allowed those memories to return, he could admit that not all packs were managed the same. Mallory and Alaina had the unfortunate bad luck to have been born into one of the worst ones.

“His response to the abuse was to abuse someone who was weaker or at least intimidated by him,” Mallory said, shaking her head.

“Full circle,” Remy said, gritting his teeth. That wasn’t the way it should happen. And yet, it did, time and again.

“Probably why he came after you again all those years later,” Remy noted. “You went to the pack leader. To the one person he was afraid of.”

Alaina’s eyes went huge. “You...?”

“Yes,” Mallory said shortly.

“I’m assuming the pack leader is going to come after you, Alaina, because he will feel like he needs to save face. In his mind, he will be afraid to look bad in front of the pack, like they might respect him less if he does not seek justice,” Remy said.

“Even though he’s the one who led everyone to hate his brother in the first place,” Alaina spat.

“Yes,” Remy said, nodding. He slipped his phone out of his pocket. “Do you want to call your parents, let them know you are okay? Maybe warn them that we’re coming.”

They finished their meals, paid the bill, and headed out to the parking lot. Remy and Mallory kept an eye on Alaina as she talked to her parents from a bench next to the restaurant’s entrance, a few dozen feet away.

Mallory paced a small rectangle around the pavement, until Remy caught her arm on her next pass. “Hey,” he said when she stopped and gave him a swift glance. “When do we get to talk?”

“About what?”

“About how all this makes you feel.”

A short laugh burst from her. “What, are you my therapist now?”

He shook his head. “A friend.” Your mate. “Why did you go back to your pack today, Mallory?”

He waited a few beats.

“Closure,” she finally said, pushing out the word like she wanted to push it over a cliff.

“Do you have your closure, now that he’s dead?”

She flapped her hand, the movement stilted. “She’s still in danger.”

It wasn’t an answer, not really, but he understood. With a slow nod, he said, “We’ll protect her.”

“I know. I just I don’t know why I still feel so...edgy.”

Remy suspected he knew, but now was not the time to explain. She might not believe him, and with a teenage girl in tow, they didn’t have the privacy for him to show her that they were fated to be mates.

Instead, he gave her neck a quick squeeze and said, “You’re worried for Alaina. Once she is safely with her parents, you’ll feel better.”

“Do you think they’ll go back to their pack?” she asked. “After what happened?”

Alaina, down the sidewalk, swiped a tear from her cheek. “I don’t know. I’m not sure

they can. With what you told me about the pack leader, I don't think he will forgive and forget."

"No, I don't think so either."

She sounded infinitely sad.

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Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 9:30 am

It was well after dark, that point at which most people were settling in for the evening, by the time they found a hotel to crash in Indianapolis for the night.

All Alaina said about her conversation with her parents was that they were relieved she was okay and they appreciated Mallory and Remy bringing her to them in Florida.

Mallory should be relieved as well, except she didn't think they were safe, even in Florida. She knew how Orsen worked. Alaina's grandparents would have had to get permission to leave pack land to move to Florida.

Which meant Orsen knew where they were. And she doubted a senior care pack had much in the way of protection. Part of the reason elderly bears retired to those packs was because they were theoretically safe. No one had ever attacked a pack full of aging shifters before.

Maybe Orsen wouldn't follow them. Maybe he would bide his time, wait for Alaina and her family to return to Minnesota.

But Mallory doubted it. Orsen was even more volatile than his brother had been. He was the worst kind of bully. No one could best him. Ever. It was unacceptable in his mind.

And he would see the death of his brother—at anyone's hand but his own—as someone trying to one-up him.

They booked a double room for the night. While her bear was disappointed—it

recalled all too vividly what happened last time she and Remy shared a hotel room—Mallory was certain Alaina wouldn't want to spend the night alone in a strange city, ten hours after killing a man and fleeing for her life.

Remy didn't act disappointed that they hadn't booked their own room, which left her uncomfortably dissatisfied. While she knew they shouldn't put Alaina in a separate room, that didn't mean she didn't want Remy to wish they could.

Alaina showered, and then they all tucked in to watch a rom-com movie. She fell asleep halfway through it, and when Remy noticed, he clicked off the television.

"Come on," he whispered, nudging Mallory. She was sharing a bed with Alaina, while Remy had the double bed closest to the door all to himself.

The curtain over the window was partially open, letting in enough ambient light from the parking lot for her to see his face. He sat on the edge of his bed, watching her.

"Let's go," he said.

"Where?"

"Outside."

"Why?"

He stood. "So we can talk." He sounded irritated. Or maybe frustrated. But hey, how was she supposed to know what he wanted?

She'd let Alaina wear her pajamas, so she was in a T-shirt and her panties. Snagging the leggings she'd draped across the foot of the bed, she threw off the blanket and shimmied into them while he blatantly watched. He didn't react, which was annoying

all over again. Yet what the hell was she looking for from him? It wasn't like they were going to have an opportunity to be anything but friends for the immediate future.

Did she even want to be more than friends? She still wasn't over the last time they hooked up.

Grabbing her shoes and coat, she slipped out into the hall as he held the door open.

Instead of heading toward the lobby, he hung a left, toward the stairs, which ended at a door leading out the side of the building.

"Where are we going?" she whispered, even though there was no one around and they weren't doing anything wrong. Just two consenting adults, wandering around the hotel late at night. Hell, it wasn't even midnight.

He shrugged and held the door open. "I want some air. Just to breathe."

Okay, she understood that. She felt the same way. Lounging in that hotel room made her edgy too. Although, honestly, everything was making her edgy lately. For the last four years, it seemed.

She rubbed at her sleeves as they walked along a cement path that circled the hotel. It was chilly, but not uncomfortably so, which was a nice change from the evenings in Minnesota at this time of year. And in Chicago, for that matter.

On the second pass around the building, she stopped and leaned against the cool bricks. They were on the backside of the hotel, overlooking a well-maintained greenspace cloaked in shadows. Hidden by darkness as they were, if anyone were looking out a window, they'd likely not be seen.

Remy propped his foot against the bricks, leaning next to her.

“This is nice,” she said into the silence.

“Yeah,” he responded. “Peaceful. Calming.”

It was and it wasn’t. Remy’s presence calmed her nerves, kept her grounded, and yet, having him constantly around felt like an itch she couldn’t quite reach.

She finally turned to face him. “I’m so...” She flapped her hand, like that might somehow help her articulate even though the words weren’t in her head either.

What was she?

“Frustrated?” he suggested calmly.

“Yes,” she bit out.

“It’s your bear.”

She blinked. Once. Twice. He was right. Now that he’d said it, she could pinpoint it. All those edgy sensations were coming from her bear. It was so odd. They’d always been in sync before. Always.

“She wants my bear,” Remy added.

Mallory stared at him. “She wants...” But she didn’t need to finish the sentence. The moment he said the words, she knew it.

He was right.

“But how...?”

He shrugged one shoulder. “My bear is doing the same thing. In here.” He tapped his left pec. “And definitely in here.” He tapped his temple.

“So our bears want...”

He twisted so that his shoulder was propped against the bricks, fully facing her. “Our bears want us to want it.”

No issues there. Hell, she’d wanted Remy since—honestly, since the moment he was hauled into that lab in Detroit, fighting his captors with more resilience than even she’d had.

She’d given in to the want when they shared that hotel room after they’d escaped, because why the hell not? They’d both needed the release, and what point was there in denying the attraction?

Except wrong place, wrong time, even if it could have been the right person. For God’s sake, she’d convinced herself there probably wasn’t a right person out there for her. She was too messed up. Yeah, bears believed in fated mates, but it didn’t happen to everyone, and given what she’d gone through, she’d figured that train was simply never going to leave the station.

And why was she thinking about fated mates while standing here in the dark, tucked into a shadowy corner, staring down Remy like she was daring him to make a move?

This wasn’t about fate. This was about really excellent sex.

And maybe, just maybe, the fact that she hadn’t had any in almost four years was exactly why she couldn’t reach that damn itch. Maybe Remy had ruined her for all

other men. The idea sucked if she put too much thought into it, because sooner or later, they were going to part ways again.

Best not to think about the long-term. Just focus on right now.

And right now, Remy was watching her with those luminous pale eyes, his body tense, waiting.

Waiting for her to make the first move.

She reached for the collar of his jacket, grasped it, and pulled. He stumbled forward, his hands automatically cupping her waist as he twisted them both until Mallory's back was flat against the rough wall. Even in the darkness she could see the desire flare in his eyes. The need.

This attraction wasn't one-sided. But she'd always known that. What she hadn't realized was how strong it was.

For both of them.

Twining her fingers in the soft waves at his nape, she applied gentle pressure, and he came willingly, watching her steadily as his face descended, his lids fluttering shut at the last moment before his lips pressed against hers.

It was everything, this simple kiss. As if they were the last two pieces of a puzzle that had finally been turned the right way and locked together with triumphant satisfaction.

She canted her head, tentatively opened her mouth, letting her tongue slip out and gently touch his lips.

He growled, the sound as feral as if he were in his bear form. His hands dropped to her ass, his fingers curling against the stretchy material of her leggings, tugging her hips closer to his body.

She spread her legs, and he edged between them, his erection pressing against her belly. Heat flared inside her. Hell, it was a damn inferno, threatening to consume her.

I want this. All of this. Forever.

Her bear was in her head, cheering her on, but Mallory tried to ignore the beast. This was a release—nothing more—and she was confident it was going to be a hell of an experience.

Remy growled again and broke the kiss, his lips nibbling their way to the shell of her ear. He gently bit on her lobe, and she moaned quietly. “This isn’t how I intended?—”

“Don’t think,” she whispered, tightening her hold on the strands of his hair. “Just feel.”

“We should?—”

She kissed him, cutting off whatever argument he was about to give. If they brought logic or reason into this moment, the moment would pass.

And they’d both still be edgy, uncomfortable.

“I just want to feel,” she whispered against his lips. “With you.”

His groan was guttural, loud enough to be heard, if anyone else were out here with them. “I didn’t bring protection.”

She shook her head. “It’s okay. I’m protected.”

His body stiffened for a scant moment before he squeezed her ass, lifted her onto her tiptoes, and very deliberately rolled his hips, that erection she had been craving for four long years dragging across her most sensitive area.

She arched, closing her eyes and leaning her head against the wall. He took advantage of the opening and kissed her neck, sucking and biting and licking her hypersensitive skin until she whimpered, a desperate please falling off her tongue.

He grasped her chin, pulling away just enough to be able to look her in the eye. “Tell me, Mallory. Do you want this? Or do you need it?”

“Oh God,” she said, her hands on the front of his jacket, her fingers curled into the satiny material. “I need it.”

“It?”

“You.” She practically breathed the word, realizing how true it was even as the small gasp tumbled over her lips. “I need you, Remy.”

He stared at her for another second before pressing a hard kiss to her lips and then whispering, “You have me, Mallory. I’m all yours.”

She arched, her body desperate to be connected to his. They weren’t close enough. Too many layers between her skin and his.

“Please,” she said again.

He grinned, looking like he’d just won a prize. Not just any prize, but the prize.

Sliding his hands down her legs, he grasped her thighs, lifting, until her feet left the ground. He began walking sideways; she locked her ankles behind his back and clung to his neck. “What are you doing?”

“Moving us deeper into the shadows,” he replied.

When he was apparently satisfied with their location, he pressed her against the wall again, holding her in place with his pelvis while he struggled out of his coat, letting it drop to the asphalt.

With her gaze on the garment, she asked, “Why did you do that?”

“You need to get out of a whole lot more clothing than I do?—”

“Shame,” she interrupted, slipping her hands under the hem of his shirt and letting her fingers trail up, over those rigids of muscles that shivered as she stroked them.

“We can get another room. The front desk clerk said there were plenty when we checked in?—”

She shook her head. “I don’t want to lose this momentum. I don’t want us to think too much.”

His eyes flared, some unnamed emotion there, and in the next breath, his lips pressed to hers, his fingers digging into her hips like he might be able to will her clothing from her body.

She stripped off her coat and dropped it onto his. When she lifted her shirt, pulling it over her head, his gaze tracked her movements until her breasts were exposed. He watched as they puckered and hardened.

“It’s so cold,” he said when she let her T-shirt fall on top of her coat.

“Guess you need to keep me warm.”

Groaning, he cupped her bare breasts, suckling first one, then the other.

“So beautiful,” he mumbled around her nipple. “So delicious.”

She wiggled, impatient to feel. To be connected with him, entirely and fully, for however brief that moment in time may be. She wanted to forget everything else and pretend they were the only two people in the world and there was nothing to do but feel. Each other. Together.

“I need...” she whispered again. She could hear the edge of desperation in her own voice.

He finally lowered her legs to the ground, and she didn’t even wait for him to get around to undressing her. As chilly as the slight breeze was, her skin was heated, probably from that inferno burning inside her. Burning for Remy.

She shoved her leggings down and wriggled out of them. Remy only watched—she almost laughed, but she was too far over the edge, too needy, too focused on what came next.

She grasped his jeans and tugged the button free, the hiss of the zipper lowering only increasing her sense of urgency.

She stroked his erection. Her name tumbled over his lips like a prayer as he lifted her legs again, pressing her against the wall while he rubbed against her like a cat.

As good as that felt, she needed more.

More.

Reaching between them, she positioned his erection. With his jeans hanging off his ass, he finally thrust, sliding into her as if they were meant to fit together. She gasped and then groaned, clinging to him when he pulled out slightly and thrust again, his fingers digging into her bare ass, his face buried in the crook of her shoulder.

She squeezed her thighs around his hips. He surged forward, groaning gutturally. A breathy “yes” tumbled from her lips.

“Come for me, cher.” His thrusts became faster, more determined. “Show me how much you want me.”

Her head banged against the bricks behind her, her inner muscles milking him, her orgasm racing through her like he had the power to command her pleasure.

Hell, maybe he did.

One hand still clutching her ass, the other tangled in her hair, tugging gently until she turned slightly. His lips crashed into hers, and he began pumping with renewed vigor, mindless, uncontrolled, dragging a second orgasm out of her before he finally gave a shout as he stilled, warmth filling her.

They stayed like that for long, long moments, holding each other, their hearts hammering in sync. She didn’t want the mood to be shattered, but eventually, the cold started to seep into her bones. She needed to dress. They needed to return to the hotel room in case Alaina woke. They needed to sleep, as they had a long drive tomorrow.

They needed to return to the real world.

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Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 9:30 am

Remy woke first. He was alone in the second bed in the hotel room, Mallory and Alaina sharing the one closest to the bathroom. They both looked so peaceful in sleep, and yet, he knew neither was.

Interestingly, he believed Alaina would be okay, eventually.

Mallory, he wasn't sure what to believe.

Last night had been no less fantastic than the first time they'd been together. His bear had demanded he claim her as his mate. She's it for us, the bear insisted in his head.

Yes, but he saw it in her eyes last night, the confusion wrapped around her need. She knew it was special when they coupled, but she wasn't ready to accept what it truly meant.

And now that Deke was dead, Remy had no idea how to help her get to that point. Killing Deke for her was supposed to erase all the horrors from her past, like he was a hero slaying dragons for his queen.

He scrubbed a hand over his face. There wasn't time to dwell. Deke's body had most definitely been discovered by now. The pack leader, according to Mallory, would come after Alaina if only to save face with the pack. Even though it sounded as if no one would truly miss his brother.

They needed to get Alaina to her parents, where she would be safe.

And then they could figure out how to slay Mallory's dragons so they could be

together.

Slipping out of bed, Remy quietly and efficiently went through his morning routine, and once he was dressed, he scribbled a note and left it on the table near the door. Then he headed out to track down breakfast. And coffee. He recalled Mallory mentioning once that she was a coffee drinker.

He returned with several to-go containers filled with breakfast foods and a cardboard holder with three cups of steaming coffee, in case Alaina, too, liked the stuff.

They were both up and moving about when he stepped into the room. Alaina was fully dressed, sitting on the bed, mindlessly flipping channels on the television. Mallory, he assumed, was in the bathroom.

Alaina switched off the television and hopped up from the bed, hurrying over to inspect his bounty. She grinned as she popped a strawberry into her mouth. “I love fresh fruit. Thank you.”

Yep, she was going to be fine.

Mallory was the one he needed to worry about.

* * *

They were out the door by seven, heading south once more. It was going to take them twelve hours to get to their destination—more when they included stops for gas and food and biological functions—but Remy didn’t want to spend another night on the road. The quicker they could get Alaina to her parents, the safer they’d all be.

And the sooner he and Mallory could begin working on their relationship. He wasn’t going to let her just disappear into the night again, like he had last time. Even if he

had to come right out and tell her she was his fated mate and force her to come to terms with the idea.

Part of him wanted to do that—mostly, the part controlled by his bear—but he knew that wasn't the wisest course. She needed to make the realization on her own, not have it shoved down her throat by someone else, even if that someone else was her fated mate.

As expected, it was nearly eleven in the evening by the time they reached the Florida panhandle, driving down a narrow road hardly wide enough for two cars to pass.

It was eerily similar to heading toward Mallory and Alaina's pack—as in, there was only one or maybe two ways in and out—yet it was vastly different. Instead of snow and leafless, slumbering trees, the foliage was lush, thick, brushing against the side of the vehicle and fanning out in bright spots of color that were undoubtedly beautiful by the light of day.

There was no security checkpoint; just a sign next to the road indicating this was private property, do not enter. Half a mile later, another sign indicated this was The Shift, an exclusive, elderly resort, and membership was by invitation only.

Did they not fear humans would stumble upon them, or were the packs up north simply too paranoid?

Alaina confirmed that this was, indeed, where her grandparents lived, and they cruised along in silence. There were no streetlamps. The first sign of life was a small cottage that suddenly loomed on the side of the road, a motion-sensing light flaring to life as they slowly drove past.

The curtain in the front window fluttered. Perhaps the security in this place was more subtle than guards posted at the entrance.

They passed another few houses, the distance between them becoming smaller and smaller, like they were heading toward a community center. Each one had one of those bright spotlights that flared to life as the vehicle rolled by.

A white-haired old man sat in a rocking chair on a porch, watching them with sharp eyes. Remy waved in greeting, and the man nodded, his gaze tracking them until they rounded the next bend.

“Is this normal?” Mallory finally asked, her gaze lifting to the rearview mirror.

“Yeah,” Alaina said. “These old people watch out for each other. They know everything that goes on in this place.”

Good, Remy thought. That meant Orsen wouldn’t be able to sneak in unaware.

The road ended at an intersection, the retirement community laid out before them like a grid. Paved streets, sidewalks, manicured lawns rolling up to squat brick houses. Cadillacs and golf carts were tucked under carports. The color of the shutters around the windows and the designs of the furniture sitting on front porches were the only obvious differences from house to house.

Most of the residences were dark, yet Remy still sensed that they were being watched. Maybe the hidden observers were trying to decide whether they were friend or foe.

Hanging over the front seat, practically vibrating with anticipation, Alaina directed Mallory to turn left, then right, and left again and to pull into the driveway of the third house from the end, behind a Trailblazer with Minnesota plates.

Remy’s head was on swivel, his gaze searching for anything that might be out of place. He was confident Orsen would make his way down here as well, but what he

wasn't sure of was how long it would take the other bear shifter to do so.

There were streetlamps, now that they were in the midst of the neighborhood, casting circular splashes of light on the concrete and grass. Alaina's grandparents' house was dark.

The curtain in the window next to the front door twitched.

The front porch light didn't flicker on.

He scanned the area again. No other curtains moved. No old men sat on front porches. No motion sensor lights sparked to life.

"Something's wrong," he said.

Alaina's body went tense. Mallory turned sharply to watch him.

"What?" Alaina asked.

Remy kept scanning, looking for something, anything. "He's here."

"Orsen?" Mallory asked, her eyes widening.

"My parents," Alaina yelped. "My grandparents!"

She dove for the door, shoving it open before Remy could even formulate the words, "Let's not go rushing in without a plan."

Mallory scrambled from the vehicle after her.

Remy sighed and pushed open his own door.

Guess they were rushing in without a plan.

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Mallory caught up to Alaina as she placed her foot on the bottom step leading to the porch. She clasped the girl's forearm. "Alaina, don't?—"

The slab of wood was pulled open, and there stood Orsen.

Their pack leader.

For a bear, he sure resembled a weasel. Beady eyes, triangular nose, skinny body. His seemingly small size was deceiving. She'd watched him take down men twice his size.

He didn't fight fair. Physically or mentally.

Mallory felt rather than saw Remy slip up beside her, and was it weird that his nearness gave her confidence?

"You finally made it," Orsen said, a growl in his voice. "Thought I was going to have to start beating on old people to pass the time waiting for you."

He said this while looking down his nose at Alaina, who shrank away, subtly moving until she was partially tucked behind Mallory.

Orsen's gaze finally shifted to Mallory, and his eyes widened a fraction. "You," he said before he furrowed his brow. "So this was all contrived? You partnered up with a kid, set her up to kill my brother?"

Of course he would think that way. He had probably convinced himself his brother

had not done anything to provoke the attack, either.

“You gonna answer me?” he demanded.

“No,” Mallory said.

His eyes widened again. People didn’t say no to the pack leader. Not this one, anyway.

“Technically, that was an answer,” Remy supplied helpfully, drawing the pack leader’s attention.

“Who the hell are you?”

“Doesn’t matter,” Remy said, and Mallory thought, he very much matters.

What a really terrible time to have such an epiphany.

“Then why don’t you get the hell out of here?” Orsen suggested to Remy.

“Nah, I’m good,” Remy replied as casually as if Orsen had asked if he wanted a drink of water.

“Whatever,” Orsen said, dismissing Remy. He wagged his finger between Alaina and Mallory. “I’ll punish you both for my brother’s death. Works for me.”

“You leave her out of this,” Alaina blurted. She stepped out from behind Mallory, her hands fisted at her sides. “And leave my family alone too.”

Mallory touched her arm, a warning not to push the bully too far, but Alaina shook her off.

“Or what?” Orsen drawled, looking mildly amused.

“Or we’ll kick you out of your position once and for all. You don’t deserve to be pack leader anyway. You never have.”

Mallory reached out again, this time squeezing Alaina’s arm in warning. “Not the best time to develop a backbone,” she murmured.

Alaina shook her off again. “I don’t need to develop a backbone. I’ve always had one. And you know what? I’m done putting up with such shitty leadership. I’m not going back to the pack. I’m staying here with my grandparents.”

“News flash, little girl. You need my permission to leave pack land,” Orsen said.

“Bad idea, dude,” Remy quipped, pulling Orsen’s focus.

“Huh?” Orsen was clearly confused.

Yeah, so was Mallory. She threw Remy a puzzled look, but he didn’t even glance her way. He stabbed his thumb in Alaina’s direction. “Calling her little girl. Bad move.”

Orsen narrowed his eyes once more. “Who the fuck are you again?”

“Told you, it doesn’t matter.”

“You’re right. I don’t give a shit who you are. I’m still gonna kick your ass.” Orsen stalked down the steps, pulling off his shirt and tossing it on the grass.

Remy held his ground as the guy stormed toward him. His face was impassive, his limbs loose, his hands at his sides. His fists weren’t even clenched.

Lip curled into a snarl, Orsen unlatched the button on his jeans, presumably preparing to shift.

“Is it just me, or does he look like he’s about to perform a strip tease?” Remy idly commented.

A laugh burst from between Mallory’s lips. “I’m pretty sure he thinks he’s being intimidating.”

Orsen stuttered to a stop, his thumbs hooked into the waistband on his jeans.

Remy shook his head. “Not particularly intimating. Or sexy, for that matter. The guy’s totally missing the mark.”

Orsen’s eyes were practically shooting sparks while he gnashed his teeth and magic shimmered along his skin, indicating he was about to shift.

“Alaina! Oh my God, you’re here!”

The front door burst open behind Orsen, and a middle-aged man and woman charged out onto the porch, followed by another, older couple who moved at a much slower pace as they made their way down the porch steps.

The first woman, a mirror image of Alaina and presumably her mother, shoved Orsen out of the way as she beelined for her daughter, pulling her into a full body hug and clinging to her like they hadn’t seen each other in years.

Or, more accurately, like her daughter had just gone through a traumatic experience and she’d been worried sick. “Are you okay, baby?” she asked, pulling away just enough to cup Alaina’s face, her gaze darting over the young girl like she was searching for injuries.

Alaina nodded, and her mother pulled her tightly to her body again, while Dad came over and wrapped them both in his arms.

“Get out of the way, Orsen,” the oldest gentleman of the bunch muttered, using his cane and a sharp-looking elbow to help him edge past the pack leader, who stood there, dazed, clearly unsure how to proceed.

“If I were you,” Remy said, leaning in like he was conspiring with Orsen, “I’d resign my position as pack leader. Suggest they vote for a new one. Take a step back. Figure out your life. There’s still time.”

“What the hell are you talking about?” Orsen demanded.

“I’m telling you, we’re cutting you a break.”

Orsen bristled. “You think you can take me?”

“That’s not what I was talking about, but yes, I do.” Remy slipped his hands into his pockets and shrugged. “However, on the odd chance that you fight dirty enough to get the best of me, we’re currently surrounded by shifters, all ready to take you down. The median age is seventy-five, but trust me, you don’t stand a chance. Not against this community.”

Orsen wasn’t quite ready to let it go. “She killed?—”

“She did us all a favor,” Remy interrupted. “And now you get to live with it. With the reality that what happened to him is at least partially your fault.”

Orsen’s eyes went round.

Remy clamped a hand onto his shoulder. “Yeah, you mull over that for a while.

Somewhere else, though. This family needs to start healing, and your presence isn't helping."

Alaina's grandmother edged between the two men, knocking her hip into Orsen and sending him staggering backward. "Move out of my way," she snapped, hustling past so she could embrace her granddaughter.

Orsen's gaze darted every which way, bouncing off each person in turn before sweeping out over the shadows surrounding them. Mallory had no idea if Remy spoke the truth about a bunch of elderly shifters hiding in the shadows, but it honestly wouldn't surprise her.

Finally, after long seconds, the hapless pack leader snagged his shirt off the ground and stormed away, stomping down the sidewalk, his image fading and appearing again as he stepped into each pool of light.

The shadows shifted and moved.

Remy was right.

She snagged his shirtsleeve, tugging him away from the reuniting family. He followed her to the edge of the driveway. When she turned to face him, he still had his hands stuffed into the front pockets of his jeans. The expression on his face was... earnest.

Good. That made it easier for her to say what she had to say.

"So, I was thinking."

"Yeah?"

She tapped her lips with her pointer finger. Remy's gaze tracked the motion. "I'd like to see if we can, um, you know."

He shook his head. "No, I don't know. I need you to spell it out."

* * *

He could probably guess what she was thinking, but he suspected it was important for her to talk it out. Maybe this was the closure she'd been seeking. This admitting to herself that she was ready to move on. Get her life back.

Mallory frowned, staring out into the darkness for too many heartbeats. Until she finally shook her head and stared into his eyes.

"I thought I needed to go back to my pack to find closure, but really, I needed to find you. My bear has been harassing me since I left you in that hotel room in Detroit."

"I knew I liked your bear."

She snickered. "My bear is quite fond of you too."

He tucked a loose tendril of hair behind her ear, let his fingers linger there. "What about you? Are you fond of me too?"

Grasping the fabric of his T-shirt, she pulled him close until their chests bumped. "Quite. I think I might be in love with you. I've finally realized you're my fated mate."

He wrapped his arms around her, gave her a squeeze. Kissed her temple. "Took you long enough."

“I have issues, Remy. A lot of them.”

“Don’t we all?”

“Yes, but?—”

He pressed a kiss to her lips. “Those issues are what shaped us into who we are. Our bears seem to be pretty confident we can make this work. My heart feels that way too. Maybe we should give it a try.”

“Oh, we’re not just giving it a try. We’re going all in.”

He laughed. “That sounds like an excellent plan. Now, what do you think about sneaking away so we can find some privacy? Because I really, really want to get you naked right now.”

Her cheeks went dusky while her eyes sparkled with mischief. “That sounds like an excellent idea.”

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Four Years Later

With little miss Elsbeth snuggled against his chest, sound asleep in the carrier strapped to his body, Remy pressed the doorbell to the pack leader's home.

The door swung open to reveal an older woman with silver hair and a bright smile on her face. "Remy," she greeted, shaking her head. "How many times do I have to tell you that you do not need to knock? And give me that sweet little dumpling."

Like a pro, she slipped the infant out of the carrier and curled her arms around the little girl's sleeping form.

"She's just perfect," Amelia said, tearing up.

A dark-haired toddler came charging into the room, skidding on stocking feet like he was practicing for snowboarding season.

"Uncle Remy," the kid shouted before slamming into his knees.

"Hey, Xavier, my man." He swept the kid up until he was perched on Remy's shoulder, giggling and clapping his hands.

Peter Karhu strode into the room, hurrying over and lifting Xavier off Remy's shoulder. "Every time my kid does something dangerous, I find out he learned that particular stunt from you."

"Yeah, and now you've had another for me to corrupt."

Found family. That's what he'd gained by finding his mate. He hadn't seen it coming. He'd been content just to have found Mallory, to be committed to spending the rest of his life with her.

But once they'd both realized they were fated mates, she'd wanted to visit Winona and Peter. And then she found out they had a kid, and she hadn't wanted to leave for a good long while.

Turned out, Remy was pretty good at being an uncle.

Eventually, Mallory had asked him to take her to south Louisiana. She wanted to see his home. She wanted to better understand where he'd come from.

He'd shown her the grave markers he'd made for his parents and sister. Even took her to meet his old pack. The pack leader welcomed him back with a watery smile.

They stayed long enough for Remy to reconnect with his pack. To settle with the ghosts from his own past.

Until Mallory figured out she was pregnant.

It was then they made the decision. They wanted their child to grow up in a pack environment. And there was only one they would settle for.

So they moved to the Upper Peninsula of Michigan. To Winona's pack.

Their found family.

"Where's Mallory?" Peter asked, releasing Xavier, who charged from the room.

"I'll watch him," Amelia said. "You all go ahead and visit." She handed Remy's daughter back to him and hurried after her grandson.

“She’s pumping. Says she wants to enjoy a glass of wine or two tonight,” Remy said.

“Come on, I’ll get you a beer. Winona’s feeding the little one. Probably planning to do the same. We’ll go chill on the back porch. They’ll know where to find us.”

And they did, a few minutes later. Winona had their newborn daughter in her arms. She’d given birth only two days ago. Remy and Mallory’s daughter was four months old.

The two new mothers and best friends were already planning the various activities they wanted to do with their daughters, who would undoubtedly become best friends too.

Mallory plucked their daughter from Remy’s arms and settled on his lap. He wrapped his arms around her and kissed her shoulder.

Peter handed her a glass of wine, and the four adults fell into an easy conversation.

Yeah, this was the life.

The one he’d been pining for, well, for his entire life.

Thank you for reading!