



Bearnapped at the Altar (Sawtooth Security #1)

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Category: Fantasy

Description: My plan when I became a contestant on Moonlight Mates was simple: Use my fifteen minutes of fame from the dating reality show to expose my ex-boss for stealing pack land.

But in the ultimate plot twist, the billionaire wolf showed up as my episode's Moonlight Beast, and chose me as his mate.

The contracts have been altered, and to keep me from destroying him, he's forcing me into marriage.

A little enemies-to-lovers drama will be good for ratings, right? Hell no. I'm not going down without a fight.

When I call Sawtooth Security, I'm shocked they agree to send me a bear shifter bodyguard. But I never expect them to crash the season finale and drag me away from this sham of a wedding on live TV.

Barrett Guardian insists the danger is only beginning. He brings me to a tiny cabin in the middle of nowhere and refuses to leave my side.

For Barrett, this case is personal. This heartbroken single dad refuses to let this wolf ruin another life—especially mine. Now, he needs my help, and it will take a lot more than gossip to bring down this powerful wolf syndicate.

This bear is ready to fight for me, and he'll give me what Moonlight Mates couldn't...my very own happily ever after.

You won't want to miss what happens when this grumpy, single dad bear shifter rescues his curvy mate in the most dramatic way possible. Both main characters are over forty! And that tiny cabin only has one bed.

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Chapter One

Tegan

My name is Tegan Reynolds, and I am seriously regretting my life choices at the moment.

I couldn't confide in any of the ladies who had been staying at this glamped-up campsite with me for the last four weeks. We were contestants on Moonlight Mates , a shifter dating reality show where we vied to be chosen by an alpha beast.

Competition for Gideon Silverclaw, billionaire wolf shifter, was cutthroat. And tonight, he was slated give away his final rose.

The excitement around the set was palpable. My fellow contestants had spent the day getting right with the universe and making themselves the most desirable Beastlerette.

I couldn't believe I was still counted in the ranks of that groan-worthy title. Not only was I forty-one and way too fluffy to be stuffed into this glorified prom gown, but Gideon Silverclaw was the wolf I'd come here to expose.

Did I expect some sort of enemies-to-lovers fairy tale where the lovable, imperfect heroine reformed the big bad wolf? Hell no. My mission was simple: use the notoriety and the money I made from the show to stop Gideon in his wolf tracks. I'd use my fifteen minutes of fame to expose him for exploiting packs and stealing their land.

I had all the time in the world to pursue this mission after I was fired from Gideon's company, Wild Adventures, for uncovering his plan to extort local shifters out of the land their packs had lived on for generations.

But the joke was on me when he showed up as this season's Moonlight Beast. He'd pretended he had no idea who I was, after we'd worked together for the last five years. When I tried to alert production, they told me it had to be a case of mistaken identity. Like I didn't know who I worked with for the last three years. They insisted that lots of Beastlerettes had nerves once their episode started.

Okay, fine. I decided I'd go through with it because maybe I'd get the piece of information that would blow my case wide open. It made filming awkward, because it took everything I had not to confront him on camera.

Plus, with a half-dozen eligible Beastlerettes within earshot at any moment, anything I said could and would be used against me.

The whole time I'd been on this show, I'd pretended to be something I wasn't. That ended tonight.

The spotlight clicked on, and show host Larrie Winslow strode on too-high heels to the center of the stage. Those were risky on a good day, but tonight, she'd broken into the champagne and started celebrating early.

A gasp radiated from my fellow contestants as Larrie turned her ankle and fell into the moon shaped pool of light.

"Even I get nervous on nights like this." She chuckled as the production assistants rushed to help her up. She adjusted the column skirt of her dress. "That will be edited out, right?"

“Of course, that’s why we don’t actually film live,” one of the producers assured her. “Everything will look like a fairy tale, because that’s what this is. Right, Beastlerettes?”

A cheer rose from my fellow contestants. I clapped—it felt so gross, but I didn’t want to bring any more negative attention to myself. There was a literal spotlight at the end of the tunnel. I’d collect the money from the show’s contract, and use every penny of it to stop Gideon.

The money wouldn’t cause much more than an annoyance, but it would give me a chance to book all the tell-all interviews as a recently jilted Moonlight Mates Beastlerette.

Once people learned the truth about this wolf, they’d help me put a stop to this nonsense.

What kind of wolf displaced other packs? And most importantly, why?

The director counted down, and Larrie was once again her most radiant self.

“Welcome to this very special episode of Moonlight Mates . Tonight’s the night all you beast lovers have been waiting for.” Larrie beamed. “Tonight, alpha wolf shifter Gideon Silverclaw will give his final rose away under the light of this gorgeous full moon. I can’t think of a more romantic way to bring this season to a close.”

The cameras panned over the Beastlerettes. My fellow contestants gave themselves a quick fluff to make sure they were ready for their second of screen time.

I couldn’t breathe as Gideon took the stage. Tonight he was dressed in a tux that hugged his slim but muscular body. A suit and tie never really did it for me, but I could understand the attraction. His dark hair had been slicked back on the sides, and

the curls on top left free. His jaw was square, and his gray eyes glowed in the moonlight like he might shift and ravage his new mate.

Normally, I was into that sort of thing, which was why I was here, but with him? Hell no.

He nodded and smiled as he took us all in.

I'd never felt so much like I'd joined a cult in my entire life. Or like my longline strapless bra was about to give out at the worst possible moment. I wasn't sure which scenario I preferred.

"Gideon, you've taken your eligible Beastlerettes out on a series of romantic and thought-provoking dates. You got to know a little about each lady, and in turn, they were lucky enough to get to know you." Larrie batted her eyelashes at him, and I had a feeling she hoped he'd choose her in the biggest plot twist of all. "It's such a big decision to choose just one of them to be your mate."

He shook his head. "Actually, Larrie, it was the easiest decision I ever made. It's a matter of fate."

My gag reflex was working overtime tonight. Just a few more minutes, I reminded myself, and then I could blissfully begin phase two of my mission.

"We're all dying to know...which one of these Beastlerettes is fated to be claimed by you?"

"I choose—" the dramatic pause lasted way too long. "Tegan."

Gasps erupted from the crowd. Music started playing and fireworks exploded overhead.

“What?” I couldn’t have heard him right.

“Go on the stage,” a production assistant whispered, giving me a hearty shove in that direction. “We know you’re in shock?—”

“Of course she’s in shock! How did she get picked out of all of us?” Bonnie, the contestant who I swore Gideon would choose, crossed her arms in front of her ample cleavage. “This show is fixed. There’s no way that this gorgeous hunk of wolf is fated to that...spinster.”

It wasn’t the insult she intended, because I wholeheartedly agreed. There was no way Gideon would have picked me if the show wasn’t fixed, which was exactly what I’d been afraid of the moment he appeared on set.

So phase two of the plan was officially under construction. But now, I had to go on stage and accept this rose from my sworn enemy. My ex-boss. This absolute piece of shit.

My mind raced as I walked up the stairs. What would I do when I got up there? I could refuse to take the rose, but that would set off a chain reaction of drama I wasn’t prepared for, and I was so close to exposing him.

But if I went through with it...

We could easily stage a dramatic breakup. No. I knew better than that. He wanted something. Unless Gideon Silverclaw really thought I was his mate.

The cameras slid into position as I walked up to Gideon. Those silver eyes were almost transparent in the bright lights. Completely unnerving, and not the least bit sexy. His full lips curled up into a smile that made my blood run cold.

All sinister, no steam.

He held the rose out to me.

If I were a braver woman, I would've snapped it in half and thrown it in his face. But instead, I took the flipping thing.

His lips were on my cheek before I had a chance to protest.

"It's fate, Tegan," he whispered. "Everything's exactly as it's supposed to be."

I nodded, because if I opened my mouth, I was sure to scream. Think of the publicity, I reminded myself. Everyone will want to know what Gideon Silverclaw was up to, and I'll share every juicy detail.

But Gideon as usual, got the last word, landing a sloppy kiss on my lips.

I pressed them shut, but that didn't stop him from trying to slip his tongue inside.

"That's a cut!" Larrie announced. "Ladies, I'm sorry to say tonight is the end of your Moonlight Mates journey. It's been a pleasure getting to know every single one of you, and I'm confident you'll all find the love of your lives. Tegan, come with me. We need to start planning the next part of the episode."

"Next part of the episode?" I said. "We're done. This was the finale."

"She doesn't even know how things work." Bonnie rolled her eyes. "This is such a joke."

Again, we were on the same page.

A few contestants awkwardly hugged me, offering hollow congratulations before I got whisked to the production office, which was just another yurt on the campground.

Larrie took the seat at the other side of the desk and gave me a camera-worthy smile. Gideon was nowhere in sight. That didn't feel right.

If this was a production meeting about filming some sort of cute epilogue, it would make sense for him to be here. And I still had a chance to expose him on camera. I tried to reframe this in my head—maybe this could give me the opportunity I needed to prove my case. I could do it on camera and catch him totally off guard.

Watching him squirm would be the most satisfying thing ever.

“Congratulations again, Tegan. Being chosen as the Moonlight Mates Beastlerette is truly a life-changing experience, and I'm excited to see what comes next. But first, we have some paperwork for you to sign.” She handed me a tablet. “I hate to drop boring formalities on you on such an exciting night, so I'll give you the TL;DR version: it's the same stuff you signed in your contract...”

She was still talking, but I was much more focused on the paperwork as I flipped through the pages.

“This looks like a marriage contract,” I said.

She nodded eagerly.

“Like a real one.” My heart was in my throat. Sweet moon, this was exactly what it was. And Gideon had already signed it! All it needed to be official was for me to sign where they'd highlighted in fluorescent yellow. “If you expect me to actually marry Gideon Silverclaw...”

“You’re contractually obligated to actually marry Gideon Silverclaw.” Larrie’s tone was icy enough to give me frostbite. “As I said, everything in this paperwork was already in the contract. You agreed to be the fated mate of this season’s beast, if you were lucky enough to be chosen. It’ll be considered a breach of contract if you refuse, and all our obligations to you will be considered null and void.”

Translation: kiss that sweet payment goodbye.

But my lawyer had gone over the contract in painstaking detail. Okay, my lawyer was my niece, who was studying to be a paralegal, and she would’ve definitely mentioned that I was on the hook to spend forever with a beast I hardly knew—let alone totally hated.

Something was very, very wrong.

“Give me a minute.” The words barely had volume as I pushed myself away from the desk and ran out of the tent.

There was a bench outside and I sank onto it, holding my head in my hands. The crisp night air had little chance of actually clearing my head, but I needed a moment to collect my racing thoughts. I needed to come up with a way out of this, effective immediately. This wasn’t a game anymore. They wanted me to marry this wolf for real.

There was no way I could do that.

I hated his guts—not only because he fired me. He had done really shitty things to unsuspecting local packs that thought the money that Wild Adventures brought in would make real change. Which it did, just the worst possible kind.

And his inner wolf had to be dense if he really thought I was his mate.

Gideon strode toward the production tent with purpose. Like he did with everything else, he was about to make this worse. He was chatting with one of the producers, too absorbed in the conversation and himself to notice the recently declared love of his life was sitting outside.

Thank the moon.

I got up fast, clasping my hand over my dress to make sure the bra didn't slip into oblivion as I scrambled to the back of the tent.

After a few weeks at the campground, everyone knew the canvas walls of the yurt were far from soundproof. Since it never stopped anyone one from speaking their mind, it was how the show obtained some of its juiciest material. Which was what I planned to do right now.

"Did she sign it?" he asked once inside the yurt. "Now we can drop the facade and get this bitch in line."

"Not yet." Larrie let out a heavy sigh. "It's not looking good. Of course, she's asking a lot of questions. She's onto us."

Damn straight I was. It took everything I had not to burst into the tent and demand answers. But Gideon Silverclaw was a dangerous wolf and confronting him when I was this furious could backfire.

Or they had set me up to film my implosion.

I refused to give them what they wanted.

Gideon growled. "You're one of the best producers in the business, and considering the generous donation I made to your company, I'm confident you'll find a way to get

Tegan to cooperate. Do I make myself clear?”

Gravel crunched in punctuation to that statement.

“Gideon!” Larrie called out, but it was futile. He was already out of the tent.

My heart raced. This might be my only chance to get him one-on-one, to get him to answer my questions without his pack, his lawyers, or the cameras. Find out why he thought I was such a problem. Sure, I was onto his plan to buy shifter land and displace the packs who lived there, but really, what did he think I was gonna do about it? I was unemployed and not very business savvy, since the best plan I’d come up with was to come onto this show to expose him.

Sweet moon. This was a bigger mess than I thought. When Gideon magically appeared as the fated beast on Moonlight Mates , I tried to convince myself it was a coincidence. But there was no way he would want to fall in love in the most public way possible, especially with me.

But I was right all along about his intentions. He was here to silence me and love didn’t have a single thing to do with it.

My resources were limited and my choices sucked even worse than that. But that didn’t mean I had any plans of giving in.

Giving my boobs a quick check to make sure they were still inside this ridiculous dress, it was my turn to make an unannounced visit to the production tent.

“I won’t be signing that contract,” I said as I took the seat in front of Larrie’s desk. “Gideon chose the wrong Beastlerette. We need to reshoot the rose scene, and this time, he’ll name his true fated mate.”

Larrie raised a well-manicured brow. “That’s so cute. You think you’re in charge of production now.”

I gave the most casual shrug I could muster. Especially when I wanted to blurt out that I heard the whole exchange. That he’d bought her off. But it didn’t feel like the time to let her know I was onto her.

There would never be a good time, but I needed to do this on my terms. Not when these assholes had my back against the wall.

“Just want to make sure everyone ends up happy,” I said.

“Seems that we both want the same thing.” She smirked as she pushed a paper at me. It was the original signed contract—well, it was my signature, but nothing about the rest of the document looked familiar. “You’ve already signed a legally binding contract that stated if chosen, you agreed to have an official mating ceremony with our eligible beast. Of course, you are more than welcome to break that contract, but if you do, prepare to pay back every penny that was spent producing this episode. Including the other ladies’ accommodations.”

I gulped. Even with a payment schedule that lasted for the rest of my life, I’d never come close to erasing that debt. “Gideon and I didn’t share the connection that he had with the other Beastlerettes. They’d be more than happy to accept that rose from him, even as his second choice. They’re all still here—we can fix this.”

“There’s nothing to fix, Tegan. Gideon chose you. More importantly, his wolf believes you’re the woman that he’s fated to claim. Do you have any idea how lucky you are?”

“Apparently not.”

“Women all over the country would do anything to trade places with you. You could try to show a little gratitude. Because a week from now, you’ll be married. They’ll all want to live vicariously through you. The network is already talking about a spinoff with you and Gideon as you start your life together.”

It was official. In exactly seven days, Gideon Silverclaw would own my ass. I shuddered at the thought as I rose from the chair. There was no need to waste time right now arguing with Larrie, her bogus contract, or the blood money she’d accepted from Gideon to make this happen.

Because they already had a plan in place to make this worse.

I had six days to manifest a better outcome for myself, and I would give it everything I had.

“Okay. I’ll do it.” I practically choked out the lie. I wouldn’t be able to work my universal magic if production clogged up my time trying to bully me into compliance.

Please don’t let this backfire...

Larrie softened, giving me as genuine a smile as she could manage with that much plastic surgery. “I’m so glad to hear that, Tegan. I assure you this is the right decision.”

“What happens now?” I’d play the role of the good little Beastlerette, because I wasn’t letting these bitches catch me off-guard ever again.

“We get everything ready for your wedding,” she said, clasping her hands together. It was the sincerest she’d seemed all season. “This is my favorite part of every episode. We’ll pull out all the stops to make sure this is the day you always dreamed about.”

More like a nightmare. I nodded. “Looking forward to it.”

As I walked back to my yurt, I tried not to focus on the fact that I was royally fucked. There had to be a solution to this.

By the time I went back to my room, my roommate was already packed up and gone. That was fast, and at this point, everything seemed off. Had production helped her pack because they wanted me alone?

Was I even safe here? It wasn't like I had anywhere else to go. Even if I did, I had a pretty good feeling Gideon Silverclaw would appear there too.

What would he do once he actually got me alone? No cameras, no rules? My funds were limited, but I'd put them all in on the likelihood he planned to kill me. A shiver went down my spine at the thought. Whatever I knew was enough to ruin him.

If he simply had romantic feelings for me, he wouldn't have waited until after he fired me from Wild Adventures to make his move.

Then I remembered something.

It was a long shot, but it might have been the only shot I had.

I dumped the contents of my purse onto my bed, thankful that I hadn't had a chance to clean it out. I did a little happy dance when I found the battered business card I'd pulled off a corkboard at a diner because my gut told me I might need it someday.

Like right freaking now.

Sawtooth Security. Shifter Solutions.

My hands shook as I typed out the text message. An email would've been more professional, but this was an emergency. I had no idea what this service would cost me, if I could even pay for it, but I'd figure it out, because the possibility of spending eternity with Gideon Silverclaw was fucking bullshit.

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Chapter Two

Barrett

This wasn't the type of job I normally took. But these weren't usual circumstances.

"Looking dapper, man," my partner Bellamy said as he clapped me on the shoulder. His expression changed from encouragement to concern when my body tensed on contact. "Sure you're good with this assignment? We can switch roles if the ceremony will be too much for you."

"No. I want to do this," I growled as I tightened the knot on my tie, leaning into the discomfort. It wasn't just that I had no idea how I'd pull this job off dressed like this, but I hadn't worn a suit since I buried my mate.

Renee had been gone three years, and nothing had filled the emptiness. Especially now that our daughter Natalie had begged to do a semester of astronaut school. She had a long way to go before she could actually launch into space, but this was a unique program that gave her access to an experience that was usually only reserved for the military or NASA.

All that was left of the two most important ladies in my life were the unfinished science experiments I hadn't had the heart to break down and put away. If I wasn't surrounded by half-built spaceships and mystery potions, I'd have to admit that I was actually alone for the first time in my life.

That the school bus wouldn't be dropping Natalie off in a few hours. That Renee

wasn't coming back.

My jobs didn't usually make me feel feelings. But this one was different. Sawtooth Security, the firm I'd ran with a small team of highly trained specialists, had had their eye on Gideon Silverclaw for years, watching him gobble up pack land and displace his own kind without any plausible explanation. There was no way I could let him claim this woman too. Tegan Reynolds had made some shocking accusations in her text message, and if her evidence was solid, we could finally nail this guy.

Not to mention the money from this job would pay for Natalie's astronaut school. She'd wanted to go so badly, and for her to get into one of the competitive collegiate programs, she needed to have this kind of experience. As much as I wanted to keep her close, I had to let her fly. In this case, literally.

This job would keep her flying.

"Are you sure? Haven't seen you like this since..." Bellamy shook his head. He didn't need to finish the sentence. He'd been with me through the good, the bad, and the ugly, and I was proud to call him a friend. "Let's just go do the damn thing."

A black van with darkened windows and fake plates waited for us in front of my cabin. Bellamy drove. I needed to get my head back in the game before we got to the mating ceremony. I glanced at my phone, and there was a message from Natalie.

Just what I needed to get out of my head.

Natalie : I have my first test today and I'm nervous.

Me : Did you study?

Natalie: All night long.

Me: Get some rest. You're gonna do great.

Natalie: What if I don't?

Me: Then you'll know where you need to improve.

Natalie: But I want to get it right the first time.

Me: They don't expect you to be perfect.

But I knew where she got it from. My job had no margin for error, and she'd seen me beating myself up for not being able to save her mother.

Natalie: I want to be though.

Me: Do your best. I've got to go to work. Love you. I'll check in with you tonight to see how things went.

I slipped my phone into my suit jacket pocket and quickly surveyed the scene. There were cars and production vehicles everywhere. Tegan Reynolds, my client, was a contestant on the reality show Moonlight Mates . I binge-watched to get familiar with the major players.

Silverclaw I knew all too well, but to pull this off I needed to know the host of the show, the other contestants, and especially the beautiful woman who'd hired me.

Not that I should be thinking of her that way, but she was stunning. With pink hair and bright amber eyes.

"Looks pretty chill so far," Bellamy said. "But remember Silverclaw's guys are here too, and we're outnumbered. Get in and get out before anyone realizes it was you."

“I’ll be quick.” I nodded to him before I got out of the van.

At least, I planned to be quick. Bellamy’s assessment seemed correct. A catering truck was unloading the food for the celebration, and a DJ was setting up for a party. People milled around the area where the ceremony would take place. I couldn’t tell if they were invited guests or people associated with the show.

A few mouths gaped as I walked past, but no one had the nerve to try to stop me. It was a good thing this place was crawling with Silverclaw’s guys. I never wanted to associate myself with his crew, but today I could be thankful that they’d give me the cover they needed.

As a bear shifter, I was bigger than those wolves. Humans wouldn’t know the difference. But a shifter would know one of these things wasn’t like the other.

It meant I had to nail this.

The further I got, the less anyone paid attention to me. Guests laughed, hugged, and were already taking part in the wine that seemed to be flowing freely. I took a glass from one of the passing trays to help blend in, but I wouldn’t touch a sip of the stuff.

I moved past the ceremony area, the dinner tables, and dance floor, and found a cluster of yurts that I recognized from the show.

Only one had a pulse. Wardrobe racks and equipment had been left outside, and women moved in and out. Frantic energy surrounded it.

That had to be where Tegan was.

We’d only spoken briefly—enough for her to tell me what had happened. Gideon Silverclaw was going through a lot of trouble to keep her quiet. I hadn’t told her my

plan, only that I would solve the problem. She didn't like that, and I didn't blame her. This situation didn't have even an inch for error. But the situation had to stay fluid, as I told her, until I had a chance to assess the situation in person. I liked rules, but I knew when to break them too.

My research quickly found her being quite outspoken about her former employer, Wild Adventures, owned by Gideon Silverclaw—who was now forcing her into marriage.

Why? There were a thousand other ways he could keep her quiet that were much less effort. He could've paid her off, or killed her...

My bear growled. It wasn't like him to feel protective of my clients, but this case felt different.

Once I made sure Tegan was safe, we'd figure out Silverclaw's MO. And I'd make sure she understood how important it would be to keep her mouth shut. To let Sawtooth Security take the lead on this case. She was human, and shifter politics didn't play by the rules she was used to.

Gideon Silverclaw was a bad dude. He'd been making promises to acquire pack land and then breaking them as soon as the contract was signed. His lawyers were slick, and shifters were losing their homes. Their heritage. My clan had been duped by Silverclaw Enterprises, and damn if this case wasn't personal.

It has nothing to do with Tegan Reynolds.

Keep telling yourself that . My bear snickered.

I wouldn't let anyone lay a paw on her.

Something inside me rumbled as I watched the yurt. My bear was in my head. Maybe he was just trying to distract me from thinking about where I was. A mating ceremony.

A quick phone call and some pictures couldn't have sent me into overdrive about a woman I'd never met. One that might be more trouble than she was worth with Silverclaw in the mix.

It had been three years since Renee died. If things were the other way around, I'd want her to be happy.

Yeah, this ceremony was getting to me.

But right now, I had a job to do, and it didn't matter what I was feeling.

An engine revved in the distance. Bellamy wasn't known for his patience, but he was a hawk-eyed bear, and he could be sending me a warning.

I had to act, now.

Once the ladies moved away from the entrance to the yurt, I stepped in the doorway as quietly as I could. Being stealthy wasn't easy for someone who shifted into a five-hundred pound grizzly bear.

Tegan stood in front of the mirror in her wedding dress. She was gorgeous. Production had spared no expense on the white lace gown that hugged her ample curves and draped softly over her legs. Her pink hair had been curled in an old-fashioned style so she looked like she'd been ripped from one of those hot rod pinup calendars.

My heart was pounding, and not only because of what I was about to do. There was

commotion outside of the tent, and I let a growl slip out. She gasped, turning to find me.

“Can I help you? Are you looking for Gideon’s tent?” Tegan asked. She must have thought I was lost. How adorable and dangerous that she was so trusting. She probably thought I was one of his goons.

She was definitely human if she couldn’t tell the difference between him and me.

I had to make my move. I stepped toward her, still undecided if I should tell her what I was about to do or just do the damn thing and apologize later. I had about three seconds to decide.

“Tegan, we’re ready for you,” an unexpected voice said. A woman with a headset and a tablet in her hand stood smiling in the doorway.

I growled again, louder this time.

Shut up, bear . This job was damn near impossible to pull off, and he hadn’t come up with any better plan.

The ladies wore matching expressions of concern.

“Excuse me,” I said, brushing past the production assistant. Fuck. I just totally blew my chance to get her out of there. I hesitated. And why, because it had been far too long since I’d been so close to a beautiful woman? Piss poor excuse. I had to make this work, and it wasn’t gonna be any easier from here on out.

Not only could I not let this delectable, adorable woman marry that asshole Silverclaw, but I needed to get paid for this job. I needed that reality check to remember what had brought me here.

The yurt wasn't soundproof, so I stayed close, listening, planning, anticipating the next opportunity. Having another chance to pull this off was a luxury, and I needed to make it count.

The camera crew appeared, and there was a good sized entourage with them that included the woman I recognized as the host of the show.

They were about to bring Tegan to the altar. I was too late.

No. Don't you dare give up on her, my bear rumbled.

"Tegan, it's the moment we waited for all season long. I'm so excited you get to experience this," the show host said. "Want to tell us what's on your mind?"

"Gideon Silverclaw is a thief, and I hope you're broadcasting this live."

Feisty, my bear said as the entourage gasped. Nice.

"We're not, because you've earned your reputation as a live wire." The host's tone was strained. "Once again, I'll remind you that you knew what you were getting yourself into when you accepted a spot as a contestant on this show."

"You changed the rules without telling me." Tegan wasn't backing down. My bear liked that a lot. But he didn't miss the note of panic in her voice. "I didn't consent to this."

"Your mate is waiting for you."

I headed toward the altar before any of them noticed me hanging around the yurt. I wouldn't have another chance to get her alone, so I needed to come up with my next plan immediately.

A group of women in bridesmaid dresses and men in suits much like mine waited at the end of the aisle, and organ music started to play. The ceremony was formal, traditional, and from what I'd seen of Tegan, not even close to what she'd choose for her own mating ceremony.

You could give her better , my bear said.

I am , I reminded him. I'm getting her the fuck out of here.

Jump in with them. Hook your arm and offer it to one of those women. You don't have time to think this through.

My bear was stubborn, aggressive, and not often wrong. And while he was right that time was running out, I couldn't afford to call unwanted attention to myself if a bridesmaid didn't play nice and blew my cover.

Instead, I slipped into a chair in the back row, ignoring my bear's groan.

Gideon stood at the altar, wearing a big old wolf smirk on his obnoxious face, and his boys flanked him.

He was too full of himself in this moment to sense me. Good.

The music changed to the traditional wedding waltz.

Tegan started down the aisle. She was alone, no one was giving her away. Her nervousness resonated in my bones, pure dread that I could actually taste, with her wide, unblinking eyes and pinched expression—anger, but more than that, utter defeat.

She thought I'd failed her.

No . My bear was about to burst out of my skin to make sure she never felt like that again.

Again, he wasn't wrong...but we had a job to do.

Only a few more steps and she'd be at that altar with Silverclaw. I'd never be able to get her away without taking down his entire crew. I was a skilled fighter, but this wasn't even close to fair.

I came up behind her, ignoring the gasps of the guests as I scooped her into my arms and made a fucking run for it.

Tegan screamed. Of course she did. The only time she'd ever seen me was when I showed up unannounced in her dressing room. My picture wasn't on my website because I needed to keep a low profile for jobs like this.

"This is better than what you were about to get yourself into," I muttered as I covered her mouth. She kicked, wiggled, and flailed, and it shouldn't have been a turn on, but fuck, it was.

My bear loved this.

I ignored him, instead tightening my grip on the chaotic, lacy whirlwind of a woman with my other arm and did my best to haul ass to the van. Bellamy better be waiting in the spot we'd agreed on.

Even a second of hesitation would cause this entire thing to unravel. Silverclaw's crew had shifted, and other beasts were turning furry all around us, joining the cause, hot on my trail.

The van door was open, and I had to get there first. I leaped into the air, practically

doing a somersault to get us inside before we had an unwelcome wolf on board.

Bellamy was burning rubber before I had a chance to shut the door.

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Chapter Three

Tegan

“What the fuck do you think you’re doing?” I wriggled away from my captor, who happened to be a big, strong hunk of man with a beard who rumbled as he abducted me.

Definitely a shifter, but I wasn’t sure what type.

Moon knew I was more than grateful to not be standing at the altar right now. I’d been minutes away from saying I don’t and causing a whole new set of problems. But I definitely didn’t have being in a speeding getaway van with two beasts I’d never seen before on my bingo card.

But that was only one of the problems. Gideon’s wolves were pissed off—and for once, I couldn’t blame them. They were running after the van and somehow managing to keep up with it as it sped away from the Moonlight Mates Ranch.

I wasn’t sure if that comforted or terrified me.

“I rescued you, like you hired me to do.” The man who’d grabbed me sat upright and peeled out of his jacket. His dress shirt clung to the muscles I’d already known were there...but now was not the time to admire them, or have any warm, fuzzy thoughts about him in general.

“Who are you?” I subtly checked to make sure my boobs had stayed in my wedding

dress after getting picked up and thrown into a van. By some miracle, I'd managed to avoid a nip slip.

"Barrett Guardian. Sawtooth Security." He lifted his hand, but stopped and smirked. "Guess we're past the handshake stage."

"Just a little bit." I had texted Sawtooth Security, and the gruff bear shifter who called me back said he'd be in touch when he formulated a plan. Not in my wildest dreams did I imagine "in touch" would equal bearnapping.

"Prove it," I said, trying to control the shake in my voice. Reality was setting in. Even if this guy was from Sawtooth Security, my troubles were far from over.

Why didn't I believe him? After having my every move filmed for the last six weeks and absolutely no privacy, it was totally possible that someone had overheard my phone call. This abduction could be to thwart the Sawtooth Security's rescue efforts.

Color me paranoid, but Gideon had a lot of bad dudes working for him.

If he'd go as far as forcing me to marry him, this stunt could also be firmly within his wheelhouse.

Barrett Guardian huffed out a frustrated sigh. "When I called you back the other night, you joked that the only reason you had my business card was because you'd had a late night hankering for blueberry pancakes."

"I have a sweet tooth. Sue me." I had to admit I liked that he remembered those details. And it was almost enough to sell me that he was who he claimed to be. But. "You could've been standing outside of my tent and overheard the conversation."

He raised a brow, like he was considering me tossing me out of the van and to the

wolves. “I got you out of marrying Silverclaw, didn’t I?”

“For now, but what are you gonna do about them?” I pointed out the window at the beasts who were miraculously keeping pace with us. “They’re gonna catch us.”

“They won’t. I guarantee.” Barrett loosened his shirt, and I was drawn to the patch of hair that became visible as he undid the buttons. He was big and burly, which boded well for his Sawtooth Security claim.

But until the adrenaline stopped pumping through my veins at warp speed, I reserved the right to be slightly skeptical and totally pissed at him for the way he handled this.

“Everyone saw what you did. There were cameras everywhere!” I reminded him. Most dudes I hung out with would never admit to watching reality shows. It was possible this bear had underestimated the overwhelming presence of cameras. “There’s no way you’ll get away with this. I’ll be worse off than before.”

“I can drop you off here, if you want.” The driver pumped the breaks, punctuating his statement. I held out my hand not to crash into the front seat. “Or you can trust us.”

Barrett’s mouth was set in a hard line. I wasn’t sure who’d pissed him off—me or his partner in literal crime.

My money was on me.

The feeling was mutual, my dude.

A rumble emitted from deep inside him.

No, I absolutely could not like that. I needed to make sure I was safe before I developed a case of Stockholm syndrome.

“You called me,” he reminded me. “How would you have handled this situation differently?”

What a frustratingly sensible question. “Maybe we could’ve done this in a more discreet fashion? Like you could’ve let me know you were coming, for starters.”

He shook his head. “Wouldn’t have worked.”

“Why not?” I demanded. At least if he’d given me a heads up, I wouldn’t have been in danger of peeing my fake wedding dress. It would’ve served him right if I had. I held in my snicker at the thought. “Like this is better? I’m in so much trouble right now. Those shifters will drag me back to Gideon. They’ve kept up with us this long, and they’re gonna be pissed off when they sink their claws into me.”

Barrett huffed. “You think I’d let them do that?”

“Gideon will be even more ruthless after this stunt,” I continued. “He showed up on a reality show and forced me into a real marriage contract. They made me sign it. This isn’t over.”

“No, it’s not.” Barrett motioned out the window.

I gasped. Oh, hell no.

There was a helicopter sitting there with its rotor blades spinning.

“Is that for us?” I squeaked.

“Yeah. Come on.” He offered his hand.

I didn’t move.

“I can carry you, if you prefer.”

I narrowed my eyes at him so he would know beyond a shadow of a doubt that I did not prefer.

“If we don’t go now, those shifters will catch you.” His tone softened. “I won’t be able to protect you from what happens next.”

“I’m afraid of flying.” I could barely even look at the thing. “Especially in something so tiny.”

Those wolves who’d chased us were getting into formation. They’d have me back at the altar in no time.

I couldn’t move. There was no way I could willingly get in that thing. Barrett grabbed me again and ran to the helicopter.

The wolves were so close. We’d barely gotten the doors closed before the pilot lifted the tiny aircraft off the ground. Some of the wolves were still hanging onto the rudders as we rose.

“I’m confused,” Barrett said. “I thought you said you worked for the adventure tour company. Didn’t that involve flying?”

“Only on the ground.” I squeezed my eyes closed. If I couldn’t see how far up we were, I wouldn’t be scared of it. And I’d never know what happened to those shifters who tried like hell to catch us.

“Listen.” He took my face in his hands. I willed myself to open my eyes. Barrett Guardian, if this bear was who he claimed to be, was a beautiful man. His eyes were dark and flecked with gold, but more than that, they were kind, like he actually gave a

shit about me. It wasn't something I encountered often, and to be honest, I wasn't sure how to handle it. "I know this is asking a lot, but I really need you to trust me."

I nodded. He pulled me in close, his body rumbling against mine, and for the first time in a far too long, I could let myself feel safe.

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Chapter Four

Barrett

I held onto Tegan way longer than what could be considered professional. She'd barely recovered from getting swept away from that sham of a wedding when I put her in this tiny helicopter. I wouldn't admit the thing scared me too.

It felt good to have a woman in my arms again. Not that this was the time to indulge, but Tegan wasn't letting me go, either. She needed this as much as I did. I couldn't imagine what she'd been through on that farce of a show, being that close to Silverclaw.

More importantly, what made her so important to him that he wanted to keep her under his claw?

Her body was soft and curvy, but strong, and she smelled lightly of vanilla and citrus. She was still in her wedding gown, which had gotten dirty during our adventure. There was a smudge of dust on her cheek that I was dying to wipe away, but I'd already been too familiar with her. If I was gonna get her to take my security company seriously, I would have to start acting professionally. But she didn't seem like the type of woman who'd let anyone see her looking less than perfect.

I forced myself to peel away from her.

The copter landed on the outskirts of Granger Falls. It was near our office, and I'd been able to secure a last minute, open-ended cabin rental. Until I could get to the

bottom of what Tegan knew about Silverclaw's business practices, I had no sense of how long I'd be on this case. It was possible that she would want to start her life completely over, and this was a place she could form some strong pack ties if she decided to stay here.

An SUV waited for us. No angry shifters on our tail on this end of the journey.

I climbed into the back seat with Tegan. Bellamy was once again behind the wheel.

"You're quiet," I said, mostly because I wanted to get out of my head. To stop thinking about how good this woman smelled. What my own mating ceremony had been like. How much I missed Renee and Natalie.

"I think I've hit the second stage of shock. Which happens to also be shock." She turned to me briefly, grinning, but her gaze darted back to the window. "Wait, are we in Granger Falls?"

Fuck. So much for protecting her here if she could figure out where we were immediately. The Sawtooth pack was strong and had already fought off a threat similar to Silverclaw's plan. I'd only had a chance to do quick research, but Gideon didn't have any obvious dealings here.

But if he did, that could be why Tegan knew where we were.

There was a possibility she was playing us, too, and still working for Silverclaw.

"You're familiar with it?" I played it cool, even though it was the furthest thing from cool if I unwittingly put her in more danger.

Damn. I needed to get back on my A-game. I'd been lucky with the clients I'd had since Renee passed away. They'd been cut and dry cases. I could've done them in my

sleep, and some of my critics could say that I did. This case needed my full attention. Too much was on the line for me to miss even one detail.

“Yeah, The Real Werewives shot one of their seasons here. The town seemed so cute.” Her demeanor changed, shoulders relaxed, expression softened.

“Didn’t realize you were so into reality shows.”

“It sounds like I’m an obsessed fan, doesn’t it?” She laughed. “I fell in love with the show, and thought that going on one like it would be the best way to expose Gideon.”

“That’s how you wound up on Moonlight Mates ?” The shows didn’t have any affiliation with each other. Some of The Real Werewives contestants and producers still lived in town, so at least I was able to confirm that in the short amount of time I’d had to prepare for the job.

“It wasn’t my first choice. I really wanted to be a Werewife, but I got fired and, I’m not too proud to admit, a little desperate. The waiting list for The Real Werewives is years long, if they even film any more seasons. Moonlight Mates wanted me.” She sighed. “Now I know why.”

“Not sure I’m getting the connection of a dating show and bringing Gideon to justice,” I said as Bellamy turned down the main road through the town. It was always bustling with activity, and I thanked the moon that no one paid any mind to the SUV with the darkened windows rolling through. The fewer people who knew we were here, the better.

“I thought the show would be a shifter-friendly platform where I could bring light to what was happening to the packs that made agreements with Wild Adventures.” She made air quotes for the word agreements. “And use the prize money to try to throw a monkey wrench into Gideon’s plans.”

“Didn’t realize reality shows paid so well.”

“They don’t. I was na?ve.” She let out a defeated chuckle. “I was desperate to stop him. My plan didn’t work, but Gideon’s did. And now we’re here.”

“Are you a shifter?” Didn’t think she was, but I needed to make sure.

She shook her head.

“But you care enough about what happens to their land that you’d put yourself on a shifter dating show to stop them?” I had to understand her motivation. “I guess I still don’t get the connection.”

“These shows make me forget about my own less-than-exciting life, and I let my imagination run wild. The people who are on them seem to change their whole lives. So in addition to revenge, I was looking for some excitement. Instead, I got the kind I didn’t want.” Her gaze was once again fixed on the town passing us by. “These pack villages always have such a unique heartbeat. Is this where your clan lives?”

“No.”

Bellamy’s eyes briefly met mine via the rearview mirror. He knew why I didn’t say more. Tegan might not notice the nod he gave me before turning onto the road that led to the cabin I’d rented for us on the Channing Reserve.

It was owned by the local pack alpha. Wolves were all around us. I didn’t anticipate needing any backup, beyond what Bellamy could provide, because I planned to keep Tegan tucked away until it was safe for her to emerge.

“This is the place,” Bellamy said as he slowed to a stop. “Need help with anything?”

“Get some rest,” I said as I opened the door to the SUV. “You did good today.”

“See you later, boss.” He winked. “Don’t do anything I wouldn’t do.”

I growled, more at myself than him. His bear must’ve been picking up on mine, but if my thoughts were that fucking obvious, it was only a matter of time before Tegan figured them out too.

I held out my hand to help her out of the backseat. She looked so out of place on this farmland in her lacy, ruined gown.

“What happens now?” Her eyes were wide, with her makeup smudged underneath them.

“We stay here until we figure out what we want our next move to be.”

She raised a brow. “Like you and me? Together?”

Great. She was probably on to me too.

I nodded. “You hired a bodyguard. I’m here to protect you.”

“Is this your house?”

My bear was thinking all sorts of inappropriate thoughts about bringing her home. Making the house less empty. He was out of his ever-loving mind if he thought I was ever going to do that. This was just a job.

And I needed to start acting like it.

No matter how delectable my client was. She was paying for a service, and I planned

to deliver.

I can think of a few ways you could make good on your promise...

Shut up, bear.

“No. I rented it just for this job.” I punched in the code that unlocked the door.

It was a one room cabin, with a sitting area, kitchenette, and one bed.

I did not think this through.

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Chapter Five

Tegan

“So...this is it?” I asked as I walked into the tiny cabin, cringing at how ungrateful I sounded.

Barrett nodded.

“It’s rustic. And kinda cute.” The bed had a calico print spread and a chunky knit blanket at the foot. There were a couple of velvety chairs by the window, and two built-in bookcases flanking the fireplace. The cabin was perched on the edge of some farmland, and there was a breathtaking view of the Sawtooth Mountains from every window. “With a little love, a few plants, and a spicy candle, it could totally have a cottage core aesthetic.”

This bear shifter was also a little rough around the edges and with some love...

No. No, no, no. I still wasn’t convinced that Gideon wouldn’t pop out of the shadows at any minute. He’d have to do a really good job hiding in this tiny place. But I wouldn’t put anything past the slippery wolf.

And if Barrett was the real deal, and he’d done the job I’d hired him to do—even though he’d picked the most banana pants way to pull it off—he still royally pissed Gideon off. If I’d learned anything about my former boss, it was that he insisted on getting the last word.

“How long do you plan to keep me here?” I cringed again as I sank into one of the chairs. I’d asked Barrett to get me out of a terrible situation, and he’d done so. In my defense, I was exhausted. I hadn’t slept at all last night, trying to manifest a way out of marrying Gideon Silverclaw. I could check that off the list of things to do. But now my body hurt—adventures like this weren’t so easy on the north side of forty.

It was a total tease to be marooned from Moonlight Mates so close to The Real Werewives , but being near where they filmed my favorite show gave me hope that this might work out okay after all.

“You’re free to go any time you want,” Barrett rumbled and ran his hand over his beard. “But you hired me to keep you safe, and I plan to see that mission through. As long as it takes.”

Comforting. Sort of.

“The Silverclaws won’t let this go quietly,” I said, more to myself than him.

Barrett took a step toward me and crouched down so we were at eye level. “What do you want to do about it?”

Sweet moon, the simple move was way hotter than it should’ve been.

“I want to expose them.” It was my turn to growl. “Stop them from destroying more lives.”

“Do you have evidence of what they plan to do?” he asked.

“Not exactly proof.” This was where things got tricky. “Gideon’s obviously decided I know enough to be dangerous. I think I know where to find the evidence.”

Barrett's expression darkened. "But nothing solid in hand."

Why did I feel like I'd let him down?

"I have a couple of pictures on my phone. They're blurry, but..." I patted my thighs, remembering that I was still in this stupid wedding dress. "My phone! I left it behind."

I was out of my chair, full panic mode activated. There was no way that thing wasn't in the hands of production. But it wasn't like I could've tucked it into my bra when I'd planned to walk down the aisle. Even I wasn't that trashy.

"Someone needs to invent a wedding dress with pockets." I groaned, shaking my head. The mic pack was still hooked onto the back of my dress, but the wire had been torn away when Barrett had ripped me from set. So production wouldn't know what had happened once we left the ranch, but they had access to everything that had happened up until that point.

Which was seriously not good.

"We can get you a new one." Barrett was way too calm about this.

"All the proof I have on the Silverclaws is in there. I texted you, and you called me back on it. They'll know who you are. We have to get it." I was in a full blow panic.

"We can have it wiped."

I stopped dead in my tracks. "How?"

"Bellamy is more than just a getaway driver." He grinned. "He's a world class systems analyst."

“Hacker,” I corrected.

“He gets the job done and I appreciate that.” The rumble was back in Barrett’s voice.

“And he’s working here?” Sweet moon, I needed to stop talking. One more faux pas and Barrett would bring me back to Moonlight Mates . “I mean, with skills like that, it seems like he’d be doing bigger jobs.”

The bear let out a low chuckle. “You have no idea how much trouble you’re actually in.”

That wasn’t true, I thought to myself stubbornly. After all, I was the one who’d spent the last three years with Gideon Silverclaw in some capacity. But from the hard expression on Barrett’s face, the slight rumble that kept slipping out of him, and the downright protective vibe... “You know something I don’t.”

“We wouldn’t have taken this job if there weren’t big implications,” he added.

My ruined wedding dress offered no defense against the chill that went down my spine.

“Are there clothes here?” I asked, motioning to my wedding dress. “I keep expecting this thing to wind up around my waist. Be thankful you don’t have to ever wear a strapless bra. They’re the absolute worst.”

Barrett unbuttoned his shirt, revealing his muscular chest. There was a healthy dusting of hair on his pecs and his abs, but not enough to hide the impressive definition. He slipped the shirt down his shoulders, and I turned toward the window to keep from staring.

But the bear had a way of drawing me back in. I turned to find him with the shirt

hanging from his finger. An offering. From a half-naked security guy I wasn't sure I could trust.

But moon knew I wanted to.

"You can sleep in this tonight, and I'll get you clothes tomorrow." The rumble was in full force now, like it increased in proportion to how much clothing he wasn't wearing.

Wouldn't you like to find out?

"I can come shopping with you."

His expression said hell no.

"I can be hard to fit." I lobbied for my freedom. Surely he didn't mean that I'd have to stay in this cabin indefinitely. "Women's sizes don't make any sense."

"I'll figure it out." Oh, the bear had an answer for everything. "It's best that no one knows you're here."

"They know I'm with you," I reminded him. "What about you? Are you willing to stay here indefinitely? Don't you have a family to go home to?"

His expression went dark at the word family. He bristled, and he'd never been more bear.

"Want to talk about it?" The answer was most definitely no, and most likely not with me, but I had to at least try to make it better.

He let out a long sigh. "I do have someone to go home to. But she's away right now."

Why did my stupid heart just sink? It wasn't like Barrett was a contestant on Moonlight Mates . I'd paid him to rescue me. This was his job.

But there had been something about the way he'd held me in the helicopter when I was absolutely terrified that made me feel safe.

Okay, it made me feel more things than safe, but I needed to push that deep down into a place I'd soon forget about.

Of course Barrett was happily married. The bear was gorgeous and successful, and he seemed like a pretty nice guy. I needed to remind myself not every man I met was an eligible bachelor. Life wasn't a reality show.

"I'm sorry to hear that," I said. I didn't specify what part I was sorry about.

A dreamy smile spread across his face. "Natalie, she's my daughter, wants to be the first bear shifter to go to the moon. And beyond that, because why limit yourself to one planet, right? So she begged me to go to a semester of space school. How could I say no?"

"There's no way you could."

He shook his head, and he looked like he was about to burst with pride. "Absolutely not. But sometimes, I start talking to her, forgetting she's not here. It's gonna take me a while to get used to it."

"I bet. How is your wife dealing with it?"

Any good feelings that had been evoked by talking about his daughter descended into darkness. "She passed away. Three years ago. Cancer."

I could feel the pain in every word. “I’m so sorry. I lost my mom to cancer too. Nothing’s ever the same.”

He shook his head, like he was lost without her. “That’s the truth. You just gotta keep going, and the hard part is, so many people don’t see the gaping hole in your life that will never be filled.”

“I get it. It’s not the same as losing a mate, but my life has been...pretty much a disaster since I lost my mom. She was my rock. She would’ve been the one that kept me out of this mess.” A yawn overtook my entire being. We’d gotten to the cabin right before sunset. “I’m so sorry. My body is about to shut down. Can’t party like I used to now that I’ve turned forty.”

“Ain’t that the truth.” He chuckled. Maybe it was the distraction we both needed. “You should get some sleep.”

I was still holding onto his shirt. His strong, earthy scent radiated from it.

“Don’t you need this back?” It looked like we were in a valley, and nights would get cold quickly. “So you can go home?”

The question seemed a little cruel after the conversation we’d just had.

“Nope, I’m staying. It’s not safe for you to be here alone.”

I eyed the bed. “How do you want to do this?”

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Chapter Six

Barrett

“You’ll sleep in the bed,” I said. My bear groaned inwardly, and I reminded him exactly how inappropriate it would be to suggest I crawled into bed with a client.

She’s not just a client, he argued.

Right, she’s a client that could have a bounty on her head.

Tegan bit her lip. Her lipstick was long gone at this point, her hair was wild from our travels, and her eye makeup had smudged. “Where will you sleep?”

She practically just gave you an engraved invitation ? —

Shut up, bear.

“I’ve spent many a night on the floor.” I moved quickly over to the closet. I needed the distraction before my bear convinced me to agree with him. Thank the moon, I found some extra pillows and blankets.

I got myself set up, and Tegan headed into the bathroom. I’d been aware of the sleeping arrangements when I booked the cabin. It was the only one available for an open-ended rental at the last minute. But I wasn’t prepared for the rush of feelings this job had given me.

The mating ceremony.

Having a woman in my arms again.

This fucking emptiness that I'd learned to ignore came racing back to the surface, threatening to throttle me if I didn't do something about it.

But I couldn't. I wouldn't. I'd treat Tegan like any other client. She deserved that respect.

I could do this, I convinced myself. My resolve was strong as I put my makeshift bed together. Considering my resources, it wouldn't be half as bad as some of the places I'd slept while on assignment. I was a bear, I wasn't opposed to spending the night in a forest, or on the side of a mountain. But like anyone else, I enjoyed a good bed.

Just as I pulled the blanket over me, Tegan came out of the bathroom wearing nothing but my shirt.

Hot. Fucking. Damn.

She'd swept her hair up on top of her head and wiped away as much of her makeup as she could. The shirt went down to her thighs, which were bare except for the flower and vine tattoo that started at her ankle and disappeared under the fabric.

"Nice ink." I groaned inwardly. "Sorry, that probably wasn't the most professional thing to say."

"It's probably not professional to be having a sleepover, or for me to be wearing your clothes, but here we are." She yawned again as she sat on the bed. A little more of the tat revealed itself as she crossed her legs.

Hell yes. My bear approved. Can't wait to find the pot of gold at the end of that rainbow.

"We should probably be honest with ourselves and admit that we're not gonna get any sleep tonight," she said.

I raised a brow. "Excuse me?"

Told you so.

"Oh, not like that." She laughed and waved her hand. "I'm exhausted, but my mind is racing. Every time Gideon does something completely awful, my anxiety keeps me up all night."

"You didn't give him a chance to do anything awful today," I couldn't stop my voice from rumbling. I hated that this wolf had her so scared. "You're safe with me."

"I keep telling myself that, but then I'm worried I might have put you in danger too." She sighed. "I won't be able to forgive myself if Gideon does something to you in retaliation. So maybe we should consider this the moment when the job is complete, and I'll make sure you have my email address to send me the invoice. And since I'm sitting here in your shirt, I feel like I can be honest with you and say we might have to set up an installment plan. I'm pretty sure any money I planned to get from Moonlight Mates will be tied up in some breach of contract nonsense since I left rather unexpectedly."

My bear roared inside me. Hell no. Don't let this woman go.

"No," I gritted out, trying to control the feelings of the beast within. "The job isn't done. We haven't had a chance to talk about what you know, what you saw while working for Gideon. And you said yourself that you expect him to retaliate. I didn't

get you out of that phony marriage just to leave you vulnerable to a worse attack.”

Tegan sighed and leaned back on the headboard of the bed. She hugged a pillow to her stomach, like she could feel my gaze on her.

Sweet moon, she was beautiful.

“Normally, I’d spend my insomnia time doom scrolling on my phone, but that’s not an option.” She bit her lip again.

“When my daughter was little and she couldn’t sleep, I’d read to her,” I said.

Tegan bristled. Maybe I shouldn’t have compared her to my daughter. But my bear was making all kinds of inappropriate suggestions about how he could help her fall asleep.

“Then when she got older, she outgrew the stories, but she couldn’t fall asleep,” I continued. “So I used to let her tell me stories. She has a pretty wild imagination. Then she’d add in her aeronautics studies. Half the time, I had no idea what she was talking about, but I loved listening to every bit of it.”

“You’re a good dad.” Tegan had finally relaxed, and as much as she didn’t plan to sleep, there was no denying she was exhausted.

“I was supposed to call her tonight, and I forgot,” I rumbled. “Pretty sure that knocks me off the pedestal you just put me on.”

“I’d love to say that daughters are super understanding when their dads get too wrapped up in work, but it’s definitely not a quality I ever mastered. In fact, it might be the direct source of my daddy issues.” She grinned when I groaned. “The good news is, if your daughter is anything like me—although I must say she sounds way

smarter—she'll appreciate any effort that you put into making it up to her. And if you insist on sticking with me, I'll make sure that you do it."

Natalie was fourteen, at the age that too many fuckups like this could cause me to lose her. She was already so far away. Wasn't sure she'd be ready to welcome another woman into our lives—that was, if Tegan planned to do any more than a little behind the scenes advising.

With both my daughter and this job, I was in way over my head, and I needed all the help I could get.

"Deal."

Tegan slept like a rock, snoring softly but barely moving. How did I know that? Because I didn't sleep a wink. My thoughts raced all night, thinking about what it would be like to finally get the best of Silverclaw, to the utter disappointment Natalie must have felt when I didn't call her back. Although she hadn't left me any messages, I could feel the judgment radiating all the way from Houston.

I rubbed the crick in my neck while I waited for Bellamy to arrive, and texted Natalie.

Me: Sorry about last night. Job was a little more involved than I was expecting. How was your test?

Natalie : No worries...I went out with some of my friends last night. I think I did okay.

Me: Just okay?

Didn't believe it for a second. Okay was on par with failure in Natalie's world. One of these days, I'd get her to stop being so hard on herself.

Natalie: I might have aced it. *wink emoji*

Me: That's my girl. We'll have to figure out a long distance celebration.

Natalie: Ooh, I can think of a few things.

Me: Whatever you want. We'll make it happen, okay?

Natalie: You're the best.

Me: Remember that the next time I say something you don't like. Bellamy's here. Gotta go.

I sent her off with a kiss emoji and slipped my phone in my pocket.

"I have so many questions." Bellamy chuckled as he handed me a coffee. My second in command was far too experienced to show up without it. "Why do you look like you're doing the walk of shame, and how come we're starting work before the sun is even up? Is there some sort of emergency where you have to pose as a male exotic dancer?"

"Funny." All I had on was my suit jacket. I'd be asking questions too. "Tegan needed something to sleep in. I gave her my shirt. I couldn't sleep, we have no supplies, and I figured we'd be a lot more efficient if we didn't wait for a clock to tell us when it was time to get to work."

"Did she give you any dirt on Silverclaw?"

I shook my head as I took my first full sip of coffee. It was strong and a little sweet, and I groaned as my brain immediately went to an image of Tegan, with her pink hair splayed on the pillow, her lips slightly parted... "Not anything we didn't already

know.”

Bellamy grunted. He wasn't a morning bear, but I'd been telling him for years that he needed to get over it if he wanted to work in this business.

“I take it you've seen the Moonlight Mates social media page,” he said.

“Not yet.”

“I say this with respect, because you sign my paychecks, but what the fuck did you do last night?” He raised a suspicious brow as he turned onto Main Street. “Scratch that. I can come to my own conclusions. So since one of us actually worked on the case last night, let me tell you what's going on. The show's using Tegan's abduction, as they're calling it, as the best free publicity they've ever had. They've been live streaming all night, splicing it with canned footage of Tegan and interviewing her fellow contestants live. The website has crashed a few times because it can't handle the traffic. They've got a vague description of you and the getaway car, but because I switched out the plates, they're unable to trace it. But they're doing their damndest to find us.”

I took another sip of my coffee and digested that information. “Not surprised they went that route, but it's interesting they wouldn't try to cover it up, since they know what Silverclaw is up to.”

“Do we know?” Bellamy grunted. “Right now, we look like the criminals. Silverclaw looks like the poor groom who got stood up by the runaway bride. All the momentum's on his side. Which means as soon as we get back to the cabin, Tegan needs to tell us every single detail of what she knows, and we need to find a way to go public with it.”

“She'll talk. She just needed some time to decompress after last night. And for me to

convince her I'm not working for Silverclaw." I grinned before I took another sip to wash away the vision of her in my shirt.

That tattoo.

"Your face lights up when you talk about her."

"She's just a client."

"Like hell she is. She's dangerous. She's pissed off Silverclaw, and to be perfectly honest, there's a possibility that she could be working with him," Bellamy said as he pulled into the parking spot. "You bested his ass last time you saw him."

"He still got our land."

"But you sent him away with many wounds to lick. I'd bet they left scars. And this reality show is eating up the drama like it's a hot fudge sundae. They'll try to push him over the edge if it means better ratings. And if they could catch a shifter fight on camera, it would give them the jackpot. I'm just saying, be careful. I'll be more than happy to kick some wolf ass if I need to, but let's try to keep that from happening."

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Chapter Seven

Tegan

“What if I was a vegetarian?” Maybe I was used to nothing but salads and smoothies on the set of *Moonlight Mates* , but I shouldn’t have been surprised that two big, burly bear shifters came back with takeout containers full of sausage, bacon, hash, and eggs. But it wouldn’t stop me from giving them a hard time about their very manly choices.

Barrett’s eyes widened. “Are you? I didn’t even think to ask.”

“Told you we should’ve got more than the fruit cup,” Bellamy added.

My traitorous stomach growled at the scent. I’d been too nervous and upset to eat much of anything in the days leading up to the wedding. I was usually someone who didn’t hesitate to feed their feelings, so the reappearance of my appetite was a good sign.

“Not really,” I said, reaching for the bacon. “But I could’ve been.”

“Might have gone a little overboard. Natalie, my daughter, lectures me when I bring meat into the house. Never know what she’s gonna eat. Guess I might have had some cravings,” Barrett said. “We got cinnamon rolls too.”

“I definitely deserve one of those after being forced to almost marry Gideon and getting bearnapped.” My mouth dropped when he pulled the pink bakery box out of

the bag. “Is that from Sawtooth Sweets?”

Barrett narrowed his eyes at me.

“How would you know about that place?” His words were so growly. “I brought you here because I didn’t think you’d know anyone here. You need to tell me right now if that’s not the case.”

“No. I only know it from The Real Werewives .” My heart was pounding, like somehow I’d failed a test. “Some of the contestants work at an animal shelter, and they celebrate the good things that happen with cupcakes. It’s a small town, so I assume it’s the only bakery.”

The suspicion didn’t leave Barrett’s face, but he put one of those ooey, gooey dreamboats on my plate and pushed it toward me.

“I got you some clothes too,” he said.

I was still in his button-down shirt from last night, and too hungry to feel self-conscious about the lack of bra underneath. I’d taken a shower while Barrett was gone. It felt amazing to wash the filth of Moonlight Mates away.

“Nothing fancy. Stretchy stuff I knew would fit. Things you could move in, if needed. Like you said, ladies’ sizes are tricky.” His expression darkened, and I was pretty sure he was thinking about his lost mate. Or his daughter that he missed dearly. “Once you’re done with breakfast, we need to talk about Silverclaw.”

My belly soured, and I pushed my plate away. I had nothing to be nervous about, yet here I was, scared that whatever I said would make Barrett change his mind about this job. Like he’d bring me back there and I’d have to marry Gideon after all.

Why did I even care? He'd done what I'd needed him to do, gotten me away from Silverclaw.

For now.

Barrett was a decent man, and after dealing with Gideon at Wild Adventures and Moonlight Mates , I appreciated that more than ever. And it was time to come to terms with the fact that getting away from my former boss was only the first step in actually bringing him to justice.

I needed more of this bear's help than just getting me out of the wedding.

"Finally," I said. "My friends dismissed my concerns, claiming everyone had a horrible boss, and obviously I couldn't vent about him at Moonlight Mates , because he was the star of the show."

"Did you try to talk to the producers about Gideon?" Barrett asked.

"Of course, but I got shut down every time. I told them I'd be happy to wait for another episode, since we'd worked together before and things ended badly. Their response? Viewers would love a redemption romance storyline. So I pushed harder, asking them if they thought it was odd we wound up on the same episode. They insisted it meant we were fated to be together. If that's fate, I have to say, I kinda hate it."

"When you get claimed by your true mate, you know it." A low rumble vibrated through Barrett. "What happened before the show started? You got fired, right?"

"I did."

Barrett was still rumbling, and it was distracting. I cut one of those delectable looking

cinnamon rolls, and if there was ever a timing for distractions and icing, this was it. “I worked for Wild Adventures for three years. They specialized in letting humans get close-up shifter experiences. Probably too close. We brought tour groups to pack lands, and they would get to see how shifters lived. They could hear local legends, talk to the pack elders, and learn about the pack. It was fascinating. Humans really liked it, but of course, there were a few one-star drama queens who thought our tours were boring. Gideon wouldn’t stand for that.”

“What did he do about it?” Bellamy asked.

“He started staging scenarios to make things more exciting for the customers. Like he’d pay members of the pack to shift into their animal forms while we were on the tour. I was supposed to act surprised, but it was so exploitive. I hated it. Other times, he’d send his guys into start fights with the pack, because the humans got excited about the drama.”

A rumble emitted from Barrett. “Do you have proof of this?”

“I recorded some conversations on my phone. Bits and pieces.” Which I hoped made sense when played back. I didn’t think I’d ever see the physical phone again, but I held onto hope that Bellamy would be able to access my files.

“What does it have to do with him buying up shifter land and displacing packs?” Barrett crossed his arms in front of his chest. Today he was wearing a muscle-hugging black T-shirt and cargo pants. It made him look like a mercenary, a badass, and sweet moon, did I ever appreciate it.

“I overheard plans that he has to buy the land where we do the tours, and then make all the members of the pack his employees—” I made air quotes around the word, because they’d have no choice to work for him if they wanted to live on the land that had belonged to their pack for generations— “so he can pull the strings however he

wishes. Kind of like live action theater, but the actors never get to stop working.”

“If you had some help,” –Barrett grinned, making air quotes around help— “would you be able to find the evidence?”

“You mean go back to my old office and look for it?” I gulped.

“Possibly,” he said. “Or maybe Bellamy would be able to access their database remotely.”

“Hack it.”

“It’s not any less ethical than what Gideon plans to do.” Bellamy growled, and it didn’t have anywhere near the same effect on me as when his boss did it. “When were you fired?”

“Six months ago.”

“When did you discover Gideon’s plan?” Bellamy asked.

“A week before that. I was growing increasingly uncomfortable with what was happening, but I was afraid to leave the job because I thought I’d be able to help the shifters more if I knew what was going on. If I could stop them from being exploited. I didn’t have a plan, instead I was holding onto hope that Gideon knowing I was onto him would stop him from doing something awful.”

“Then how did you find this evidence?”

“I was in his office, looking for details on a new location, and found the blueprint. I never confronted him about it, but he must have had cameras in there, because I was fired by the end of the week.”

Barrett let out a long sigh. “We have records of him buying pack land, but this accusation...it’s pretty damning. His pack would be banned. His company dissolved.”

“Couldn’t happen to a nicer guy.” Bellamy scoffed.

“Does anyone else know about his plans? Any other human coworkers?”

I took a moment to think about my final interactions with my ex-coworkers. “I don’t think so. On the surface, Gideon was a pretty good boss. He paid well, and the benefits were unmatched. Most of my human counterparts considered themselves lucky to have such a good job. I did too, until I realized something was very, very wrong.”

“He wants to silence you,” Barrett said.

A shiver reverberated down my spine hearing someone else come to that conclusion. After all the time I’d begged people to listen to me, to take me seriously, having someone actually do wasn’t comforting at all.

“That was exactly what I was afraid of when Gideon showed up on Moonlight Mates. Even more so when the show doctored the paperwork to make it look like I okayed a marriage contract.”

“Can you prove that?” Bellamy asked.

“Yes, I sent the original contract to my legal team to look over. Via email, so there’s a copy of the original. I went over everything with a fine-tooth comb. The changes should be obvious.”

Barrett raised a brow. “You have a legal team?”

“Of course I do.”

The bears looked at each other, skeptical. Not that I could blame them. I hadn't presented myself as someone who had their shit together.

“My niece is studying to become a paralegal. She was excited to look over the contract, and I took her out for a fancy dinner as payment. She'd thought she'd manifested it, and I was feeling pretty good about my chances with the universe at that point too.”

“I think the universe has put you exactly where you need to be.” Barrett rose from his chair, and I took a long sip of lukewarm coffee to keep myself from looking at his ass for too long. It was high and round and as muscular as the rest of him. He pulled a laptop out of the bag and slid it across the table to Bellamy. “We made a fool out of Gideon in front of all those cameras. He'll want to get the last word. Let's make sure he doesn't get that chance.”

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Chapter Eight

Barrett

“I feel like a bank robber,” Tegan said when she emerged from the bathroom in the black hooded sweatshirt and black leggings I bought for her. She did a little twirl, like she was on a stage. “Don’t get me wrong, I’m super grateful. And the sports bra? Genius move. You can totally tell you’re a girl dad.”

“You look adorable,” I said before I could stop myself.

Tegan stopped mid-twirl.

“I’m so sorry.” Fuck. It was only a matter of time. My bear had tried his damndest all night long to convince me to crawl into bed with her. Hold her like I had on the helicopter. “That wasn’t professional at all.”

“It’s okay. It’s been a while since I’ve felt adorable.” She frowned, and any of the swagger she’d had about her sweatsuit was gone. “You must think I’m a desperate, feral spinster who will do anything for a man, coming from a reality show and then basking in the first compliment that gets thrown her way.”

“No, I don’t think that at all.”

Her spark didn’t return.

“I think you’re a woman who’s been underestimated for too long and you’re ready to

step into the spotlight.” That was my bear talking.

Oh hell, I might as well admit that I agreed with him.

Tegan considered the redirect. “I like that assessment.”

She took a step closer to me. My bear rumbled in appreciation. He wanted me to take her face in my hands and...

“If it makes you feel any better, I’ve been thinking about how good your butt looks in those cargo pants all morning.”

Told you , my bear said.

“Have you?” I rumbled.

“I could lie and tell you I’ve been completely consumed by stopping Silverclaw, but you’ll realize soon enough, I don’t have that kind of focus. And I’m way too honest. So maybe I’ve been enjoying the distraction.”

Our gazes caught, and I had no idea what to do next.

My bear had many ideas. Most of them involved stripping her out of the clothes I just bought for her and backing her up against the bed...

“Everything okay in here?” Bellamy’s voice was an unwelcome but much needed interruption.

“Fantastic.” Tegan pulled away from me and sat at the little table outside of the kitchenette. “Were you able to access my phone and email?”

“I did. I wanted to check with you first before I made any moves.” He took the seat beside her like he hadn’t walked in on his boss about to kiss a client. There was no fucking way he didn’t know what was going on, and I was sure to hear all about it later. I deserved that. I knew better, but something about this woman was making me want to abandon all the rules.

He powered up the device, and after a few taps, he slid it over to Tegan for her to log in.

“Whoa.” She jumped back in her chair when the screen popped up. Once she turned it around, we could see it was the homepage for Moonlight Mates . “Wasn’t expecting current browser settings to open as I’d left them. You’re good.”

“He is,” I said.

Tonight you’ll show her that you’re better . My bear was pretty proud of himself for that one.

It took everything I had not to groan. My traitorous cock twitched inside those cargo pants Tegan liked so much.

But I needed to focus, because having access to her computer would tell us a lot of what we needed to know about the current situation. Not everything, of course. But Tegan would be able to read through the subtext and subtleties, and Bellamy would be able to blast through the rest.

If things went smoothly, which was hardly a guarantee.

CHOSEN BEASTLERETTE STILL MISSING was the headline on the site. The story went through the details of what we already knew. The shifters who’d chased us had lost our path when we got into the helicopter, and if they had any idea of where

he landed, they didn't own up to it here. There was a video of the show host wiping tears away from her eyes.

"My foremost concern is for Tegan's safety, and we're working with local and national authorities, both shifter and human, to identify her kidnapper." The woman looked directly into the camera. "Tegan, if you can see this, know that we're looking for you, and we'll do whatever it takes to guarantee a safe return to the Moonlight Mates. Gideon is still waiting for you at the altar."

"Way to make a threat look like concern. She's good like that." Tegan turned the laptop toward her again and tapped on the keys. "There's no way Gideon's standing idly by, mourning my disappearance. He's either putting his beastly wolves on the case to track me down, or he's using this opportunity to his advantage."

"What types of things would he consider an advantage?" I had a pretty good idea, but I wanted to hear Tegan's perspective.

"The only things he really loves are money and control. He'll be furious that he's lost control over me, but of course, he'll be looking at ways he can turn this into an opportunity. Yup, right here—he's doing a press conference."

She turned the screen so we could all see it. Gideon stood at the altar where he planned to claim Tegan, still in his tux, looking forlorn. If I were human, if I hadn't had dealings with him before, I might have felt bad for him.

"I hope that you'll never feel the heartache of seeing your beautiful mate coming toward you and having her stolen from your grasp," he said. "I'll do whatever it takes to find Tegan Reynolds."

"Do you have any idea what would've motivated someone to kidnap her?" a reporter asked. "Do you have any enemies?"

He shrugged. “Envious business associates, perhaps, but I wouldn’t waste time associating with anyone who would resort to such barbaric measures of revenge. This seems like a rogue attack. All the Moonlight Mates Beastlerettes have been moved to a safe location, and everyone is safe and accounted for.”

“Lies.” Tegan groaned. “Half of them bailed the moment they weren’t picked.”

“Is it true that Tegan Reynolds is your former employee?” another reporter asked.

“It is,” he said without missing a beat, but my bear didn’t miss the way his Adam’s apple nervously bobbed. “Tegan was one of our best tour leaders. She had a bright future with the company.”

“Then why was she fired?”

His expression darkened, only for a moment. A human might not see it, but my bear wouldn’t miss it. “She wasn’t.”

“How did he say that with a straight face?” Tegan rolled her eyes. “I got perp walked out of the office with a security escort.”

“It was unethical for her to be an employee and a contestant on the show while I pursued her,” Gideon continued.

Tegan groaned. “Oh, give me a break. What does he know about ethics?”

“Do you have a message for the assailant?” another reporter asked.

“Absolutely.” Gideon looked directly down the barrel of the camera lens and growled. “You won’t get away with this. Tegan Reynolds is my mate, and I fully intend to claim her.”

Tegan flipped off the screen in response. “You’ll never lay a dirty paw on me, beast.”

“Think you can pull up that evidence?” Bellamy asked. “I should be able to access your phone records from my system.”

“Not creepy at all. Let me check my email. I send myself notes when I need to remember something. The app on my phone wasn’t working anymore because I needed an upgrade. I’d been too lazy to go get a new phone. But it makes it easier to search...fuck.”

“What’s the matter?”

“I’ve been wiped clean.” She pushed the laptop toward us. “I’m a bit of a digital hoarder, as you can probably see from the amount of tabs I leave open. I like to keep emails, so I can reference old conversations. But there are only like ten emails there. Not even a full page. I’ve had this email account for years. There should be thousands.”

All that was left were some ecommerce emails.

“Wait,” I said. “There’s an email from Gideon.”

Chapter Nine

Tegan

“Is it a new email?” Barrett asked.

My fingers trembled over the keyboard. It had been left unmarked, which in my chaotic filing system, meant that it was important, or recently received.

I had saved a ton of emails from Wild Adventures and Silverclaw Associates. Or at least, I used to have them. But never any from Gideon himself. He had staff to take care of tasks like that.

Tegan,

You probably think this is some cute game. You got away from me once, and I don't plan on letting it happen again. Show this to the beast who stole you from me. Let him know that I am coming for you.

Yours,

Gideon

P.S. This email will be removed from the server, just like all those others you had kept about our company. I will find you, and all will go according to plan.

Barrett put his hand on my shoulder, and electricity rocketed through my already

shocked body.

“Are you okay?” His voice had a delicious rumble to it. It was something I never knew I craved. I wanted him to take me in his arms and tell me it would be okay. That this nightmare would end. But he couldn’t. Not yet.

I shook my head.

“I’m scared.” My voice was barely more than a whisper.

“As long as you’re with me, you’re safe.”

Bellamy grunted. “They’ve got top-notch security on the Moonlight Mates .” He shook his head, tapping the keys harder, like he would be able to convince the password to work by force. “They’re hiding something.”

“Larrie will only know what Gideon wants her to. He has her eating out of his hand. I’m not sure what their agreement was, but I’m familiar with how he operates. Don’t waste your time with the show. Go straight to Silverclaw Enterprises.” My heart was pounding. “I always hoped I was overreacting. That it couldn’t possibly be this bad, and maybe it really was a coincidence that Gideon showed up on Moonlight Mates and just happened to pick me. But it’s worse than I thought, and it’s freaking me out. I don’t know how to fix it.”

“You don’t have to do anything. We’ll take care of this,” Barrett growled.

Bellamy looked up from the computer. “How far do you want to take this, boss? The job that we agreed to is complete. This is a whole new scope of work.”

I held my breath. Bellamy would have no problem bringing up payment. At this point, I’d likely have to sell everything I owned to pay off the original job. A

helicopter rental wasn't cheap. There was no way I could pay for more.

Barrett's body tensed. "All the way."

"We've dealt with Silverclaw before," Bellamy said, his words slower than usual. Measured. Like a warning, telling Barrett to tuck tail and run. "It didn't end well."

"And we finally have a chance to get the final word." Barrett's eyes narrowed, and his gaze was firmly set on Bellamy, like he was daring him to back down. "He's obviously still a fucking problem."

It had to be a shifter pecking order thing. It was also a complete turn on, but I had to stay focused.

"What did you say? You've done another job with Gideon?"

"Not exactly." Barrett sighed. "I moved to Idaho when we opened Sawtooth Security. My mate—" his eyes shifted, expression darkened, like saying the word out loud caused him physical pain. "—was from here. It was a great place to start a family, and her clan was thriving. Until they took a land development deal from Silverclaw Enterprises."

I gasped. "Gideon stole their land."

"Yup. It wasn't someplace he used for his tours. But what used to be a wild area that had been kept native for generations is now covered with condos and a giant resort. He offered to let us buy at what he said were discounted rates, but way more than anyone of our bears could ever dream of spending on a house. A few bears took jobs at the hotel, but the pay was terrible, they couldn't afford to live in the area, and they had to go someplace else and start over with nothing. Humiliated that they'd been had."

“I’m so sorry. Scratch that, I’m furious. I feel like I’m responsible, somehow, because I worked for him. I should’ve done something, but I felt like I was. What I really did was let it happen.”

“This happened before you worked there.”

I rose from my chair, pacing the room. It felt like there was an animal inside of me ready to burst out. I couldn’t imagine how Barrett and Bellamy must have felt when they had to be close to Gideon at the altar and act professionally. They’d probably wanted to kick the ever-loving snot out of him. “He can’t get away with this. Is there any way for your clan to get their land back?”

Barrett shook his head. “We’ve moved on. Many of the bears have settled here in Sawtooth Forest. They’re happy now. Living good lives.”

“Sawtooth is a strong pack,” I said.

Barrett’s brow furrowed. “Are you sure you don’t know any of them?”

“Positive.” I tipped my head. “What would happen if I did?”

He rose from his chair. Fury rolled off his body in waves. He put his hands on my shoulders. “I think you and I want the same thing.”

I gulped, bracing myself for bad news about the wolves I’d come to love through a reality show. They hadn’t had things easy, and they didn’t always see eye to eye, but they always had everyone’s backs. It had given me a romantic view of pack life and was one of the reasons I wanted to stop Gideon.

“To take Gideon Silverclaw down,” Barrett continued when I didn’t answer. “He considers you a valuable asset. There are a lot of ways he could’ve dealt with you that

made this marriage look like child's play. So what I need from you, Tegan, is every single detail about what you saw. No matter how small it seems. Even if it seems stupid. The evidence we thought we had is gone, and his guys are one step ahead of the best systems analyst?—”

“Hacker.”

“Whatever. He knows what we're looking for. Gideon's slick, and you've spent enough time with him to be able?—”

“I've told you everything.” Or so I thought. My panic had me doubting myself. I started pacing again. “The big stuff. There are a thousand things that happened while I was working for him, and while we were filming the show. I'm not sure what's important and what could send us in the wrong direction.”

“You're doing a great job,” he said. “But you've said it yourself, and that email confirms that Gideon's not done with you. That's why no one can know you're here, and why I was concerned that you might know the Sawtooth pack. The last thing we need is a well-meaning wolf to say the wrong thing.”

“How long do you expect we'll have to stay hiding?” It definitely would not be a hardship to spend an undetermined amount of time with Barrett as my guardian in this tiny one-bed cabin. But it was also completely unrealistic. He surely had other clients and a life to go back to. “I...I can't pay you to keep guarding me indefinitely. I'm not even sure I can make good on the original quote beyond the deposit I already paid?—”

Barrett's hand cupped my chin, demanding that my gaze met his. “Some jobs you do for money. Others for honor.”

Bellamy sighed. “Boss?—”

Barrett shook his head, but his eyes never left mine.

“I’m gonna head into town. Maybe hit up the Stepchild tonight. See what the locals have to say about the case.” Bellamy slipped his laptop back into its bag. “I’ll keep working on the websites. Seems like you two have some terms and conditions to work through.”

“Wait.” I could hardly collect my thoughts. Barrett and Bellamy were fully within their rights to kick me to the curb. But they weren’t. They were all in. And I had no way to repay them. “Won’t the locals know something’s up if Bellamy shows up and starts asking about the case?”

“I’m a local. I live here. And I have no plans of telling them what we’ve done. I’ll be discreet. You were on a reality show, they were involved in a reality show. All I plan to do is find out what they have to say about it.”

“And you’re headed to the Stepchild?” I couldn’t resist an opportunity to be a fangirl. The bar had been prominently featured on *The Real Werewives*, and it was notorious for being a place where shifters could go wild, especially in an exclusive back room known as Red Heaven. Sweet moon, the filthy dreams I had about that place after my binge watch. “Maybe we should go too. Incognito, of course. I know who Gideon has working for him. That way, we’ll know if they’re close.”

“Absolutely not,” Barrett growled. “Too dangerous.”

I raised a brow, as playfully as I could manage. But sweet moon, I was frustrated. I was responsible for creating this mess, and I wanted to help fix it. “So you just plan on keeping me here, in this tiny cabin, for the rest of time?”

Barrett nodded. “Until I know you’re safe.”

“And you’re gonna stay with me? Or will you assign other bears to watch over me?”

“Just me.”

“I just told you I can’t pay you.”

“Don’t need you to.”

Bellamy groaned. “The two of you can work this out. We’ll touch base in the morning.”

I waited for the engine of the car to start before turning back to Barrett. He looked huge in this tiny cabin, but somehow still vulnerable.

“Listen, I appreciate that you want to see this job through, and understand that you have an ax to grind with Gideon too. I want nothing more than to stop this bastard. But we have to be realistic. This is way more than both of us bargained for. And you can’t work for free forever.”

“It’s not work, Tegan.” He pulled away from me and raked a hand through his hair. For a moment, I thought he might shift. “My bear thinks...fuck! It’s complicated.”

I furrowed my brow. Barrett was full-on flustered. Fire in his eyes. Heat in his cheeks.

“What does your bear think?”

“He wants you.” He sighed. “You can’t be my mate, because I’d already found her. But he knows that you’re special.”

Chapter Ten

Barrett

My bear was feeling so freaking smug right now, but I couldn't believe that I'd made that confession. Even if she couldn't pay me for what the job had become, she was still a client, and I should've remained professional.

She's more than that and you know it.

I sat on the bed and tipped my head back. Silverclaw would have the last laugh because I would fall head over claws for this woman.

Tegan sat beside me. Her soft and curvy body was still fragrant from the citrus shower gel that had been left for us.

Us , my bear said. You're already thinking like she belongs to you.

And it made me no better than Gideon fucking Silverclaw. I never thought I could have another mate. Fate had chosen Renee for me. But it had taken her away, too.

Our thighs were touching, and Tegan's hand was on my arm. I could barely think straight with her so close.

"Why does your bear think that?" she said softly.

"I've never questioned my bear before."

“That’s not what I meant and you know it.” She pushed playfully against my arm, and it took everything I had not to push her back on the mattress and ravage her. Show her the animal inside me so she had no questions about what he was thinking ever again.

Nope, not better than Silverclaw at all. I was taking advantage of a woman who hired me. I told her I would keep her safe. And what the fuck was I doing?

“I’m not exactly sure how to put the feelings into words,” I said. “My bear is always inside me. Guiding me when I’m in my human form, making sure I stay true to my nature. He wants to protect you, and not because you hired us to do it. He thinks you might be good for me.”

She nodded. “What do you think?”

“That my heart is still in pieces from losing Renee. That I’ve already had a mate. That I’m just as bad as Gideon, trying to claim you. That you’re the most beautiful woman I’ve laid eyes on since?—”

Tegan’s lips were on mine, and she let out a little squeal when I reciprocated with everything I fucking had. My hand snaked into her wild pink hair, pulling her head to the side. My tongue danced along the seam of her lips, teasing her, demanding to be let inside. She clutched my shoulders, moaning.

I’d tell her how much my bear loved how expressive she was when we were so close, later. But now, I couldn’t stop kissing her.

She was the one to pull away. Her eyes were wide, hair mussed, lips swollen. I’d only thought she was gorgeous before. Now she was wild. Completely irresistible.

My cock pulsed, wanting, needing more.

“What did your bear think about that?” she asked.

“You want to play with him, don’t you?” And more than anything, I wanted the answer to be yes.

She nodded. “I want to see if he’s as big, strong, and protective as I think he is.”

“Tegan,” I rasped.

“I know. I crossed a major line and I’m sorry.” She was up off the bed, pacing. She did that when she was scared. Nervous. Unsure of herself. My bear wanted to make sure she never did it again. “But you know, maybe your bear could take me to Red Heaven. You know what that is, right?”

“You didn’t cross a line. It was only a matter of time before I kissed you.”

“Glad me and your bear are on the same page.” She smiled. “So that means that we can go to Red Heaven? There are a few things I’d love to show you there.”

“Absolutely not.” I growled. Red Heaven was the exclusive area at The Redheaded Stepchild. It was a cross between a VIP lounge and a sex club where anything could happen and usually did. Bellamy had brought me there, thinking maybe it would help me move on after losing Renee. Didn’t work.

“If I wear a wig and I change up my makeup, Gideon’s goons will have no idea it’s me. He’ll never do his own dirty work. He’s too much of a pompous prick for that.”

“They’ll be able to scent you.”

Her eyes widened. “Really? Even if I’m not their mate?”

I nodded.

She let out a long, shaky sigh. “When it’s safe to go, will you bring me there?”

I raised a brow. “Do you like being watched?”

Her lips parted, and her scent intensified.

She likes it a lot , my bear said. Good to know.

Wasn’t sure I liked it.

This luscious body belongs to us , my bear added. But you can’t deny a little show could be fun...

“I want everyone there to know that I belong to you.” Her body stiffened. Scratch that—I liked that reasoning a lot. “But you just said that I don’t. That I can’t...”

She didn’t have to finish the sentence.

I closed my eyes for a long blink. “I never thought I’d have another woman in my life after I lost Renee. That connection...” I needed to slow down, think about what I wanted to say. Tegan had my mind racing, and other parts of my body had some opinions too. “It’s magnetic. And I never thought I’d feel that again.”

“I’m not expecting you to have feelings for me like you had for Renee.” Her name on Tegan’s lips was like getting hit in the face with ice water. “Twenty-four hours ago, I thought I’d be married to another wolf by now. My feelings are a little all over the place. But you make me feel safe. And heard. And that’s more than I’ve felt in way too long.”

She was scared and confused. That's all this was. I was taking advantage of her...

No, it isn't, and you know it, my bear growled loudly enough to make Tegan jump back. Tell her how you feel. This woman is ready to believe in big, crazy love. She doesn't need a fucking explanation. Don't fuck this up for her. Or us.

"You didn't let me finish." My bear had been aggressive since we met Tegan, but he'd never steered me wrong. "I'm feeling that pull again. But it's not exactly the same. You're not Renee. You're Tegan. You're gorgeous, exciting, and brave, and I'll do whatever it takes to make sure nothing happens to you. Because..." I chuckled. "My bear says not to fuck this up."

"Oh." She softened. The silence was thick between us. "I think what your bear is trying to tell you is stop thinking so much about what you should do and do what feels right."

"Like this?" I leaned in and kissed her again. This time was even more charged than the last. There was no surprise, no wondering if this was the wrong thing, just pure need.

More than that. Hunger.

We'd both refused to admit that we'd been starving.

Tegan leaned back on the mattress, and I was ready to follow her anywhere. My hand slid along her thigh, and she tightened her grip on my shoulders as I made the journey up her body, under her sweatshirt. She sighed against my lips when my hand stopped on her ribcage.

Had I gone too far? Abso-fucking-lutely. Even if we'd confessed these feelings for each other, she was still a client. But at the same time, it wasn't far enough. I wanted

her. I wanted to know what noises she'd make when I touched every inch of her. When I made her body lose control.

She broke the kiss first. "This might not need to be said, but you don't have to sleep on the floor tonight."

"It did need to be said." Was I really gonna do this? Spend the night with another woman? Forty-eight hours ago, I would've sworn I'd never have another in my bed. But Tegan changed everything. "But while I was shopping, I did get an air mattress?—"

"You're adorable. And very concerned with rules. Which means it's gonna be really fun when you break every single one of them."

Chapter Eleven

Tegan

All I could see of Sawtooth Forest were the mountains and the sky from my window in this little cabin. The sun was setting, leaving streaks of periwinkle and fire in its wake. It cast shadows on Barrett's face as he lay beside me, making the bear shifter look even more stern and serious than usual.

And I'd be lying if I didn't say sexy.

My lady parts were throbbing, my arousal threatening to soak through my panties, and here I was, wondering if I'd given into an extreme case of Stockholm syndrome. Not to mention the guilt that this man was obviously still mourning his mate.

But I meant what I said. Maybe it was because we were in this tiny cabin, and I'd hired him to solve my problems, but he made me feel safe. Seen.

Sweet moon, he had no idea how much I needed that. I had no idea how much I'd needed it. I'd balled up my feelings like wadded up paper and had crushed them to make myself forget about them.

This man had given me my life back. Sure, I was still in captivity, with a threat so imminent a bodyguard refused to leave my side, but I was finally free of Gideon Silverclaw.

When I chuckled, Barrett asked, "What's funny?"

“I was just thinking that I had this whole new life, but according to my security specialist, that new life is confined to this room.” I ran my finger lightly over his beard. It was so surprisingly soft. “Definitely not in Red Heaven.”

“No, not Red Heaven. But you will get to leave the cabin.” He couldn’t keep his hands off me either. His fingers were still under my sweatshirt, stroking my stomach.

Normally, this would make me super self-conscious. Plenty of those dudes from dating sites had told me that area needed work. But Barrett made me feel beautiful.

“Soon?” Just because the answer was no wouldn’t make me stop asking.

“Maybe.”

“Will we be headed to Sawtooth Sweets? I could definitely go for some of those cupcakes.”

“Not what I had in mind, but I’ll put it on the list.” He laughed. I loved the way the skin around his eyes crinkled when he smiled. “Are you still friendly with anyone at Wild Associates?”

“A couple of people. If they don’t think I’ve ghosted them. I signed an NDA when I went on the show, and wasn’t allowed to tell them what was going on.”

“They must know now.”

“Probably. Wouldn’t surprise me if they got gag orders too.”

“I’ve got Bellamy working on hacking into their system, but Gideon will be prepared for that. If we need physical proof, we’ll have to get into the offices.”

I realized something. “There’s no way production, or Gideon’s goons, wouldn’t have gone through my stuff that I’d left behind on set. They’ll find your business card. They’ll know you were the one who has me.”

“There’s a nationwide network of shifter security that will make sure that doesn’t happen.” He growled. “My whole family’s in the business. Silverclaw and his goons might know I was the one who took you, but you can trust that the trail disappeared once we were out of their sight.”

“So, what do we do now? All my evidence is gone, Gideon will do whatever it takes to track me down, and we’re in this tiny cabin together until further notice.”

“We’ll worry about the big stuff tomorrow,” he said.

I raised a brow. “Bellamy will be pissed if we don’t have a rock solid plan when he arrives.”

“Probably.”

“Bet he’s gonna be the life of the party at the Stepchild tonight.” I scoffed. If anyone needed a one-way ticket to Red Heaven, it was him. The bear definitely needed to loosen up.

“He’s a good guy. Hard worker. He’s cracked cases that I thought were impossible.” Barrett ran his fingers along my jaw. They were rough, but his touch was so light. “But I don’t want to talk about him anymore.”

“Then what do you want to talk about?”

“I was hoping you’d want to show me what you would do if I took you to Red Heaven.”

Hot. Freaking. Damn. My lady parts pulsed in agreement.

“I don’t know.” After I inched away from him, I sat up. I could barely breathe when I looked at him, with his chin in that big hand. “I think it would be more effective if we went there. We might have to stop at the drugstore and get some hair dye?”

“No.” Barrett growled. “Your hair is fucking gorgeous and you’re not ruining it for some cheap disguise.”

“Bossy bear,” I teased, but I appreciated that more than he’d ever know.

“Damn straight.” He crawled toward me in a way that made my mouth water. “And I believe you were about to give me a show.”

My heart pounded. “Once I saw Red Heaven on *The Real Werewives*, I had some really dirty fantasies about it.” I pulled the sweatshirt over my head. The sports bra had been functional, but now, I wished it was a lacy little number that gave me killer cleavage. But I was used to working with what I had, and I’d make the most of it. I ran my fingers lightly over the fabric, my touch enough to send me through the roof. “I dreamed of meeting a shifter there—maybe a chance encounter, maybe someone who already knew he couldn’t live without me, who wanted me so badly he couldn’t resist taking me right then and there.”

“Oh, yeah?” Barrett’s voice was deep and growly. “I bet the two of you had been dancing all night. Killer band. Place was packed, pushing you closer, until you’re grinding against each other.”

So the bear was down for a little roleplay. That was a twist I didn’t see coming. “At first, I was a little shy about having his hands all over me, but it felt so good I gave in.”

He shook his head and inched closer. “No, you didn’t. If you let the bear touch you, it was because you wanted him to. Not because you gave up.”

“Of course. But I felt a little self-conscious at first. All those people. Watching us.”

“Every shifter in the room wished he could have you.” Barrett pushed himself away from the mattress, his muscles bulging as he rose. “But not one of them dared make a play for you, because you belonged to him.”

I fought the tinge of disappointment he didn’t say me instead of him . But I had to go easy on him. Not even an hour ago, he was beating himself up for these feelings because he was still mourning his mate. I wanted this to be his fantasy as much as mine. He deserved to have his world rocked. I might not be able to pay him for the job, but I could give him that.

No, I wasn’t using sex in exchange for payment. This went way deeper than that. I wanted to see if I could help this bear put his broken heart back together. Didn’t mean we couldn’t have a little fun while doing it.

Maybe I needed a few things put back together too.

His mouth dropped as I got up off the bed.

“It took everything I had not to rip my clothes off right on the dance floor.” I turned around, so he got a full view of my ass, and slipped my leggings off my hips in my best burlesque worthy move. We’d had some lessons on Moonlight Mates , and they were finally coming in handy. It felt awkward, but from the fire in Barrett’s eyes, I’d pulled it off. “I wanted to see if he’d follow me to Red Heaven.”

Barrett rose from the bed in a move that could only be described as pure bear. His body was rumbling, and I almost expected him to shift. Sweet moon, did I want that?

Maybe.

The rumbles got louder, almost like a ragged purr as he backed me against the wall. His hands were on either side of my body. Caging me in. “Your plan worked.”

And I had a feeling this was the part where I lost—no, handed—every bit of control over to him.

“Barrett,” I whispered.

His breath caught. “Is this too much?”

“No.” Well, maybe. “It’s just that. I’ve never actually been with a shifter before.”

His brow arched. “Really?”

“Really.” I sighed. “Just in case this isn’t what you?—”

“Hey.” He took my face in his hands. “What you were doing was driving me wild. You don’t have to apologize for doing something you’ve never done before. It’s brave and sexy as hell. But if you want?—”

“I love the way you ask for my permission just before you’re about to ravish me.”

His eyes sparkled, like I could see every filthy thought that was going through his mind. “I’m definitely gonna ravish you, but only if you want it.”

“Oh, I want it.”

“Are you sure?” He raised a brow.

It was my turn to take his face in my hands and pull him toward me. That rumble turned into a full-on growl as he kissed me, his tongue tangling with mine in a dance much more provocative than our roleplay from the dancefloor.

His hands moved down my body, under the bra, pushing it up over my breasts. I managed to lift my arms so he could take it off me. My boobs weren't as perky as they used to be, my body was soft and a little lumpy with cellulite. I was forty, my gym membership had lapsed long ago, and this man was looking at me like I was the most beautiful thing he'd ever seen in his life.

He made quick work of his shirt and then kissed me again. His lips moved down to my neck, teasing the spot that pulsed wildly in response to his every move.

Then the bear fell to his fucking knees in front of me. The move made mine weak, but he wouldn't let me fall. His lips were on my breast, circling, sucking, teasing my nipple into a hard peak. His big hand covered the other one. My hands were in his hair, pulling in appreciation, giving him direction, letting him know what I couldn't say with words.

Everything was so much more intense with him. When I made my confession, I'd worried that this would be a disappointment. That I wouldn't be able to excite him. That our connection was nothing more than loneliness and the desire to finally be taken seriously.

But it was more than that. Barrett pulled away from my breasts and dragged my panties down my thighs. I'd almost taken them off in the striptease, but I hadn't been that bold. His gaze was glued to the patch of hair between my legs, and the rumble intensified in approval. I stepped out of the panties, my legs pure jelly. He pushed my thighs apart and his lips were on my clit.

Electricity rocked through my body on contact. At first, he only teased, flicking his

tongue, circling slowly, turning my blood to lava. My body bucked in response, telling him exactly what I liked. The bear picked up on my every cue, and he got bolder, licking, sucking, exploring...

I slid down the wall, and he followed my move, laying me out on the floor, spreading my legs wider. Now his fingers were in the mix, teasing my opening, and slipping inside.

My hips bucked as he curled that finger forward. He didn't have to be told what to do, and he caressed the spot until I couldn't see straight.

"Things are a little different with a bear." His grin dripped with pure sin as the waves of my orgasm rolled through me.

"Little bit," I panted. "I want...your cock."

"Do you?"

I nodded. "I want that big cock inside me."

He fumbled with his pants, his cock springing free. He crawled up my body, his shaft bumping against my thigh, my stomach, before he lowered himself and whispered in my ear. "What would you do if everyone was watching you? Would you ride my cock like a good girl?"

"Sweet moon, yes."

He rolled over onto his back, pulling me with him. I was on top of him, with that glorious cock bumping against my stomach. My legs were still shaking from the orgasm, and he put his hands on my hips, steadying me, helping me position myself.

I grabbed his thick shaft, giving it a couple of pumps. My hand could barely close around it. Barrett's eyes fluttered closed, and he moaned. I moved faster, harder.

"Tegan," he gritted out. "We can't do this."

Chapter Twelve

Barrett

Tegan stopped the motion abruptly, and her eyes widened like I'd slapped her before she slowly took her hand away from my shaft.

"Did I do something wrong?" Her voice was shaking, and my bear growled from inside me.

Self-sabotage , he insisted.

He probably wasn't wrong, but while she'd been turning my insides molten, I couldn't think straight.

"No. Fuck no." I growled and slid away from her. I sat up and looked for my pants. Clothes had been strewn all over the tiny cabin. "I don't have any condoms."

"Oh." She blinked, and her body relaxed. "As incredibly frustrating as that is, for both of us." Her gaze fell to my groin as I shoved my still half-hard cock back into my pants. "That's awfully sweet of you. You're a good man, Barrett Guardian. A lot of guys would've been like sorry, baby, you made me so crazy I couldn't stop."

"I don't want to hear about you with other men," I said before I could stop myself.

Her lips parted. "That's sweet too. Even if it's a little over the top."

I grabbed her clothes and handed them to her. I could look at her luscious naked body for the rest of the night, but she was too much of a temptation. My bear snickered at me as I tried to figure out how to not make this worse.

“I don’t hook up with women on jobs just because I’m trapped in a cabin with them.” That didn’t sound right either.

She smoothed her sweatshirt and then looked up at me with a coy grin. All she had on was that and her panties. “So, this is a thing that happens often?”

“I just said it wasn’t.”

“Not the sex. I meant the bearnapping and the staying with your lady clients in small, remote cabins for undefined amounts of time, even after they said there’s no way they can possibly pay you for such extensive services.”

“Nope. It’s a first all around.” I went over to her and kissed her forehead. It was still dewy from our time together. “It feels wild and irresponsible to say that I have feelings about you. We only met?—”

“You abducted me,” she corrected. “Contractually, but this wasn’t exactly a speed date.”

I raised a brow. “Tell me when you’ve ever hit it off with a guy from speed dating like you have with me.”

“Let me think about it.” She landed dramatically on the bed, and it took everything I had not to follow her. She tapped her chin and looked at me. “Never.”

“What I’m saying is, I don’t know how this ends.” I put my knee on the bed. My body warmed from her gaze. My cock twitched in my pants, protesting, but there was

no way I could risk putting it back in action tonight. “But I don’t think I want it to.”

“Has anyone ever told you how adorable you are?” She put her hand over mine once I settled. “Now that I’ve turned forty, I joke that I’m ‘grown men are adorable’ years old. I don’t mean it as an insult. It’s refreshing to meet someone so genuine. I can see you’re mentally beating yourself up because you probably feel like you’re saying all the wrong things, but let me assure you, you’re not. Thank you for that.”

I nodded. “It’s not just that. It’s...” I just told her I didn’t want this to end, which meant I had to tell her everything. “I never planned to be with another woman after Renee died. Not casually, not long term. And I know—she’d want me to be happy. I would want the same for her. But I never thought I would want another woman.”

“There’s no shame in loving someone so much you’re not ready to let them go,” she said softly. “I’d love to be a part of your life, when you’re ready, and I’d like to think that Renee would be a part of it too. It doesn’t have to be me or her, Barrett. In this case, it can be both. You can still cherish your memories and be excited about the future at the same time.”

“I can do that.” I closed my eyes and tipped my head back. For once, my bear wasn’t giving me a hard time. Instead, I saw Renee’s bear form, her gorgeous fur, those big brown eyes, like she was agreeing with every word Tegan had said. I opened my eyes so I could appreciate the gorgeous woman who was with me now. The one who was willing to hold my hand while I kept her safe. “Thank you.”

“I haven’t done anything yet, besides get you involved in my giant mess of a life.” Tegan moved back to the headboard. She curled her still bare, inked legs underneath her. “And if we stand a chance of anything, we need to fix this mess. What’s our plan?”

I stretched out on the mattress and put my hands behind my head. “Depends on what

news Bellamy comes back with.”

Her mouth dropped. “I thought you said no one would be able to find us.”

“They won’t. But Moonlight Mates has made this everyone’s business. There’s no way you aren’t the talk of the town. Bellamy has unusual methods of gathering information?—”

“Hacking.”

“It’s not his only skill.” Some of the things he did were on the gray side of legal. But Tegan didn’t need to know that. I was the lawful one who balanced things out. “He’ll also work on accessing the Wild Associates sites. If he can’t get in there, we might have to pay the offices a visit and get that evidence that you saw, the good stuff that has Gideon shitting his pants over you, in hand.”

Chapter Thirteen

Tegan

“You want to break into the offices?” He’d mentioned it before, but I never thought we’d actually do it. I should’ve known by now this bear would stop at nothing to get the job done.

Barrett shrugged. He looked so sexy lying on the bed, shirtless, with his hands behind his head. “Think of it as hacking.”

“There’s no way we can pull this off. There are people there all the time. Security. I found out the hard way. There’s no telling what they’ll do if they catch us.” My heart was pounding. Barret’s suggestion was risky, best case scenario. Worst case, deadly.

But we had to do something. Gideon would keep wiping digital evidence clean. And there was no guarantee that they weren’t watching us.

I trusted Barrett. I’d hired him out of pure desperation, but this man that made me feel safe. Like he actually cared.

“If we pull it off, it doesn’t matter what we do. We’ll have the evidence we need to shut down his operation and make sure no more packs lose their land. Which is exactly what you told me your goal was.”

I nodded while I mulled the scenario over in my head. “It’s dangerous. I don’t want you to get hurt.”

Barrett rolled onto his side and propped his head up with his hand. His hair was mussed from almost sex, and that was when I noticed the scar on his chest. It looked like a claw mark that started on his pec, so close to his heart, and moved in the direction of his belly button. “Getting you away from that wedding was dangerous. Cameras everywhere. Gideon’s whole crew in attendance.”

“How did you come up with that plan?”

“Instinct,” he said without hesitation. “I was hoping I’d be able to get you alone before the ceremony, but I was too late. And when I saw you...”

“What happened when you saw me?” He’d come into the tent, like he was lost, all dressed up and adorable, but he’d disappeared quickly when Larrie and some of the crew had entered.

“I knew right away you weren’t going to be any other client.”

Which was exactly why I was worried about this new mission. He’d risked his life to save me once, and I didn’t doubt his ability to do his job. I’d like to say I wouldn’t have called him if I did, but he was my only way out, and at the time, he’d only been a name on a business card. He was so much more than that to me now. “Gideon will be expecting you this time.”

“Then we’ll have to do something he doesn’t expect.”

“Like what?”

Barrett crawled to the head of the bed. He was rumbling, like he seemed to any time he got close to me. I wondered what he looked like in his bear form. He was stronger than a human man, and his sexual prowess? Off the charts. Not that we had a chance to finish, but my first time with a shifter was more than I imagined.

His face was so close to mine. “Don’t you ever trust your instincts?”

“Is that how you run your company? Purely on instinct?”

Darkness flashed in his eyes, and before I had a chance to apologize for yet another faux pas, he said, “No, but plans fail, no matter how well-crafted they are. The job still needs to get done. That’s when I listen to my bear. He knows things I don’t. He’s thinking two steps ahead. Reading the situation in a way I wouldn’t be able to if I was just human. He hasn’t failed me yet.”

Our lips met in a kiss. “I don’t want to be the one to break his streak.”

Barrett drew away from me, and the rumble stopped. “Is there anything you haven’t told me about Gideon? Because if we do this, I need to know absolutely everything.”

I swallowed hard. “There was a pack we worked with a lot. In Washington state. Gideon made an offer for the land. The alpha refused. It wasn’t the first time, and usually, that meant we packed up and worked with another group. It was easy enough to get new customers—we posted online at travel sites, and tourists weren’t looking for much info past what worked for their vacation. But this time, we stayed.”

Barrett raised a brow. “Did he make another offer?”

“Not right away. He started pulling his shenanigans, as we called it in the office. He’d have actors go in and start fights with the local pack during the tour to make things more exciting. But this alpha had never signed off on that, and he wanted us gone. We kept coming, and the fights were real. The last time, Gideon shifted and took on that alpha. I’m sure I don’t have to tell you who won.”

“He was a strong alpha. It was a shock when he passed,” Barrett said, shaking his head.

“What? You know about this? I thought this was top secret. We got out of there fast, but?—”

“Gideon still bought the land,” Barrett finished for me. “That was the tipoff that something had gone very wrong, and that’s when local packs started talking about their experience with Silverclaw and Wild Adventures. But we’d had no idea that Gideon himself had played such a hand in his death.”

“It was horrible.” Emotion stung my eyes at the memory. “I was the tour guide that day, and at first, I thought it was business as usual, that the alpha had changed his mind, but then I realized something was way off. I didn’t know what to do, Barrett. I wanted to stop him, but he was an animal possessed. And the way those people were cheering him on...”

“Shh.” Barrett took me into his arms, holding me like he had in the helicopter. Like nothing could hurt me. “You didn’t know what Gideon was capable of. But he knew that you’d have the power to take him down. And if we can prove that he did this, we’ve finally got him where we want him.”

“What do we do? Call the pack, get them to make statements?” If it was as easy as going on camera and telling all, I could do that. I’d had six weeks of training in pouring my heart out to an audience.

Barrett shook his head. “There will be evidence in the office. We’ll get it, and we’ll bring Silverclaw to his knees.”

A thump on the door woke us both out of a sound sleep.

“The fuck?” Barrett rumbled, reaching for something beside the bed before he untangled himself from the sheets. We’d lost most of our clothes, but we hadn’t done anything but cuddle and kiss before passing out.

He looked out the window and groaned.

“Who’s out there?” I asked, pulling the sheet over me.

Barrett was bent over, pulling pants over his boxer briefs. “Bellamy.”

When Barrett opened the door, his partner smirked at him and nodded to me. Heat rose in my cheeks. Whatever. We were all adults.

“You better put on more than that. We need to go,” Bellamy said.

“Go where? And why?” Barrett asked.

“Gideon’s guys were at the club. They gotta know we’re in the area.”

“Fuck,” Barrett muttered under his breath, grabbing his pants. “Did they see you?”

Bellamy shrugged. “They might have. I go there regularly, so it wouldn’t be a red flag. But if they realized I was the one driving the getaway car, they might start to put two and two together.”

Barrett turned to me. “Get ready to move.”

“Where are we going?”

“To Silverclaw’s headquarters.” Barrett was shoving the few things he bought today into shopping bags.

“Now? It’s gotta be after midnight.”

“Best time to do it. When they least expect it.” He stopped and raked his gaze over

me, which made my body warm all over. “Are you coming with us?”

“Could I have a little privacy, please?” I looked at Bellamy.

“Oh, yeah. Sorry for the interruption. I’ll warm up the car,” he grumbled before heading out the door.

“Bellamy,” Barrett called after him. When he didn’t respond, my bear turned to me and rolled his eyes.

Wait. Did I just think of him as my bear?

I didn’t have time to contemplate that right now as I scrambled off the bed and looked for my clothes.

“He’s gonna be a little weird now that he knows we’re together. He thought he had found his mate, and she rejected him. Once we get Silverclaw taken care of, my next order of business is to get that bear laid. Probably why he’s been hanging around the Stepchild.” Barrett chuckled. “Maybe we can sign him up for one of the reality shows you love so much.”

“That would be amazing. Or maybe we can play matchmaker...” My mouth dropped. “Not that I’m making any assumptions.”

For all I knew, I could find myself back on the reality show circuit too.

“I like that you’re making assumptions.” Barrett gave me a smoldering look that said he was my bear, if I was ready to let him claim me. “Now let’s get the fuck out of here.”

In a brand new matching sweatsuit with the things Barrett had bought earlier that day

shoved into bags, I climbed into the backseat of the SUV. Barrett's body was big, warm, and tense next to me as we pulled away from the cabin into the darkness.

I'd spent enough time on the shifter adventure tours to know I was about to meet his bear. He thought he would have to fight. As much as I wanted to see Silverclaw go down, I knew it wouldn't be that easy.

"It's a little bittersweet to leave the cabin so soon," I said, trying to break the tension.

"Oh, yeah?" Barrett's words were almost pure growl. Definitely on the verge of a shift. "You weren't so thrilled about it when we got there."

"I figured you'd eventually let me out of prison, and I was looking forward to exploring Granger Falls. Getting some of those cupcakes." I shrugged. "And that was before I got to know you."

Bellamy let out an exasperated groan from the driver's seat. "You two need to stay focused. There are a lot of guys in town. We weren't as smooth as we thought getting you out of there. Chances are, one of them traced the flight records on the copter."

"Have you checked on the pilot?" Barrett asked.

"Yeah, he's fine."

Goosebumps blossomed over my skin at the thought Gideon's guys would hurt the pilot who'd brought us to safety. Or to the illusion of safety, it seemed. The cold hard fact was we wouldn't have any until we defeated this guy.

"Is it just the two of you who work for this company?" My voice was brittle. Shifter math made it probable that a bear could take down more than one wolf, but I'd worked for Gideon long enough to know that the numbers would be padded in his

favor.

“We have other guys.” Barrett’s voice was gruff. He might not want to play too much of his hand, but I needed the peace of mind. “Some are on other assignments. Some are working in the office. Every assignment is different. I do my best to match my team up so they can use their strongest assets.”

“The others are ready, if we need them,” Bellamy said. “We can’t explain all the logistics to you, because it could put you in danger. But you called professionals and we’re prepared to get the job done.”

Barrett’s body vibrated with pure bear energy next to me. Seemed like there was a bit of a rivalry between these two, and the last thing I wanted him to do was to put himself in danger to prove a point. Not that I knew him well enough to assume that’s what he’d do, but I’d put my life in his hands, so I needed some clarification.

“What do I do?” I asked. “I don’t want to hold the two of you back.”

The night was dark. We seemed to be truly in the middle of nowhere, on a windy mountain road that Bellamy was familiar enough with to drive like he was in a race. I could barely see Barrett, even though he was right beside me, and Bellamy’s profile only because it was illuminated by the dashboard lights.

“You won’t. You’ll be our secret weapon because you know exactly where they keep the plans. That kind of knowledge will be invaluable—”

Bellamy slammed on the brakes, stopping Barrett mid-sentence.

“What the fuck is that?” I asked.

There was nothing but glowing gold dots in the blackness.

“Wolves.” Bellamy’s grip tensed on the steering wheel.

Sweat dripped down my spine. The temperature inside the SUV had suddenly gone off the charts. I tried to count how many golden dots there were, but new ones kept appearing.

These wolves had us surrounded.

Chapter Fourteen

Barrett

“What do you want to do, boss?” Bellamy asked. He was so close to shifting I had seconds to come up with my answer.

“Go,” I growled.

“Go where? Out there?”

“No. Drive.” Part of me was itching to fight, to take years of frustration out on these wolves. But my bear knew it was a bad idea. He might have been distracted lately with this gorgeous woman by his side, but he’d never lead me wrong when it came to something like this.

Bellamy didn’t question me. He just put his foot on the gas. That was why he was my right-hand man.

Tegan clutched my arm. My bear considered her touch a reward for making the right decision. “Why didn’t you fight them? We could’ve settled this right here and now.”

“No, we couldn’t have.” I exhaled, letting the rush of adrenaline that had flooded my veins leave my body. I’d been so close to a shift, because for a moment, I’d thought the same exact thing. “We have no idea who those wolves were.”

“We have a lot of allies in Sawtooth Forest,” Bellamy added. “They could’ve been

working to keep us safe.”

“Or they could’ve wanted us to shift, knowing it would slow us down,” I said. “Buy more time and figure out what they were working with.”

Tegan tensed beside me. “I got you into this mess.”

Make her feel safe , my bear insisted. She’s only scratched the surface of what shifter life is and she’s not prepared for what she’s about to see.

“No, Gideon likes to pick fights with packs and humans he thinks are smaller than his. He mistakes kindness and goodwill for weakness. We’re about to show him it’s a strength, and that none of us shine unless we all shine.” I leaned in and gave her a kiss. “That means you too. You’re a dangerous woman, Tegan Reynolds. Never apologize for that.”

In the darkness, I could barely see the corners of her lips curl into a smile. But I could feel her body relax. My bear approved.

“Never thought of myself as dangerous before, but I like it.”

“Are you kidding? You might be the woman who brings down Gideon Silverclaw. Do you know how long packs have been trying to ruin him for the shit he’s done? Too long. We haven’t been able to do it because we haven’t had the proof we needed. You do.”

She took a deep breath, and I waited for her to say something. Instead, she put her head on my shoulder. Bellamy caught my gaze in the rearview mirror. He agreed with me that she was dangerous, but I knew he thought she was more trouble than she was worth.

It would take him a minute to be bear enough to admit we needed her as much as she needed us. He'd been acting differently since he realized Tegan and I were together. The sting of his rejection had never gone away, even though it had been a few years. The woman who'd walked away from him had a family.

Bellamy needed a reason to move forward.

You never thought you'd find one , my bear said. Don't be so hard on him.

Tegan's head was still on my shoulder, her fingers interlaced in mine. A wave of guilt washed over me, like I shouldn't be doing this, but at the same time, it felt like the most natural thing in the world to be getting ready to fight with her beside me. She was human, but that didn't make her weak. She'd see things we wouldn't. Sense things we didn't.

Bellamy pulled off the main road, onto a dirt one. Tegan sat up, peering out the window.

"I never thought I'd be back here," she said as she sucked in a breath.

A makeshift security checkpoint had been set up. Bellamy slowed.

"Fuck!" Tegan whispered. "They're gonna know."

"Trust me," was all my partner said.

Tegan slid down, off the seat. My bear growled inside me, pissed that she was doing that, but I wasn't sure of Bellamy's plan either.

He rolled down the window and handed them something.

“Not your usual time,” the security guy said.

“Had to go out for a job. Checking into the office late,” Bellamy replied.

The guard considered the car and then looked into the backseat. “Why’s he back there, and not in the front seat with you?”

“He gets carsick.” Bellamy chuckled, then lowered his voice. “Don’t make a big deal out of it. He gets mad when we bring it up.”

The guard gave me another once-over, and then reluctantly waved Bellamy through.

“What the fuck did you show him?” My voice was a whisper, like the guard could still hear us.

“One of the local guys used to work here. He managed to keep his security badge. I might have borrowed it and printed a fake name and photo on it.”

“Can’t believe that worked.” I put my hand on Tegan’s shoulder. “You don’t have to stay down there.”

“I’m terrified that wolves will come out of nowhere the minute they see me.” She pulled her hair away from her shoulder. “Pink hair is amazing until you have to sneak into your old office.”

“Maybe you’re not sneaking,” I suggested as Bellamy pulled into a spot marked for employees only. “What if we tear a page out of Bellamy’s book and make them think you’re supposed to be here?”

She cocked a brow. “Act like I own the place?”

“I imagine you command every room you walk into.”

Bellamy could barely stifle his groan, but he'd have to deal with it. We needed Tegan on her A-game.

“I can certainly try.” She shook out her hair and got out of the car. “Follow me, gentlemen.”

My partner raised a skeptical brow, and I shook my head.

Tegan strutted toward the building. I wished I had time to buy her a more impressive outfit, to sell whatever story she was about to tell us, but she owned this parking lot like she was walking the red carpet.

I couldn't wait until I got her alone again.

“This is gonna be fucking trouble,” Bellamy said between gritted teeth.

“Like when that guard realizes you gave him a bogus pass?” I said.

“They don't know me. They know her. She's too good at this.” Bellamy stopped. “What if she's playing us, and we walked right into her trap?”

“You're the one that suggested we come here now.” I leveled my gaze at him. “Give her a chance.”

Tegan looked over her shoulder as she opened the door, holding it open as we caught up.

The woman behind the desk startled when she saw us come through the door. She was an older woman with a gray bowl cut, a cardigan, and glasses hanging on a chain

around her neck.

“Tegan. Sweet moon, is that you?” She rose from the chair and put her hand over her mouth. “There are rumors that you...I don’t even want to say it.”

“Tell me.”

“There was speculation on the news that you could’ve been murdered. That the rescue mission’s been changed to a recovery mission.” The woman shuddered. “I’m glad to see it’s not true, but what are you doing here? In the middle of the night?”

“I could ask you the same question, Josephine. I know you have trouble with your night vision,” Tegan said. “Will someone be driving you home?”

“Of course. I made arrangements. We’ve all been working around the clock since you were abducted. Gideon said he’d stop at nothing to find you.”

“Well, he found me.” She spread her arms wide. “We haven’t gone public yet, so you’re the first to know. I’m back.”

Josephine raised a skeptical brow, then looked over Tegan’s shoulder. Her gaze fell to me and Bellamy. “And these handsome gentlemen behind you?”

“Oh, they’re new to the company, so we should give them a warm Silverclaw welcome, shouldn’t we?”

“You’re back in your old position?” Josephine asked.

Tegan shook her head. “I got a promotion. Management, can you believe it? We’re having the press conference in the morning.” She brought her finger to her lips. “Mum’s the word though, until we go live. I just need to get into the office and grab a

couple of things I need to hit the ground running.”

She turned on her heel and winked at me as she headed down the hallway.

I nodded to Josephine and followed my...

I wasn't quite ready to think of her as that yet. All I knew was I'd follow her anywhere.

“Wait.” Josephine said, stopping the three of us dead in our tracks.

She came out from behind the desk. She was tiny. Old enough to be my grandmother. And I had a feeling that she was about to screw this entire night up beyond all recognition.

Tegan turned around, her body tense.

Josephine approached her, arms crossed. “If I remember correctly, you called Gideon a ‘fuck nugget’ when you were escorted out of here by security.”

Tegan swallowed hard. “You remember correctly.”

“And I believe that you also said, loudly enough for all of us to hear, that you hoped he choked on his own wrinkled ball sack.”

I couldn't help but snicker, which earned a stern look for Josephine. But it didn't last long, because her attention snapped back to Tegan, her expression demanding an explanation.

“I assure you I have no idea what condition Gideon's balls are in, Josephine,” Tegan said. “It was all part of the show. You see, we were both already signed up for

Moonlight Mates , and they thought it would be super juicy if we had an enemies-to-lovers, boss and fired employee backstory. We had to make it as authentic as possible, because you know how people like to talk, and?—”

“You don’t have to tell me anymore, dear. I’m glad you’re okay.” Josephine patted her arm. “I assume Gideon knows you’re here?”

Tegan nodded. “He sent me in. Press conference is first thing in the morning.”

Josephine pulled a phone out of the pocket of her slacks. “I’ll let him know you made it here safely.”

Chapter Fifteen

Tegan

“Move,” I said to my two giant bodyguards as Josephine headed back to her desk with the phone pressed to her ear, ready to make it rain hellfire the moment Gideon answered her call.

I knew the moment I saw her sitting there this plan was fucked beyond all recognition.

“Will she actually call him or is she bluffing?” Barrett asked as we marched down the hallway. All the offices were dark. If we could get in and out of here quickly, we had a chance of actually leaving with what we needed.

“Oh, she’ll absolutely call him,” I whispered, which wasn’t easy, because I could barely breathe right now. “Not sure if she believed any of that bullshit story?—”

“I thought it was pretty good, until she called out how you left,” Bellamy said.

I rolled my eyes. “In my defense, I thought I’d never set foot in this building again. But she’s Gideon’s first, longest, and most loyal employee. She knits him a sweater every year for Christmas, you know, because he doesn’t have a mate to do it for him. She’s terrible at it too. But he wears them, because he loves Josephine. If only he treated others the way he treats her.”

“Think she might be more than just an employee?” Barrett asked.

“She’s like, pushing eighty if she’s a day.” I wrinkled my nose in disgust.

“Not like that. Like a mother, or an aunt.”

“Doesn’t matter who she is right now. She’s definitely ratting us out.” I tried the knob on the door to Gideon’s office. I knew it was locked, but it was still worth giving it a try. Good thing I managed to grab the key card off Josephine’s desk when she was feeding me her own bullshit story.

Moonlight Mates was reporting that I was probably dead? That was a bit dramatic, even for them.

Oh, shit... Bellamy said that Gideon’s guys had been at the Stepchild, and we had that run in with the wolves in the road. We didn’t need Silverclaw’s employee of the year to call in my crimes, because he already knew exactly what we were doing.

And Josephine would’ve known I didn’t have a card to get into any office, except this one had been in plain sight. Too fucking easy.

Maybe she was rooting for us to bring him down in her own way.

But we were in Gideon’s office and that was all that mattered. “We’ve been set up. This is a trap.”

“Why?” Barrett’s question was a growl.

“Because his desk is immaculate. Not like Gideon, at all.” My heart banged in my chest. “It doesn’t even look like he’s working in here anymore.”

“Let’s do a sweep before we move on. Check for anything that looks unusual,” Barrett suggested.

I slid into the chair behind the desk and went for the first drawer. Locked.

Barrett put one of his big hands on the desk, and with the other, he pulled the drawer free. He looked at me with fire in those dark eyes before he repeated the motion. He nodded to me and then joined Bellamy, who was turning over every trinket, trophy, and award in the place.

Bellamy was thorough, and I had to respect that. Maybe the grouchy bear wasn't so bad after all.

There were some files in the drawer, but not many. Not like many things were kept on paper anymore. I flipped through, but most of these things were just permits, contracts...which might come in handy. I grabbed that group of folders. But they weren't the plans that I'd seen on the desk, the ones that had made Gideon nervous enough to fire me.

Nothing else of interest in the files.

"Fuck," I muttered under my breath. It was only a matter of seconds before security came and hauled my ass out of there for a second time.

My two-man wrecking crew didn't seem to be having any better luck. They'd hardly slowed down to take a second look at anything.

Think, Tegan. Where would he put the blueprint for the resort that you'd seen? The step-by-step instructions to destroy a pack? Think like Gideon, with his weird alliances and even more sinister ambitions.

That was when I spotted the photo on his desk. Was that...

Sweet mother of the moon, there was a framed picture of him and me. I almost didn't

recognize myself—not only because I had purple hair at the time, but because I looked so happy. It was the two of us on one of our very first tours, with a pack of shifted mountain lions.

Just before Gideon’s recklessness got one of them seriously injured.

Why would he have kept this picture, much less framed it and put it on his desk? It had been years since I’d seen this photo. With trembling hands, I pulled the back off the frame.

A thick wad of papers with drawn plans fell out.

“Guys. I found it.” I slipped the folded papers into my sports bra. “Let’s get the hell out of here.”

Barrett’s face lit up, and his smile warmed my body. “I knew you could do it.”

He believed in me when no one else had. Hell, I didn’t even think we could pull this off. And we did it. We fucking did it.

“Not so fast.” Gideon Silverclaw stood in the doorway of his office, in one of his impeccable, overpriced, faux safari outfits, with his arms crossed over his chest. His hair was slicked back like he’d just come out of the hair and makeup trailer. His boys, Larrie from the Moonlight Mates —and of course, Josephine—flanked him. “I believe you owe me a few things, Tegan.”

Chapter Sixteen

Barrett

Tegan steeled herself, those amber eyes full of fury, like they could ignite and burn this entire operation to the ground. “What could I possibly owe you?”

“Your hand in marriage, for starters.” Gideon stepped toward her, and my bear let loose with a growl that shook the foundation of this building. His gaze snapped to me. “If it isn’t the bear who thinks he can stop that from happening.”

“You should be thanking him for saving you from the public humiliation of me telling you to go fuck yourself in front of the entire world. Your plan was never gonna work, Gideon. It was always going to come to this. I just hoped we could do it in a more civilized fashion.”

Gideon scoffed. “What does a white trash, good for nothing?—”

“Don’t you say another word.” My hand was on his throat, and I had him backed against the wall.

“You’ll pay for this.”

“No.” I tightened my grip, rattling the wall. “It’s about time you start paying back the packs you destroyed. The clans you ripped apart.”

The bastard managed to grin. “Like yours?”

“Did you get that on camera?” Tegan poked the show host. “He finally admitted what he’s done.”

“I did no such thing.” Gideon’s face was turning a purplish shade of red under my grip. I could feel his wolf under the surface.

But he hadn’t shifted.

I realized I’d never seen this asshole in his wolf form.

“We have the proof.”

“My wolves will destroy it. And you.” He swallowed hard. “Doesn’t take a genius to figure out you’re outnumbered.”

“And apparently it does take one to call for backup. I’ve got a dozen bears in the parking lot just waiting on my call. So why don’t you shift, and we can settle this like animals?”

He nodded to his pack. “You heard him, gentlemen. Give the bear the fight he thinks he wants, and send him out of here on a stretcher.”

He tried to knee me in the groin, but my bear was faster than his sluggish wolf. I managed to land a punch to the side of his cheek before my bear ripped through my human skin.

Tegan screamed as bones cracked and skin ripped all around her. I didn’t need to tell her to make a break for it. She jumped over an approaching wolf and ran down the hall.

I didn’t like having her out of my sight, but this office was tiny, and with two fully

shifted bears, more wolves than I could count, and a painfully human CEO, it was better that way. Tegan was scrappy and innovative, and if it came down to it, she'd be able to hold her own in a fight.

Mate , my bear thought as he clawed at the approaching wolves. These annoying ankle biters didn't like to quit, but I wouldn't have any problem making them beg for mercy.

Gideon watched over everything, like he was some sort of deranged wrestling team owner.

"Why don't you fight?" I asked.

"Don't have to." Smug bastard. "I have enough money to pay wolves to do my dirty work for me."

That was more than a bragging point. I filed it away as a serious clue. Once the dust settled in this fight and we had a chance to look at the documents Tegan stuffed into her bra, I had a feeling he'd give us a major key to breaking this wide open.

Kicking his ass would be just as effective, but not nearly as satisfying if he didn't shift.

I took a step forward, backing him into the corner. "What's wrong with your wolf?"

"Absolutely nothing." His voice was thin. "He refuses to dignify this spectacle with his presence."

"Or is it because he's weak, and you need to overcompensate with a bunch of thugs who help you steal land?" I bumped him with my snout, hard.

“Everything in my business is above board. Don’t be fooled by that little slut?—”

He didn’t have to say anything else, and he’d run out of chances—my bear wasn’t letting him talk about my mate like that. Human or wolf, Gideon Silverclaw had made choices, and now he was gonna have to back them up.

Fur broke through his skin as my jaws closed in on his body. He screamed, like the shift was painful. Under normal circumstances, I would’ve pitied him, but he didn’t deserve it.

I closed my jaws, letting my teeth break his skin. His wolf was thin and weak.

“No. Please,” he pleaded. “I’ll cut you in. Make you a partner. You don’t understand what you’re doing.”

“Oh, I understand everything. But I wonder what you’re hiding that you’re so afraid to let go of.”

He scratched and clawed at me, but I barely felt it. Gideon Silverclaw was a weak wolf in so many ways.

“The old pack structure...it doesn’t work anymore. I want to give power...back to the packs.” He stopped every few words to gasp for breath. “New ideas. New life. Don’t you want that?”

“Do you even know who I am?” I pulled away from him enough so he could get a good look at me. “You stole the land from my mate’s clan.”

“Your mate?”

“She’s gone now. Cancer.” I had to focus, and not give him any opportunity to pour

salt into my wounds. “Watching her family go through losing everything didn’t help her. You robbed her of the peace that she needed in the end. I’m gonna make you pay.”

I could snap this wolf in half, and I’d given him enough chances. There was chaos all around us. Blood splattered on the glass partition that separated the office from the hallway. Fur floated in the air. The sound of my bears taking care of business in the place that needed to go out of business...priceless.

“No,” Gideon pleaded again. “We could use a security company like yours.”

“You don’t get to bargain with me, when you stole my clan’s land and tried to abduct my mate.” That was his last warning. I planned on spending the rest of the night picking this wolf out of my teeth.

And then taking Tegan to my bed.

“Tegan can’t be your mate.”

Fuck, he knew exactly what to say to keep himself alive, at least for another moment. His wolf was fading, skin showing through the already thin fur. I stared at him in disbelief as he shifted back to human.

“Why not?”

“Because she belongs to me.”

“Like hell I do.” Tegan strode into the office. Her hair was wild and there was a bit of blood on her cheek. I liked it. A fucking goddess in the midst of chaos. “If I’m going to be with any man, it’s because I want to be. Not because he’s forcing me to be with him.”

“You signed a contract.” Gideon cupped his hands over his junk as the room filled. His balls, as suspected, were wrinkly. I’d forever tell myself that Tegan had just made a lucky guess.

She put her hands on her hips. We had a full house. Tegan had been followed closely by the show host, Josephine, and a posse of bears and wolves, some shifted, some human.

“I signed a contract to be on the show. Not to marry you. The security team I hired to stop you has also had a chance to contact my legal team, who has the original contract on their computer, since you wiped mine clean.” Tegan grinned as Gideon squirmed.

I nodded to Bellamy. I’d asked him to have someone on the team handle it, and I’d been so busy falling for Teagan I’d almost forgotten about it. But the important thing was he didn’t. Because the timing of this announcement couldn’t have been more clutch.

“While you boys were fighting, I had a chance to talk to Larrie. The two of us came to an understanding. I think you might be interested in hearing the terms,” Tegan said.

Gideon let out an exasperated sigh, and I growled, lunging at him. To be honest, I was glad I didn’t have to kill him. As horrible as he was, he was weak, and nothing about it would’ve been satisfying. Having Tegan pull his character apart string by rotten string would be so much more deadly.

“Fine. What are they?”

“We’ve already alerted the press that there will be a tell-all press conference tomorrow morning,” she continued. “They’re very excited that we’ll be appearing on

stage together. That's the agreement. You go on stage, and you tell the world every terrible thing you've done."

His eyes widened. "What if I refuse?"

She shrugged. "I'll be there, telling everyone all about your sorry ass. I have all the evidence I need to ruin you, whether you're man enough to show up or not. What do you say, Silverclaw? You give me the happily ever after I wanted all along, and then watch me leave with a real beast."

Chapter Seventeen

Tegan

“Never seen you done up before,” Barrett said from the makeup chair beside me. “I like it.”

“You did on my fake wedding day.”

He shook his head. “Doesn’t count because it had been ruined by the time I had a chance to really get a good look at you.”

“So which one is better? Hot mess express or just plain hot?” A piece of me wanted him to vote for door number one because this level of glam was a lot of work every day, and the last thing I wanted to do was disappoint the bear when he saw me in my ripped jeans and vintage concert T-shirt collection.

But I could probably get used to this bombshell thing too.

He rumbled. “They both have appeal.”

The last place I ever expected to find myself was back on the set of Moonlight Mates . Today, the crew had an energy I’d ever seen before. It was magnetic.

I wondered how long Larrie had been making terrible deals at the expense of everyone on the show. She wouldn’t be able to do that any longer. Rumors were flying around that The Real Werewives were interested in taking on the future

Beastlerettes, and were already in talks with some former contestants to see if they could give them the happily ever after they deserved. There were a lot of fictional stories that came to life on the set of reality shows, but I really hoped this one was true.

A lot of people's lives were about to change, including mine.

"Do you want to go with your regular lipstick, or something bolder?" the makeup artist asked, holding out my usual light pink gloss with a little shimmer, which had seemed so sassy before, and a gorgeous hot pink. No shimmer. Just rich, bold color.

"That one." Today, I was team magenta. I let her apply the color and then turned to Barrett.

He'd gone through a complete grooming ritual—his hair had been trimmed, his beard shaped and tamed with the most delicious smelling oil...I couldn't wait until we were done with this press conference.

"What do you think?" I asked.

There was fire in those dark eyes. The wardrobe team had dressed him in a black button-down shirt with the sleeves rolled up to the elbows and dark jeans. "I think you're absolutely gorgeous. I always thought that, but I love seeing you in your element."

"I don't know if this is my element." I was wearing a light purple mini dress with a lace overlay and the softest little black cardi over it.

"Should be."

I narrowed my eyes at Barrett. "Are you growling?"

“If I am, does it mean you’ll wear more of those dresses and that lipstick?” He wagged his brows. “Until we’re alone, that is.”

“Absolutely.” I leaned in closer, but I didn’t care who heard me flirt with my bear. “I’ll make sure you’re wearing this lipstick in some very scandalous places.”

“Can’t fucking wait.” Definitely a growl.

“We’re ready when you are.” A production assistant stood at the door, probably saving us from ripping each other’s clothes off in the middle of the makeup trailer.

“Let’s do this.” I took a deep breath as I rose from the chair. Barrett offered me his hand when we got outside.

Damn right I took it.

I loved the quiet confidence of this bear. He could’ve easily torn Gideon to shreds in that office to avenge what he’d done to his clan, but instead, he let me finish what I started. My original plan of humiliating the wolf publicly wasn’t so important anymore. Now I wanted everyone he’d wronged to have a chance to share in this moment of justice. I couldn’t give them back what they had lost, but I could reassure them that he’d never be able to hurt anyone else.

Reporters shouted at us as we approached the stage.

“Tegan, how long have you been planning to destroy Gideon Silverclaw’s empire?”

“We heard that you were fired from his company. Care to comment?”

“Who’s this man with you? Is he a shifter?”

“Wait, isn’t he the one who abducted you on your wedding day?”

“Are you going to reshoot your episode so he can be your Moonlight Beast?”

“Would you consider The Real Werewives offer for a do-over?”

My legs shook as I climbed the stairs. Gideon was already there, along with Larrie. She stepped to the podium first.

“Thank you for gathering on such short notice. As you can see, Tegan Reynolds has been found alive and unharmed, which is such a relief to all of us. Thank you so much for your well wishes.” She pressed her hand to her heart.

It took everything I had not to roll my eyes. Less than twenty-four hours ago, she’d been ready to destroy me, and now the tables had turned.

“You’ve all gathered to hear the statement she’s prepared, so without further ado, I’ll turn the microphone over to her.”

Silence had fallen over the crowd. Barrett leaned in close and squeezed my hand. “You’ve got this, babe.”

I winked at him and then headed to the podium. As much as I’d dreamed of this moment, I’d never thought it would be so public. After a season of Moonlight Mates , I knew how hungry the reporters were for a juicy story. There was a possibility one of them could throw me a curveball that could ruin our case.

Deep breath. Trust the process.

I’d thought about writing down my statement, but there had never been a better time to speak from my heart.

“In the three years I worked for Gideon Silverclaw, I witnessed him do unspeakable things that cost some shifters their homes and others their lives. I always knew I had to do something, but what? I was just a middle-aged lady who had trouble paying her rent. How would I take on a huge company? That was what led me to Moonlight Mates , because I wanted to use my fifteen minutes as a chance to right his wrongs. If I was famous, maybe I could get people to listen. To care. But what I didn’t know was Gideon was one step ahead of me. He worked with the production company to find a way to silence me for good. Yes, Larrie Michaels and Moonlight Mates were complicit in his plan. I’m not Gideon Silverclaw’s mate. Trapping me into a marriage against my will was a way to keep his nefarious business practices quiet for good. But I’ve been able to uncover the evidence that proves that Gideon was negligent in his dealing with the shifters who had participated in the Wild Adventures tours, that he had displaced many of them, had deals in place to take more land from shifters, and not give them what he had promised in return. I’ve turned those files over to the proper authorities, and they will be made available by the legal teams soon. Going public won’t give those shifters their land or their lives back, but they can rest easy knowing Gideon Silverclaw won’t take anything from anyone ever again. I believe he’s also prepared a statement.”

I couldn’t wait to look him in the eye when I stepped away from the podium. I had nothing to hide, nothing to apologize for, nothing to be ashamed of.

But the wolf bastard wouldn’t meet my gaze.

“On behalf of Silverclaw Enterprises and Wild Adventures, I deeply apologize to anyone who feels that I’ve wronged them. My lawyers are reviewing the evidence Ms. Reynolds obtained for its legality, and I’ll make a more in-depth statement after I’ve spoken to them.”

But the biggest statement of all were the police officers who waited for Gideon and Larrie at the bottom of the stage.

“Sweet moon, is that not the most satisfying thing ever?” I said to Barrett as the officers cuffed them and hauled them away.

Barrett shook his head. “Watching you completely ruin that asshole was the only thing that could possibly top it.”

The reporters went wild as he pressed a kiss to my forehead.

“Let’s get out of here,” he said. “Assuming you still want to hang out with me. You’re not in danger anymore. You don’t need me to protect you.”

I took his hands in mine. “Bear, I would follow you anywhere.”

Chapter Eighteen

Barrett

Tegan beamed at me from the passenger's seat of the SUV. It was the first time we were truly alone without the case hanging over our head. We were free.

“You're gorgeous, you know that?”

“Of course I do.” She laughed and gave her hair a playful flip. “Although I can't let you get used to me looking like this. It's not the norm. I'm a ponytail and jeans type of gal.”

“I like those too.” I pressed the button and let the engine purr for a moment before pulling away from the set of Moonlight Mates for the final time. “You were really fucking magical up there today.”

She let out a long, shaky breath. “I was absolutely terrified, like somehow, someone would come out of nowhere and make a fool out of me, or Gideon would pull the final rabbit out of his hat and prove me wrong. But it was so much easier knowing I had you by my side, Barrett. That if anything went wrong, you'd take care of it.”

“You have no idea how many shifters will fight for you because you took down Silverclaw. Hell, you'll probably never have to buy a beer again.” I chuckled.

“Change beer to caramel lattes and I'm in.”

“You can have whatever you want. Seriously, don’t minimize what you did. Like you said on stage, it won’t bring our land back, but a lot of shifters, including me, will rest a lot easier knowing Silverclaw is rotting in a jail cell.”

“I couldn’t have done it without you. You’re the only one who took my claim seriously. Everyone else told me to calm down, and that I was letting my emotions get the best of me because I got fired, while Gideon Silverclaw was out there getting pats on the back for ruining people’s lives. It was maddening, and you’re like a breath of fresh air, Barrett Guardian.” She put her hand over mine and squeezed. “I want to pay you for this job.”

“This has gone way beyond a job, Tegan.”

“I’m not mad about that.” She laughed. “But I like to hold up my end of a bargain. I’ll admit, I was in over my head on this one, but I had to make a bold move. When I called you, I swore to myself I’d find a way to pay for the job if somehow I convinced you to take me on. I won’t go back on that promise just because you gave me the best orgasm of my life.”

I almost crashed the fucking SUV. “I did?”

“Don’t get too full of yourself, bear, but let’s just say you’re pretty good with your hands.” Her hand moved from mine onto my thigh, and we almost got into our second accident in less than a minute. If she got any closer to my cock, I’d pull over and take her on the side of the road...

My bear rumbled loudly inside me, saying everything I couldn’t.

“Maybe we should stop on the way to wherever we’re going and get those condoms,” she suggested.

“Absolutely.” I needed to focus so I could get her home, after a stop at the drugstore, of course. “I have an idea for how you might be able to pay me back.”

Her expression brightened. “Whatever it is, I’m probably in. I seriously hate owing anyone anything.”

“Hear me out before you agree.” It wasn’t a fully formed thought, but I was pretty sure we could make this work. “Why don’t you come work at Sawtooth Security? The reason we were able to solve this case was because of the work that you did—while you worked for Gideon and even when we went back to the office. Not only were you able to get us past Josephine and into the offices, but you stayed levelheaded enough to find those documents, and then deal the lethal blow to Gideon when it mattered most.”

She was quiet for a moment.

“It’s an incredible offer, but I’m afraid I might be a one-hit wonder,” she finally said.

I growled again. “What did I just say about minimalizing your accomplishments? And we’re overdue for an expansion. The reason Bellamy couldn’t be here today was he had to go back to the office. We’ve already got a backlog of work, and we haven’t had the bear power to take everything on?—”

“Because you took my case.”

“Your case was personal.” I had no idea how personal it would be. “But now it’s done, and we can help more clients. You have a unique perspective, and you’ll be able to work your magic with clients who don’t connect with us. I need you, Tegan. I want you in my life, I crave you in my bed, and I need you working by my side.”

“When you say it like that, how could I refuse?” She leaned over and kissed my

cheek. “It’s an amazing offer, and I’m in. It’s gonna be so much fun to get to work with you and solve cases.”

“They’re not all exciting,” I warned. “Some of them are just security detail. Others are mountains of paperwork. But sometimes, we get to right a wrong and it makes up for all the boring stuff.”

“I don’t think life with you could ever be boring, Barrett.”

“It’s super cute in here,” Tegan said as I led her into my cabin. It felt like a lifetime since I’d been in my home.

“I haven’t changed much since Renee passed.” I said, looking at everything through different eyes. “It always made me feel like I was coming home to her.”

“I love that.” Tegan let go of my hand, doing a sweep of the living room. There were throw blankets and half-finished science projects everywhere. A giant TV and a leather recliner were the only two clues I lived here too. “It’s super cozy, and I can feel her here. I love that you kept it the same.”

She wandered into the kitchen, considering everything. She looked up at me, eyes wide and full of an emotion that I wasn’t prepared for. “Something tells me Renee wasn’t the cook.”

“You’d be right. Maybe we can get some stuff delivered, and I’ll make dinner for you.”

Tegan closed her eyes, and a low moan that made my cock twitch escaped from her lips. “I would love that so much. I’ve had nothing but takeout and catering since I became a Beastlerette?—”

“A what?”

She rolled her eyes. “That’s what they called the contestants on the show. And we were competing for the Moonlight Beast.”

“Have you gotten the need to be on a reality show out of your system? I hear you have an offer from your favorite.”

“A week ago, if The Real Werewives called, I would have been all over it. But now.” She grabbed my shirt and pulled me in closer to her. “I’ve found a hot bear and I want to stick around for a while.”

“Yeah?” I liked the sound of that.

“But I still want to go to Red Heaven,” she added.

“We will.” I rumbled. My bear was ready to rip her clothes off at the thought. “So now we’ll be working together, and we’re together, and you probably need some place to live. I still have the lease on that cabin, but it’s a little far...” I was nervous at this next thought. It was a huge leap, and I wasn’t sure if I was ready, but I wanted this. “My daughter’s usually here, and I can’t wait for you to meet her. She’s really amazing. Smartest person I ever met. Won’t eat my cooking unless I threaten to ground her though...she’d live off frozen waffles if I let her?—”

Tegan interrupted me with a kiss. “Barrett. Where are you going with this?”

“I was wondering if you wanted to stay here.”

“Oh.”

Fuck. “That’s not the answer I was expecting.”

“It came out all wrong. Let me try again.” She took a deep breath, steeling herself between me and the counter. “You’ve literally changed my life, and in a few short days, I can’t even imagine what it would be like without you in it. This room is totally yours...but the rest of the house is still all Renee. Your heart is still in pieces over losing her. Are you ready for this?”

“I don’t know, but opportunities like this don’t come when you’re ready. They come when they’re right. And this feels right, Tegan. I want you here. In my life.”

“What about Natalie?”

I sighed. “I’ll talk to her before she comes home.”

“Barrett. Let’s not commit to forever. Let’s just do what gives us this tingly feeling in our bellies as long as it lasts.”

“You make me feel things in places that aren’t my belly.” I chuckled, brushing my lips against her cheek. There was no way she wouldn’t feel me getting hard. “I’m a bear, Tegan. Forever is what we do.”

“I like that.” She sighed.

I caught her lips in a kiss. It was only supposed to be quick, but my bear took over. We knew exactly why she had reservations about the long haul. Hell, I did too. But it wasn’t just that she’d given me tingly feelings in my belly.

This woman had somehow made me feel alive again. I hadn’t really lost Renee. She’d always be with me, but this was a new, exciting chapter. I lifted Tegan onto the counter, and pushed her legs open. She wrapped them around me, caging me in. Our kisses were growing more intense, and the first meal she was gonna have served in this kitchen was me.

“Sweet moon...Dad?”

I jumped away from Tegan, shocked by the sound of Natalie’s voice. “Hey sweetie, what are you doing here?”

Her eyes widened as she took in the scene. “I had a long weekend, and talked to Uncle Bellamy about helping me arrange a surprise trip...but I guess you’re the one who’s full of surprises.”

“I can explain everything.”

“I would’ve warned her, boss, but I had no idea this was what you were up to,” Bellamy added.

“You don’t need to. I get it. And it’s about time you start dating.” Natalie came into the kitchen, circling the island, her lips parting as her gaze landed on Tegan. “Wait a minute. Are you the Runaway Beastlerette?”

Tegan’s brows shot up. “Is that what they were calling me?”

“Yeah. Not that I blamed you. I wouldn’t have married Gideon, either.” Natalie made a disgusted face.

“Have you seen today’s press conference yet?” Tegan asked.

“No, I fell asleep the minute the plane took off. What happened?” Natalie asked.

“Hold up. How do you know what a Beastlerette is?”

Natalie rolled her eyes. “Dad, everyone watches the show. It’s such a trainwreck—sorry. But we were all rooting for the Beastlerettes this season to revolt

against Gideon. He's a not a wolf—he's a weasel shifter. Wait. No way. Dad, are you the one who abducted Tegan from the wedding?"

I nodded. This was not going how I expected it at all. Somehow, it was much better. "That was me, bearnapping the Runaway Beastlerette."

"No way. That's so cool. I have to go tell everyone right now. I think I just became the coolest kid at space school." She took off in the direction of her bedroom.

"Are you staying for dinner?" I asked Bellamy.

"Absolutely." He pulled a chair onto the other side of the island. "Good thing we got here when we did. I take it you've had the talk with Nat before she left for school."

"It's space school," I reminded him.

Tegan pushed against my chest. "You don't think a smart, beautiful girl like that isn't turning the head of every nerd enrolled there?"

"She better not be." I growled and helped Tegan down from the island. "Welcome to the family."

Chapter Nineteen

Tegan

“Where did you learn how to do this?” My hair was perfectly curled and pinned, and my stylist had just expertly added a strip of lashes. No, I wasn’t in the Moonlight Mates makeup trailer. I was in Natalie’s bedroom. “You have some serious talent.”

“When you’re the nerdiest kid in a small town you wind up with a lot of time on your hands,” Natalie said as she spread the glue on the other lash strip. “There are only so many science experiments Dad will tolerate, and I like to keep busy. So I started watching tutorials and practicing on myself. And it was a good way to make friends when I went away to school.”

“Your dad will go pretty far to make you happy.” Even though it was completely unexpected to have Natalie with us on our first weekend truly together, getting to know her had been pretty amazing. She was smart, funny, and surprising, and I loved watching her and Barrett together. If I’d had any doubts about committing to this bear, they’d completely disappeared after I saw how good he was with his daughter.

“Dad tries too hard sometimes.” She sighed. “He wants to make up for the fact that Mom is gone, like it’s his fault. I try to make things easier for him. Stay still for a minute and let the glue dry.”

“You’d be surprised how much he likes a challenge.” It took everything I had to keep my gaze down and not blink away the emotion I felt at the thought of this teenage girl trying to take care of this big, protective bear.

“From you.” Natalie was grinning when I was finally able to look up. “Can I tell you a secret? I’d been low-key dreading this trip home because he was so sad when I left the first time. Didn’t know if either of us could go through me leaving again. But with you here, he’s so happy. There’s light in his eyes again.”

“He makes me happy too.” I reached for her hand. “Can you promise me something? I know we just met, and I’m kind of in a weird place, being your dad’s girlfriend.”

“I think you might be more than his girlfriend.” Natalie’s cheeks pinked. “And I know better than to commit to anything before I know the terms and conditions.”

“If only I’d known you when I got my contract for Moonlight Mates .” I laughed and rose from my seat in front of the vanity. “Don’t hold yourself back because you think you need to take care of your dad. He can’t wait to see you go into space.”

Natalie gave me a surprise hug. “Take care of him for me.”

“I promise.”

She left me alone to get dressed. I’d chosen a black crushed velvet minidress that hugged every curve. I would’ve never had the confidence to wear something like this before I met Barrett, but the way this bear looked at me...

I strutted into the living room to find his gaze sparkling and hungry. It was enough to take my breath away, and that was before I even had a chance to consider the total package. Tonight he was wearing a black button-down shirt, untucked, sleeves rolled up to the elbows, dark jeans, and boots.

“Hi.” I slipped my hands around his waist and kissed his cheek.

“That dress is incredible.” His voice was low enough only for me to hear and had that

delicious rumble to it, and these panties would barely make it out of the house. “I can’t wait to see it on the floor.”

My cheeks burned. “Barrett.”

I turned to make sure Natalie wasn’t paying attention to us. She was already back in her room, knowing I would take good care of her dad.

“I’ve been dreaming about this night.” My naughty bear was relentless. “I want to tell you all the details, but it will give it away.”

“You should just tell me.”

“What fun would that be?” The only instructions I’d been given for the night were to get dressed up.

The two of us were quiet on the drive, but it didn’t mean the energy between us wasn’t supercharged. As excited as I was for whatever Barrett had planned, I was nervous too. Our world so far had been small, inside a snow globe, and this was our first official date.

“Are we in Granger Falls?” I asked as we entered the small town. There was no other place we could be—I recognized many of the shops on Main Street from The Real Werewives.

“We are.” His eyes were on the road, but his lips were curled into a wicked grin.

“Where are you bringing me?” It was too late for dinner, and we’d had some food before we left. My heart pounded.

“You really don’t like surprises, do you?”

“They usually aren’t good.”

He glanced over at me. “We’ll have to change that. Starting tonight.”

Barrett drove straight through town and into a giant, bustling parking lot full of cars, trucks, and motorcycles. I would’ve known that giant building anywhere.

“We’re at the Stepchild.”

There was a line outside the club when we got there, and Barrett led me to the front. “It’s been torture trying to keep this a secret from you, but this is the first of many.”

There was a camera crew waiting for us. A woman approached. “Tegan? Hi, I’m Stephanie Manada, one of the executive producers from *The Real Werewives*. As much as we were thrilled to hear that you didn’t need our help finding a mate, we were even happier when Barrett reached out to see if we could help him out tonight.”

I turned to my bear. “How did you pull this off?”

“I work with Javier, Stephanie’s mate, on a regular basis. You know from the show that some of those wolves do undercover security work. We’ve saved each other’s asses more than once, and they were more than happy to help me fulfill this fantasy for you.”

“You mean, they’re gonna film us in Red Heaven?”

“Not exactly,” Stephanie said. “It will be just like the show. We’ll film just up to when things get too hot to handle, and then leave the two of you alone for the rest. You’ll never know we’re there.”

This was amazing. “Will it be part of an episode?”

Stephanie shook her head. “If we’d like to use any of it for promo, we’ll let you see it first and you’ll sign off on everything. Tonight, you’re an honorary Werewife, and you always have final say of how we use the material. But mostly, this is just for you and Barrett.”

“This is amazing,” I said as the sound woman pinned a mic inside my dress.

“You love these shows so much, and I thought your episode should have a happy ending.” Barrett’s voice was pure growl, like it was every time he took me to bed.

“It already does.”

He was mic’d too, and there was no way they didn’t pick it up when he said, “I can’t wait to watch this night with you, over and over again.”

My body heated with the suggestion, but then I remembered this was just for us. I pulled away from him and motioned for him to follow me.

The crowd at The Redheaded Stepchild was rowdy and ready to party tonight. There was a band onstage, and the dancefloor was full of people singing along, dancing, and lost in their own rhythm. Sweet moon, I was really here. Barrett’s hand was on my back.

I looked over at him, his gaze was on the stage, but it slid over to meet mine. Always the protector. Always knowing what I wanted. He pulled me into his arms and gave me a kiss that turned my legs into jelly.

His hand moved up my leg, pushing my skirt up to a dangerous level. He rested on the curve of my ass cheek. My heart pounded—even though I’d had a camera crew following my every move for weeks, tonight was different. Supercharged.

It was so much different when I was actually with my mate. I never thought I'd feel anything like this. I'd chalked it up to being human. Not feeling my emotions as deeply as someone who had animal instincts. But I had it all wrong. I was capable of feelings this intense.

The band started again, and I moved my hips to the frantic beat. Barrett's erection was hard against my stomach.

He somehow managed to tear his lips away from mine. His eyes were on fire.

"I want to strip you out of this dress," he growled. "I need to take you."

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Stephanie motion to her crew to head to Red Heaven.

I nodded to Barrett. "I want everyone here to know I belong to you."

He picked me up easily and headed away from the crowd. My arms were around his neck. It took everything I had to keep from kissing him.

A guard nodded to us and lifted the velvet rope.

"Welcome to Red Heaven, baby," he said.

The area was dimly lit, with curtained rooms along the walls. Dancers in various stages of undress were on a narrow stage in the middle of the room.

Those little curtained rooms...many of them were full, even though the curtains were wide open. Couples, threesomes, even one woman with four mates—you go, girl—were all lost in the throes of passion.

The camera crew hadn't followed us back here.

Barrett set me down on my shaky feet. I'd fantasized about this night so many times, I knew exactly what to do.

I slipped the strap of my dress off my shoulder, and ran my hands over my body, luxuriating in the feel of the velvet. Pretending they were Barrett's hands. I ran them over my breasts, going back and forth slowly as my nipples pebbled.

The lace of my bra was visible, and my touch was electric as I dragged my fingers over it.

Barrett's eyes were glued to the motion, and he was in a full body rumble as he backed me against the partition between two of those little rooms. One of them was empty, but the other one was rocking.

I didn't have eyes for anyone but my bear.

He pushed the dress down, taking the bra with it. My boobs were out, on full display in this crowded room. Sweet moon, this was so hot. Barrett lowered his mouth to take one of my nipples into his mouth. He covered my other breast with his big hand, running his fingers over my nipple, bringing it to an impossibly hard peak.

"Barrett," I moaned. I thought I was gonna explode.

He moved up my body, his forehead dewy when it brushed against mine. "I need you now, Tegan." He groaned. "Do you want stay here, or go in one of the rooms?"

"The room." I could barely speak. "But don't close the curtain all the way."

His lips curled into a wicked grin. He lifted me again, this time putting me over his

shoulder. Just enough so I could see all the people watching us.

I pushed the curtain open as we passed it.

“You’re not so shy after all,” he said as he pulled the dress over my head.

I shook my head. Words were too much right now. I reached around and unhooked my bra and let it fall to the floor. Barrett’s big body was in front of me, offering some shelter, but otherwise, I was just in my drenched panties and stockings in this bustling, exclusive club.

My fingers shook as I unbuttoned his shirt and slid it down his shoulders. He was pure beast, rumbling, vibrating, and I practically expected fur to burst through his skin. But I was more than thankful that it didn’t.

His hands were on his belt buckle, and he freed himself from his pants. His cock was hard and ready for me. I dropped to my knees, taking my thick shaft into my hand, and opened my mouth.

Somehow, he managed to pull me to my feet. No words, he simply shook his head.

“Why?” What man would say no to a blow job?

“Turn around,” he growled. “This is your fantasy, and I’m going to make it come true.”

He was behind me now, and I was on full view to the entire room. He ran his hands over my body, the sensation driving me crazy.

“Hold on to the bar.” He guided my hands to the thick pipe above me. There was no hiding now. As terrifying as this was, I loved it. I had no idea how much this had

turned me on until I found out Red Heaven existed, and I couldn't stop thinking about it. But I never would've been comfortable enough to do this with anyone but Barrett. He'd keep me safe. He'd worship my body, make sure anyone who dared to watch us knew I was worthy of being cherished.

Ravished.

Claimed.

His thumbs slipped into the thin straps of my panties and slid them down my thighs. Sweet moon, I was completely naked. He rubbed my hips, and his knee was between my legs, spreading them apart.

I was already dripping wet when his hand slipped between my thighs, but that didn't mean Barrett didn't take his time. By now, he knew all the moves that sent my body haywire. My body bucked forward, and the only thing keeping me up was the bar overhead, and his hand on my hip.

Barrett intensified the motion, taking my clit between his fingers and giving it a squeeze.

I saw stars. I cried out as I reached climax. Just as the band stopped playing. I felt like I was in the spotlight, all eyes on me.

My bear wrapped his arm around my waist. His other hand slipped away from my hip and I could feel him positioning that giant cock of his to enter me.

I had a feeling this might be his fantasy too, whether he knew it or not. There was nothing gentle about the way he entered me, his thrusts strong and fast. My muscles pulsed around him as if trying to trap him inside me, claiming him as much as he claimed me.

His hands moved to my shoulders, steadying me as he continued to slide in and out of me. The rhythm was relentless, and my next orgasm was building fast.

Barrett's claws dug into my skin---claws? He was still human, but at the same time, he was all bear as he scraped his nails down my shoulder, marking me.

His shaft swelled inside me, and he came. We'd definitely gotten those condoms.

The two of us stood there, naked and panting, but forever intertwined.

"That was amazing," I finally managed.

"That was just the beginning." He kissed my dewy forehead. "I can't wait to be wild with you, again and again."

Thank you for reading!

I hope you had as much fun reading Tegan and Barrett's story as I did writing it! I loved having a chance to revisit one of my favorite fictional places, Sawtooth Forest. Okay, it does exist, but the jury is out on whether any actual shifters live there. I'm a little biased, but I think they definitely do. Granger Falls, however, is purely fictional. This is my first foray into exploring the bear shifter population in the area, but if you want to read more about the Sawtooth Shifters and The Real Werewives season that filmed in Granger Falls... you can get all the details [here](#) .

If you're curious about Bellamy and the mate who rejected him...she's back, and bringing chaos to everything she touches. He's not getting involved. Or so he thinks...

Keep reading for a sneak peek at My Un-Bearable Mate!

When Trouble Walks In

Bellamy

“A little authority looks good on you, man.” Beau, one of the newest additions at Sawtooth Security, clapped me on the shoulder as he came into the office, coffee in hand, along with Brad, the bear tasked with showing him the ropes.

My bear was more than willing to let the compliment and the slight increase in responsibility go straight to his head. He was a cocky beast and his personality wasn’t anything like how I presented as a human.

“It’s only temporary while Barrett and Tegan are on their mate moon,” I reminded everyone. We’d all come from different clans, and it had been natural for Barrett to take charge of the security operation.

You could’ve been alpha too, my bear loved to remind me. If your mate didn’t ? —

Nope. Didn’t need to think about that right now. Or ever.

“I can be your second-in-command,” Beau offered, earning a mix of laughter and groans from the rest of the bears at the table, and turning my focus back to the meeting. “Until Barrett gets back.”

A chorus of ooohs rang out. I was about to lose control of these rowdy bear shifters before my first official day at the helm even started.

Maybe that's not such a bad idea , my bear said. I'd been about to put Beau in his place, but my bear could be onto something. Bellamy and I had talked about if things would work out with Beau. He was young, eager, but he didn't know his place in the company. Came in with a head of steam and didn't want to be told what to do.

But he was really good at getting the job done, even if he was unpolished. The kid had potential.

"If you want to be second-in-command, you can start with making sure you bring coffee for everyone. Especially if you're gonna show up late."

Beau's eyes widened, and the guys on either side of him nudged his considerable biceps. We needed muscle, which he had in spades, and it might have been the only reason we hadn't fired his ass yet.

"The Tegan Reynolds case changed our business. Put Sawtooth Security on the map," I said, starting the meeting's official business. She'd called us from the set of a dating reality show after her ex-boss had duped her into a real marriage to keep his dirty dealings under wraps. Barrett had history with the slimeball wolf and putting him out of commission meant Sawtooth Forest was a safer place for all the shifters who lived here.

And he scored a smokin' hot mate when he'd completely given up, my bear added . Maybe that means you've still got a chance.

"Nothing about that case was typical for us," I added, ignoring my bear. The last thing on my mind was a mate. Especially while I was in charge of the business and was working on earning the loyalty of a bunch of rambunctious bears.

"Good." Beau nodded. "Hollywood doesn't belong in Sawtooth Forest."

Brad gave him the side-eye the comment deserved. "Thought you said you wanted to

be a contestant on The Real Werewives if they filmed another season here.”

“You have to admit it’s kinda weird, having the cameras everywhere, all those people wanting to know about your life.” Beau shuddered dramatically. “But I wouldn’t mind finding my mate. Or bringing her to the hot tub.”

“If that’s how you feel, you’ll be a good addition to the team. Our work should stay behind the scenes. No one should even know we’ve done it.” I wouldn’t admit to the crew that I was relieved when filming ended. Barrett had been the one in the spotlight, but I hadn’t been comfortable with being on camera.

The mission of Sawtooth Security was helping shifters when their own packs couldn’t or wouldn’t. My job specifically was to find answers.

“Things might feel a little slow right now, but don’t get used to it,” I continued. “Our inboxes are overflowing with requests for help. We’ll be reviewing the cases, and determining who’s the best fit. You should’ve gotten a survey about?”

The door burst open and every head in the room turned to see the woman I thought I’d never lay eyes on again.

Hot damn , my bear said, confirming what I saw was not a figment of my imagination.

Otherwise, I would’ve never believed the woman who’d rejected me in front of my entire clan was standing in the office of Sawtooth Security.

Fuck, she looks gorgeous , my bear added.

Couldn’t argue with him there as my gaze locked with the woman who should have been my mate. No, Clover Crowley did not still have a hold over me. Not after she’d torn my heart to pieces and laughed as she threw them up in the air. But somehow,

over the last fifteen years, she'd become even more beautiful. Her fiery crimson hair fell almost to her waist, completely untamed. She'd always been curvy, but now she looked downright dangerous. Maybe because I knew the truth about this woman. Everything about her was a red flag, and still I couldn't force myself to look away.

Her blue eyes narrowed, like she knew exactly what I was thinking. And if she thought she was about to have me eating out of her hand after all these years, she was dead wrong.

A low growl rumbled in my throat. Someone had the audacity to snort.

"Seems like the two of you might have a history." Brad's voice broke the trance as he rose from the table. "Maybe we should give you some privacy."

"That won't be necessary." Not that I blamed any of them for ignoring me and hightailing it out of this room. I wished I could do the same.

Get it over with, I told myself, expecting my bear to argue for a quick tumble first, but even he agreed that the last thing I needed was this woman complicating my life. Especially this week.

"What—

"What do I want?" Clover's lips curled up into a smile, and damn. No. There was no way I could still feel anything for this woman after what she did to me.

She's your mate, my bear said.

"I was trying to be professional. Not sure why." I rose from my chair. I hadn't forgotten the way I towered over her, but after all this time it caught me by surprise.

She softened. "Because you're Bellamy Laredo, and not one thing about you has

changed. Except for the little bit of silver in your beard that has no right to look that good.” She shook her head and chuckled softly. “And I’m still the horrible, rotten bitch who broke your heart in front of the entire clan. I don’t expect you to be nice to me. In fact, I don’t want you to be.”

“Then why are you here?” That question got delivered with the growl she deserved. “If you’re looking to make yourself feel better?—”

“I need your help,” she said quickly.

I couldn’t have possibly heard her right.

“Believe me, you’re literally the last person on earth I want to ask for anything,” she said when I didn’t respond. “But unfortunately, you’re also the perfect person to ask, and I’ve exhausted all possibilities. I would’ve settled for capable, but...” She finished the sentence with a shrug.

“Are you in danger?” My protective instinct was coming out and I hated that I couldn’t stop it. Not even for her. Whatever she was trying to hook me into, I couldn’t fall for it.

I couldn’t fall for her .

“Not exactly.” She dragged the second word out. This had to be good. “Nana’s locket is missing.”

I couldn’t stop myself from smiling at the thought of her grandmother. Shirley Crowley was one of my favorite bears in the clan. She wasn’t our alpha, but she was the pack healer, a spot exalted to only those who were gifted with certain powers at birth, and the only woman powerful enough to keep a bunch of rowdy bears in check.

Except for her granddaughter, who wouldn’t listen to anyone.

“How is she?” I asked.

“Feisty as ever. Still mad at me for what I did to you.” Clover smiled sadly.

“That’s unfortunate.” And this conversation was over. I took my seat and opened my laptop, like she’d caught me in the middle of something important. She had—the meeting. Ugh. I wasn’t looking forward to the barrage of questions from the guys that would surely follow this surprise encounter.

I had to get Clover out of here.

“You know it’s not just a necklace,” she said as I opened my email. My inbox was overflowing with shifters who needed us, with real problems. “Nothing with Nana is what it seems. And of course, because I didn’t get her magic, she won’t tell me what will happen if the locket’s not safely returned to her. She’ll only say it’s gotta be found. Or else. You know how she is.”

“I hope you find it.” I chanced a glance up at Clover to drive my point home. Mistake.

“I’m here because I need you to find it.” She let out an exasperated sigh.

Of course I knew that was what she wanted, but I’d hoped she’d get the fucking hint that I wanted nothing to do with her. No way could I face my old pack after I’d been rejected. I missed them terribly, but this woman had made an absolute fool out of me.

Not that I could take the case anyway. I was in charge of Sawtooth Security until Barrett came back. I couldn’t go running off in search of a necklace. If Barrett caught wind of that, he’d be making Beau his second-in-command.

I’d already made my one questionable decision for the day, and I wasn’t looking to follow it up with a worse one.

“You don’t need me to find a locket.” It was on the tip of my tongue to quote her some outrageously inflated rate, but that would open up negotiation. Make it sound like there was a chance in hell that I’d take this job.

I wouldn’t.

But I knew Clover wouldn’t stop until she got what she wanted.

“Nana thinks it might be for sale. And if it falls into the wrong hands...she won’t tell me what will happen, but I can say there’s been a lot of incense burning and chanting anytime the possibility’s been brought up.” Clover gave her head another shake, and her hair shimmered like a crown.

For a woman who thinks she’s got no magic, she certainly knows how to cast a spell.

Not helpful, bear.

“You know your way around a computer,” she continued.

You know your way around a few other things too...

“I’m a hacker,” I said, ignoring my bear.

That earned a grin. “Right. If there’s shady shit happening online, you’re the man to call.”

Couldn’t argue with that. “Listen, I would love to help you?—”

“Don’t try to let me down easy, Bellamy. Are you in or not? There’s a reward for the safe return of the locket.”

“I don’t do tricks for treats. I’m running a security company that’s just handled a case

with national exposure, and we have more jobs than we can possibly keep up with.”

“Right, you saved that lady from the awful Moonlight Beast. That’s how I found you. I wouldn’t be here if I wasn’t desperate.” She lowered her gaze. “I might be forty years old, but Nana will have my ass if this thing isn’t found.”

Wait. “Are you responsible for this?”

There was no way this woman would come in here and beg me to do anything if she wasn’t in deep shit. This was way more than a fucking necklace.

Clover pursed her lips together. Yeah, she was completely responsible for whatever mess had been created.

“I would never do anything that would hurt Nana or the clan.”

It took everything I had not to laugh in her face. If that was true, she never would have rejected me.

“I hope you find your nana’s necklace, Clover.” Saying her name out loud tore at those delicate pieces of scar tissue that had never quite gone back to the way they were before she broke my heart. “But there’s no fucking way I can help you.”