



Bitter Wind (Hickory Bear Rapids #1)

Author: *Ruby Shae*

Category: Fantasy

Description: He swore he'd never take another mate...

Grizzly bear shifter, Ryker Windsor, doesn't want a mate—ever. His first mating was a mistake, and though he doesn't regret raising his sons, he refuses to let another woman into his heart—or his head. But when Carly Masters walks into his shop, all his careful walls start to crack.

She's not looking for forever...

Curvy girl, Carly Masters, never expected the town's broody mechanic to ask her out. She's not chasing fairy tales, but the instant pull between them is impossible to ignore. Ryker makes her crave something she's never had, and though he's holding back, she can't help but hope for more.

Fate doesn't care about his promises...

Ryker vowed to spend the rest of his life alone, but fighting the bond between them is futile. Carly is his, and now that he has her, letting go isn't an option. But old wounds run deep, and if he can't overcome his past, he might lose the only woman who was ever meant to be his.

Total Pages (Source): 11

CHAPTER 1

Ryker Windsor stood in the storeroom and wiped his greasy hands on a rag as he stared at the empty spot in the center of the space. After nearly twenty-four years, it was weird to not have to look at the food truck whenever he entered this part of his shop, and though he was glad it was gone, he couldn't shake the feeling that something was missing.

Which was completely stupid because he definitely didn't miss the thing.

Even covered in the tarp the truck had been a huge eyesore, and as he looked around again, he realized just how much space he'd let it take out of his life. Both in his shop and in his head. In the beginning, he'd held onto the vehicle out of guilt—wondering if he could have done anything different—but as the years went on, he'd kept it as a reminder to never make the same mistakes again.

He probably would have kept the thing forever, but something changed last summer. Suddenly, and with no probable cause, the weight of the truck felt like a burden he didn't want to carry anymore. The feeling weighed on him heavy, but it had still taken a couple more months before he'd brought up the subject with his boys.

Their adamant responses to get rid of the vehicle had shocked him, but honestly, he wasn't sure why. Although their mother had wanted the food truck, she'd never actually used the thing. It was just another one of her whiny ways to manipulate him, and he'd been stupid enough to do anything to try and make her happy.

Unfortunately, that had been an almost impossible feat from the start.

Of course, they'd had fun in the very beginning, playing house before the twins were born, but once they got married and the babies came, everything changed. He'd spent four long years trying to make her happy, and honestly, he'd been relieved when she'd finally called it quits. Unfortunately, they had officially mated—at her request—and the only way to break the mating bond was death. He'd still had to deal with her inside his head for another year before she'd gotten herself killed, but aside from the fact that his boys would never see their mother again, the only thing he'd felt was relief.

He knew that made him an asshole, but he didn't care. He hadn't loved his ex, and though he'd been trying to do the right thing by marrying her, mating with her had been stupid.

Never again.

Nope, he would never make that mistake again. Not that he was looking for a mate, because he wasn't. He never wanted to own that burden again, and aside from a few one-night stands a couple of towns over, he'd never had a need for a mate. He'd raised his boys without any help, and even though he'd barely been an adult himself, he'd done a damn good job. His boys were good men, and he was proud of all three of them.

And he hadn't needed a mate for that.

It would be nice to have a true mate, though.

It was the same feeling that had plagued him last summer. The thing that had made him wonder if holding onto the food truck had been a mistake all these years. It made him wonder if maybe holding onto it had slowly turned him into a grumpy old man. Not that he was ancient or anything, but he certainly felt older than his forty-six years. Not physically—his bear form kept him active, and he often lifted more than

his share of weights—but mentally.

Even after all of his boys had moved out, he'd been content to be alone. Hell, he still relished in the quiet house, and though he loved their Sunday barbecues, he didn't miss his kids when they were gone. Maybe it was because they all lived in the same town, and he saw at least one of them daily, but he didn't think that was it. He just enjoyed the quiet that had been missing from his life since he was eighteen.

Not that he regretted anything—well, except for his failed mating—but if he hadn't met his ex, then he wouldn't have his twins, and he had never once regretted them. His oldest had come to him first, but even though they weren't related by blood, he'd been born to be the man's father, and he'd never regretted that decision either.

But he still liked the quiet, and he was glad that everyone now had their own places to live.

Of course, that meant he now had a house that was way too big for him alone, but he didn't plan on selling anytime soon— if ever. This house sat closer to the National Park than most of the other houses in the area, and it was a big plot of land so his neighbors were a nice distance away. The river flowed next to his backyard, but his property was high enough that he never had to worry about flooding, and the sun warmed his back patio in both the summer and winter, which allowed him to connect with nature even when he didn't feel like running in his bear form.

One of the best things though, was the small bridge he'd build to connect his property to the other side of the river. It was a drawbridge that used a large tree as an anchor, and he could lower it when he wanted to cross the river into the National Park. It made shifting into his bear form easy, because all he had to do was cross the river and disappear into the trees. His shift was instant, and the magic allowed him to keep his clothes on during the change, but he also had the added bonus of privacy. The part of the park that was across from his land was barely visited by people, and he never had

to worry about finding strangers in his special spot.

He also didn't have to worry about anyone using the bridge to cross into his land, but that didn't mean that he didn't take precautions. No Trespassing signs were posted on the tree on his side of the river, and he'd also attached a sign to a chain that he used to block the entrance to the bridge. He also used his bear senses to check the area before coming and going, and he had never found a trace of anyone, other than his family, crossing into his land.

He checked the clock on the wall and realized he'd been staring at the empty spot in the middle of the storeroom for way too long. Normally he locked up promptly at five unless a customer asked him to stay late, and that hadn't happened today. No, he'd just been wasting time thinking about the past. Except... that wasn't exactly true, because he was also wondering about that nagging feeling he'd felt back in August.

It had been the thing that had finally pushed him to fix up the truck and put it up for sale, but he'd never even made it that far. In late December another shifter—Liam Rivers—had showed up wanting to buy the truck, and even though the man's story about Santa sending him sounded crazy, it was the only thing that had made any sense.

Because he hadn't told anyone about the truck, and neither had his boys. In fact, all three of them had admitted later that they hadn't believed he would ever sell the thing, and he understood their position. He'd sat on the truck for months after talking to them about it, and when he'd finally started working on fixing it up, it had been without a lot of fanfare. He didn't keep his work a secret, but he also hadn't talked to them much about the process.

Ryker thought again about the story Liam had shared with him and shook his head. It had sounded unbelievable—it still did—but he was a man who could shift into a grizzly bear, so he knew some things were unbelievable. Plus, while Liam was

reserved, he was also sincere, and Ryker had no reason not to believe the other man's story.

Admittedly, despite all the work he'd done, he'd still been on the fence about selling until Liam had shown up out of the blue. He'd taken it as a sign and sold the vehicle for the price of new parts and nothing more. The other man had balked at the price, claiming it wasn't enough, but in that moment, Ryker had known it was time to let the monstrosity go.

He still believed in that choice, but unfortunately, that nagging feeling still remained. He'd thought selling the truck would settle him, but yet, it had been nearly a month and he still felt like something was missing. His bear grumbled in agreement, and he shook his head as he threw the rag into a nearby bin.

It had been a long time since he'd sought out a woman for release, and maybe that was all he needed. Someone to warm his bed for the night. His bear growled this time, and he dismissed the thought almost as soon as it had formed. A one-night stand held little appeal, and even less when he considered searching a few towns over. Aside from his ex, he'd never had a relationship with anyone in town, and that wasn't about to change. He'd had plenty of offers—way too many—but their motives had always been selfish, and he wasn't about to repeat any of his past mistakes.

Especially when he didn't feel anything toward any of them.

He used to think it was because he was angry, and that his stance would change over time, but his indifference had never waned. Sure, there were some pretty women in town, but he'd never felt anything more than a slight appreciation for their looks. And that definitely hadn't been enough to change his stance on finding someone new. If anything, it had cemented his resolve, and he'd accepted the fact that he would never be mated again.

That nagging feeling felt stronger now, and he rubbed a fist over the center of his chest at the same time the bell on the door chimed.

Fuck me!

He'd forgotten to lock the front door, and though most people read the posted hours and didn't bother him once they were closed, every now and then he was greeted with an annoying soul who thought the world revolved around them. Usually he would help them anyway, but right now he was feeling out of sorts, and he didn't want to deal with anyone.

He started walking toward the front, but stopped in his tracks at the sound of the unfamiliar voice.

"Hello?"

Carly Masters smiled as she walked down the path on the side of the raging river. She loved the way the river rolled over the rocks, and she could watch the swirling rapids all day. She glanced across the river, and saw a grizzly bear eyeing her curiously, but she didn't linger or make eye contact with the animal. In order to get to her side, the bear would have to cross the bridge that went over the rapids, bringing it closer to town, and though it could do that, she wasn't worried about the animal following her.

She'd moved to Hickory Bear Rapids nearly six months ago, and during that time she'd seen lots of grizzlies, but none of them had paid her any attention. She loved being outside and surrounding herself with nature, but being a city girl, she could admit that seeing a grizzly for the first time had been frightening. Luckily, the feeling had only lasted a few seconds, and she'd relied on the information pack she'd received in the mail from both the National Park and the city council on what to do when encountering a bear in the wild.

She hardly ever ventured very far into the National Park on the other side of the river, but the bears were frequent visitors of the water, and since she was also a frequent visitor, she was used to their presence. It wasn't unusual to see a bear splashing in the water, or just wading around in the shallower pools, and when it was warmer, she'd even seen one or two sunbathing on one of the larger rocks. Now that she was used to seeing the animals nearly every day, she loved getting to view them up close.

A gust of wind swirled around her and picked up some of the soft powder that covered the path. The powder-like crystals seemed to float around her feet as if by magic, and she shivered slightly as the chill battered her coat. She still had time to get to get to Windsor Auto before they closed, but she needed to move faster so she didn't freeze before she got there.

One of her coworkers had planned to drive her to pick up her car, but the other woman had gotten a call to pick up one of her kids early from practice, and by the time Carly had learned of the news, most of her other coworkers had already gone home. At least, all of the ones that she'd feel comfortable asking for a ride. Luckily, she didn't mind being out in the cold with the right coat, and she loved walking.

As soon as she reached the end of the path along the river, her phone rang, and after glancing at the caller ID, she only answered it because she still had a while to go before she reached her destination.

"Hey Jules, what's up?"

"Oh, so you are still alive."

"Funny." Carly rolled her eyes, but still forced out a laugh.

She knew her friends meant well, but none of them had understood her desire to move away from the city, and she received these kinds of calls weekly. She loved her

friends, but she was thirty-four years old and single, and everyone she knew was married and having babies. Though she loved kids—that's why she'd chosen teaching as a profession—she didn't want any of her own, and she definitely didn't want to become a full-time baby sitter. Not that anyone took advantage of her single status or anything, but she'd babysat all of her friend's kids at least once during an "emergency", and that wasn't the way she was going to spend her life.

Of course, that wasn't the only reason she'd moved, but combined with the fact that nearly all of the schools in the city had cut art and music from their curriculums, and the fact that she preferred being outdoors more than anything else, it had made sense for her to make the move. Especially since she wasn't tied to anyone, and she wasn't getting any younger.

Besides her friends, there was nothing holding her in the city, and she rarely saw the other women anyway. That didn't mean she didn't miss them, but she needed to make the changes that were right for her life, and she believed moving to Hickory Bear Rapids had been the right thing for her.

"So, guess who I saw yesterday?"

The other woman said the words in a sing-song voice, and Carly knew whoever it was had to be a man. Either someone from their collage days that was now married with kids, or someone Jules knew from work that she'd tried to set up Carly with and failed.

Never again.

Ugh! She'd allowed exactly two friends to set her up on blind dates, and they had both ended badly, though not in the same way. The first guy had been a complete disaster less than five minutes in, but the guy Jules had chosen had actually seemed nice.

At least in the beginning.

That facade hadn't lasted long though, and despite looking good on paper, his personality had been shit. At first it was a bunch of little things that could be easily overlooked, but over time, his whiny, super needy, and clinging behavior just got old.

They'd only dated a couple of months, but though she'd ended things with him nearly two years ago, he'd put her off relationships in general. She liked her independence, and her alone time, and she wasn't going to give those things up just to be in a relationship. Not to mention the sex hadn't been good. The man had been way too overconfident considering his skills, and though he gushed about loving on her curvy body, every encounter had been a waste of her time.

Of course, her vibrator could only do so much, and if she could find a man who knew what the hell he was doing, then she would definitely be down for some sexy times. She didn't need a relationship, although she wasn't opposed to that if she found the right man, but she did miss the weight of a man on top of—and behind and inside—her.

She wasn't holding her breath though, because Hickory Bear Rapids wasn't a huge town, and she'd known when relocating here that the move might have cemented her single status for life. The situation wasn't ideal, but she'd known the truth when making her decision, and she wasn't upset about it.

"Who?" She glanced around the street, and noticed nothing looked familiar.

"James Wheeler."

"Um... eww!"

James was her ex—the one Jules had set her up with—and the other woman knew

why they had broken up. Why her friend thought she would be happy hearing about the man was beyond her, but it was just another example of how they were slowly drifting apart. The woman's next words confirmed her assumptions, and a wave of sadness washed over.

"What do you mean, eww?" Jules chastised. "It's been two years, and people change. He was driving a brand-new car, and he asked about you."

Anger replaced the sadness, and she hated the fact that her friend would allow, or even encourage, her to settle for someone less than what she deserved.

"He's a big baby who sucked in bed, and I'm sure that new car has put him deep in debt. I honestly can't believe you're even bringing him up. You didn't tell him anything about me, did you?"

The silence on the other end of the phone told her everything she needed to know.

"I just worry about you," Jules said. "And I want you to move back here."

"And what?" she said, her voice hard. "Marry James Wheeler? Settle for some loser so all of your friends can be married? That actually kind of sucks."

"God, you're right," her friend said, blowing out a breath. "I do suck. I also told him where you lived and gave him your number again. I wasn't thinking, and it was a shitty thing to do. I'm sorry."

Carly looked around again and swore. She would forgive her friend over time, but she'd also taken a wrong turn somewhere and the Auto Shop was nowhere to be found. She needed to retrace her steps and hurry up if she was going to make it before the owner closed for the night.

"Okay," Carly said. "I have to go now, but don't give my number—or my location—to anyone else."

"I'm sorry, Carly."

"I know, but I have to go."

She hung up the phone and opened her GPS, thankful her phone had good reception in this town. She typed in the name of the repair shop, and then started backtracking her steps. She'd turned one street too early, and she'd walked quite a long way before realizing her mistake, so now she had to pick up the pace.

Unless she could get there in ten minutes, the shop would definitely be closed when she arrived, and the temperature was already dropping as tiny flurries fell on her nose. Hopefully she'd get lucky and the owner would still be around, otherwise she'd have to try again tomorrow, and she really didn't want to trek back home in the snow.

Twenty minutes later, she arrived at the shop, and despite the closed sign being clearly visible, she pulled on the door and smiled when the thing opened. The little bell tinkled against the wind, and though the place wasn't overly warm, she was happy to be out of the elements. Her jacket was warm, but she'd been walking for a while, and her cheeks and fingers were freezing.

She usually enjoyed being outside, but right now she was cold and tired, and all she wanted to do was get home and snuggle under a warm blanket. All she had to do was get her car and get going, but the counter in front of her was vacant, and no sounds were coming from inside the building.

In fact, it seemed like the place was completely empty, and her smile fell.

Please let there be someone inside.

"Hello?"

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CHAPTER 2

Ryker forced his feet to move, angry that he'd been thrown by a voice. Since when did he react to a voice... especially one that belonged to a woman. It didn't matter that the unfamiliar ache had seemed to ease almost immediately, or that his bear had also sat up and taken notice. He wasn't a man who could be moved by just one word.

He left the storeroom and started walking through one of the bays at the same time a woman poked her head into the space.

Holy fuck!

Not only was she gorgeous, but she felt like his, and in that moment, he knew that he would give her anything. Though the feeling was completely different from when he'd met his first mate, the desire to make her happy was the same, and he was never going down that road again.

"We're closed!"

He was closer now, only about a cars-length away, and his words bellowed across the small space between them as if trying to push her back out the door. Instead of backing down like most normal people, she narrowed her eyes at him.

"I'm well aware of that, and I'm sorry," she said, her voice calm. "I took a wrong turn, and didn't realize until I had already been walking for a while."

God damn!S he was beautiful.

Her light brown hair was streaked with gold highlights, and the wavy locks were pulled back into a messy bun piled high on the back of her head. As he moved closer, he noticed how pretty her eyes were, and how the amber color seemed to sparkle with flecks of gold. Did they do that all the time, or only when she was angry? Would they do it while he fucked her? He definitely wanted to find out everything about her, and at that thought, his dick started to swell.

What the fuck!

His body's reaction pissed him off, and he wanted to send her away. He opened his mouth to do so, but at the same time, her words registered and he was angry for another reason.

"Wait! You walked here?"

He looked at her again and his anger flared when he noticed the dark pink color in her cheeks, and the tiny flurries stuck to the top of her head. How far had she walked, and why wasn't she wearing a hat? At least the rest of her outfit was appropriate, although he didn't miss the fact that she hadn't removed her gloves yet, and the knowledge made him angry. She'd been out in the elements a long time.

"Yes, and I took a wrong turn, hence I'm late. Now can I get my car or are you going to hold it hostage?"

She was feisty and sassy, and his dick swelled even more. It didn't help that she was tall with curves that went on for miles, and he knew that he wouldn't have to hold back with her. He could pound into her hard and she could take it.

Fuck me!

He stepped behind the counter, and she watched him warily. He knew he should say

something, but he was too busy trying to get his dick—and his bear—under control. The animal had sat up at the sound of the woman's voice, but now he was pacing under his skin, desperate get out and claim his mate.

The feeling was odd—and foreign—and though he'd known his first mating hadn't been true, he wasn't prepared for this onslaught of feelings toward a complete stranger. He didn't need a mate, didn't want one, and all he had to do was get rid of her and he would never see her again.

His bear growled beneath the surface, but he ignored the animal and went to the box they kept on the counter that held the keys and cards for the completed cars.

"Name?"

He practically growled the word, and something akin to pride washed over him when she didn't shirk away or back down.

"Carly Masters. It's the black SUV out front."

He nodded and tried not to look at her. He glanced at the card matching her name and silently swore. He'd never worked on the car before, and the work he'd done had been simple routine maintenance, but he'd been impressed by the condition of the vehicle. Especially since it wasn't exactly new. She'd taken care of the thing, and that was something he admired.

Shit!

He had to keep it together. He didn't want to charge her for the work, but if he didn't, that would be more awkward, right? Yeah, of course it would. More so because he was acting like a complete idiot. Still, he didn't want her to leave.

He glanced down at his hands, and for the first time in twenty-four years he wished they weren't covered in grease. He'd wiped them on a rag, but even though he wasn't leaving traces of the black stuff on everything he touched, it was embedded into his fingers and it would be until after he got home and showered. That's just the way it was when you worked on cars for a living.

He shook his head as another wave of anger raced over him. He hadn't thought about his hands in over twenty years, not since his first mate had complained about how he looked dirty all the time. It didn't matter that the dirt paid for all of the things she wanted, including that stupid food truck, or that they took care of their family and provided everything they needed to survive.

Fuck!

Would this woman be like his ex? Not that it mattered because he didn't want a mate. He didn't need to impress her, but he noted that the other women he'd slept with hadn't seemed to mind his hands.

Of course, he didn't go searching for women straight from work, and he never told any of them any details about his job. In fact, he'd always tried to keep his personal information private. He hadn't cared what any random strangers thought about him.

But he cared what this woman thought.

Carly Masters.

He tested her name in his head as he pulled up the computer program that held the invoice so he could take her payment. The name suited her, but he'd never seen her in town before, and suddenly he wondered if she even lived in Hickory Bear Rapids. He looked at her again when he told her the price, and she smiled back at him as she swiped her card in the card reader.

"Thank you so much for doing this," she said. "I know it's a huge inconvenience."

The thanks was sincere, but he could also tell that she was mocking him just a little bit. One side of his face twitched at her feistiness, and she smirked at him knowingly.

"Do you live in town?" He blurted.

"Yeah," she gave him a genuine smile. "I just moved here about six months ago."

That was when the unfamiliar ache had started. The thing that had prompted him to sell the food truck and let go of the past. That couldn't be another coincidence, could it? It might be, but he didn't think so. Even though he didn't want a mate, he was definitely open to having some fun, and he would like to have some fun with this woman.

"Have dinner with me."

The words came out like a demand, and he winced until she started laughing.

The sound surrounded him, wrapped around him like a cloak, and he realized that if he had this woman for the rest of his life, he would never tire of that sound. It was pure joy, and the only time he'd ever heard it before had been coming from his kids. It reminded him of family—and of home—and his bear roared beneath the surface, desperate to claim their mate.

And that's when he smelled the subtle hint of her arousal.

She was still smiling, but also studying him curiously, and he did his best not to squirm under her scrutiny. He felt as if she could see into his soul, and it bothered him that she might not like what she found there.

"Are you asking me or telling me?"

"Both." He nearly growled the words, loving the way her eyes seemed to sparkle at his words.

That scent of arousal wasn't so subtle now, and his fingers twitched at the need to touch her. He wanted to carry her into his office, bend her over his desk, and make her scream as he fucked her from behind.

As if she'd read his mind, her eyes flared again, and he knew he was screwed. Asking her out had been a mistake, and he suddenly wished he could take it back. At least until she spoke again.

"When?"

Even though he was an asshole, she clearly didn't think he was—or didn't care—and if she was agreeing to go out with him, he wasn't going to take back the offer. Of course, she could have other motives like the rest of the women in town, but he didn't think that was the case. At least he hoped it wasn't, because even though he didn't want a mate, he did want this woman, and it was the first time he'd ever felt anything like this.

"Tonight. There's an Italian place on Main Street that's pretty good. We could split a pizza if you want. Or if you don't like Italian, we can go someplace else. Someplace nicer. Wherever you want."

God damn, shut the fuck up!

What the hell was wrong with him? He sounded like a fucking idiot.

"Pizza sounds perfect," she said.

"Great. How about I pick you up at seven?"

"Seven is good, but I'll meet you there," she smiled. "Is it the place next to the sheriff's office?"

It was, and his oldest son was the sheriff.

Ugh! Well, this should be interesting.

The chances of avoiding his son were almost zero percent, but he was surprised that he didn't really care all that much. He didn't want a mate, but he did want everyone in town to know that she was his.

"It is."

"Oh good, because I love that place," her eyes sparkled again. "By the way, what's your name?"

She laughed and the sound went directly to his dick, but her question made him smile.

"I'm Ryker Windsor," he said, "and I own this place." He raised his hand to show her his dirty palm. "I'd shake your hand, but this stuff is a bitch to get out, and I don't want to dirty your pretty gloves."

"I appreciate that," she laughed. "I guess we'll just have to have a formal introduction later."

It was an innocent comment, but the way his body reacted to it was anything but innocent. He wanted to introduce himself to her in a very different way, preferably naked, so she could scream his name over and over. He also wanted to mark her as

his, and that thought left him speechless. He didn't want a mate, but he wanted to claim this woman with every fiber of his being.

Luckily, she didn't wait for him to respond.

"Sounds good. See you later, Ryker."

Carly tightened her fingers around the keys in her pocket, and tried not to think about the fact that Ryker was watching her ass as she walked away. Underneath her winter coat, she was dressed in her favorite comfy jeans and a long sleeve t-shirt that was her basic work attire on colder days. She knew the jeans didn't flatter her ass the way some of her other pairs did, and she cursed as she slid into her car.

The first thing she noticed after locking herself inside was how clean the driver's side door and steering wheel were. She couldn't count how many times she got her car back after repairs only to find grease or dirt on some of the surfaces. She'd accepted it was part of the process, but she was impressed that Ryker had taken extra care to clean up after himself. Of course, maybe it was just a fluke, but after meeting the man, she didn't think so.

She knew he didn't work alone, and that thought made her pause. She'd talked to a woman on the phone both before dropping off the vehicle, and when she'd gotten the call that it was ready, and she briefly wondered who the woman was. Not that it mattered. She didn't think he would have asked her out if he was involved with someone, and the woman was probably just an employee who worked the front desk.

Thinking about the desk made her pussy tingle, and she desperately wanted to know what it would feel like to have Ryker pound into her from behind while he bent her over basically any surface.

To say that the man was hot was an understatement, and everything about him made

her want to strip down and let him do whatever he wanted to her body. The feeling was at odds with her more independent nature, but unlike her ex, she had a feeling Ryker knew exactly what he was doing when it came to making a woman come.

That thought, though probably true, pissed her off, and she didn't like thinking about him with other women. Which was just stupid. Of course he'd been with other women. Hell, even though he didn't seem that much older than her, he probably had a lot more baggage.

Shit!

Had she made a mistake in agreeing to go out with him? Did he do this with all the new women in town? Or with all the ones passing through? God, was she just some sort of conquest for him? She didn't think so, but what the hell did she know. She'd only been in town for six months, and even though everyone was mostly nice, maybe Ryker liked to mess with women.

The sinking feeling wanted to take root, but she didn't let it. She wasn't looking for a boyfriend anyway, and as long as she had some fun, it probably wouldn't matter. Unless he humiliated her or something, but she didn't think that would happen. The few women at work she hung out with liked to gossip a lot, and they hadn't mentioned anything about the man. If there was news worth sharing, she probably would have heard about it already.

Besides, she liked Ryker, and it had been a long time since she'd liked anyone so she wasn't about to pass up the opportunity to get to know the man better. Not when just looking at him made her pussy ache. He was sexy, there was no doubt about it, but that wasn't all. She was drawn to him, as if they were meant to be together, and she'd never felt anything like it before.

Honestly, it was probably just her mind going into over-drive because she'd been

alone for so long, but she wasn't about to pass up a chance to be with this man. Not when every fiber of her being was pushing her toward him.

When he'd first bellowed the words about being closed, she'd had the odd feeling that he was trying to scare her away. As if somehow his scowl could make her leave. Instead, the look had had the opposite effect, and she'd wanted to see how far she could push him. When he'd smiled at her teasing, she'd known that he was different, but him demanding that they eat together—and her reaction to his gruff tone—had both been a surprise.

She wasn't into dominant assholes, but Ryker didn't seem like an asshole. She'd noticed the vulnerability when he'd mentioned the grease on his hands, but all she'd seen were strong capable hands that could handle a woman her size. And his hands weren't the only large part of this his body. Hell, the man was at least seven inches taller than her five-foot, nine-inch frame, and he was a lot wider, too.

He'd been dressed completely in black, and the t-shirt covering his chest had been snug. It had clung to his body with every movement, and she'd wanted to rip it off and rub her hands all over his glorious form. She knew he'd be hard everywhere, and even now, that thought sent a fresh wave of heat through her body.

Aside from the tee, he'd been dressed in black jeans and black work boots, and his head had been covered in a black beanie. The jeans had surrounded tree trunk legs, and she'd definitely noticed that he was big all over. There was no way he could hide his thick cock, and she desperately wanted to know what it felt like to be filled by him.

God!

She'd been thinking about sex since she'd met him, and even though she was almost home, she couldn't get him out of her head. She needed to take the edge off if she was

going to get through dinner with any semblance of a normal person, and a few minutes later, she was in the shower with her fingers between her legs.

She plunged two fingers in and out of her pussy as she thought of Ryker's dark, midnight blue eyes, and wondered what his hair would look like under the black beanie he'd been wearing. She'd seen strands of both grey and black sticking out from under the fabric, and if his beard matched the hair on his head, she knew that it would be a nice salt-and-pepper mix. He looked way too young to have so much grey, but she didn't mind. On him, the look was sexy as hell, and just the thought of that beard scraping over her skin sent her over the edge, and she bit her bottom lip in an effort to stifle the moans caused by her orgasm.

She didn't need to do that, but for some odd reason, she wanted to save those sounds for Ryker.

Oh my god! I'm losing my fucking mind!

She'd never obsessed over a man like this, and her thoughts were crazy. Hell, Ryker might be crazy, and after tonight, she might never see him again. Why the hell was she worried about saving him sounds? Or orgasms? The odd feelings pissed her off, and she finished her shower quickly, annoyed that her release had barely taken the edge off.

Not that she should be that surprised. She'd been without a man for nearly two years, and while she had no problem making herself come, her fingers and toys weren't the same as a man who knew what the hell he was doing.

God, I hope Ryker knows what the hell he's doing!

A quick glance at the clock helped clear her mind, and she spent the next half-hour carefully choosing her outfit and getting her hair just right. She knew they wouldn't

be getting naked today—at least she didn't think they would be—but she was glad that her legs were shaved and that her toenails still looked pretty from the painting she'd done over the weekend. It was way too cold outside to wear anything but close-toed shoes, but knowing her toes were pretty gave her a boost of confidence that rivaled the sexy bra and panty set she wore.

After one last look in the mirror, she left the house excited for her date.

CHAPTER 3

Ryker stood outside the Italian restaurant, and plastered a smile on his face when he saw his oldest son, Luke, walking toward him. Picking a place to eat that was right next door to the sheriff's office had been the only flaw in his plan, and he knew his dinner would be interrupted more than once tonight.

"Hey, dad." Luke walked right up to him, stood at his side, and looked up and down the street.

Ryker's smile grew as pride filled him. He loved all of his sons—and the men they'd become—and he was proud of all three of them.

Luke had always been the peacemaker of the family, and his calm and logical thinking made him an excellent sheriff, even in a town where the crime rate was relatively low. Hell, that ability to stay calm when everything went to shit was what had kept him alive when he'd been abandoned at the young age of seven.

Ryker had been barely an adult when he'd found the boy, but he never regretted adopting his son and becoming a parent so early in life.

"Hey, son. How's work?"

"Normal," Luke laughed. "What are you doing?"

Yeah, cause what he was doing was completely not normal, and he knew Luke would ask questions if he spotted him out here. Still, he hadn't wanted to wait inside for

Carly.

"Just waiting."

"Waiting for what?"

He sighed. He'd known being evasive would never work. Luke was too damn aware of everything around him, and he'd always been the one to find out all of the details before making a decision on things.

"I have a date."

"A date?" Luke's eyes lit up like it was Christmas morning, and he knew Noah and Rhys would know the information before the other man made it back to his office.

"With who?"

He understood his son's shock. He never dated, and if he shared a meal with someone, which was rare, it was never with anyone in town. Hell, he couldn't remember the last time he'd been on an actual date, and he glanced down at his outfit, suddenly wondering if he looked okay.

Fuck! His woman was making him crazy!

His woman? What the hell? They hadn't even had dinner yet. He didn't know anything about her, and wasn't sure if he'd ever see her again after tonight... Except, deep down, he knew he would. She was different from anyone he'd ever met, and his bear was desperate to mark her. Unlike his first mate, his animal actually liked Carly, and they didn't even know her yet.

Luckily, he wasn't as impulsive as the animal. After the last time, he knew he never wanted another mate, but even though he was determined to stay single, Carly called

to his human side almost as much as she called to his bear. He'd be a fool not to at least enjoy her company for a little bit.

That last thought didn't sit right, but he pushed the feelings away and focused on his son.

"Her name is Carly Masters, and she's new in town. I did some work on her car, and she came to pick it up late this afternoon. That's how we met. Now get out of here because she'll be here any minute, and I don't want you hanging around when she arrives."

"Okay, okay," Luke laughed, putting up his hands in surrender and taking a step back. "I'm going. You look great by the way. Have fun!"

Ryker shook his head as Luke ran back to the sheriff's office, and he made a note to warn Carly about his sons. He knew they wouldn't stick around and be a nuisance, but his boys were definitely going to show up and get a good look at his woman.

Good...then they'll know to stay away from her.

The unfamiliar, possessive thought shocked him, especially since it was directed at his boys, but he wasn't sorry. He didn't have a problem with the other men being around her in a family capacity, but even though they were closer to her age, Carly was his, and he didn't want anyone else—especially his boys—thinking she was available to date.

What. The. Actual. Fuck?

Damn! I am so screwed.

He didn't want mate, and yet, he was ready to take Carly off the market before they'd

even gotten through their first date. Hell, he might not even like her. Maybe she was a bitch who kicked puppies in her spare time or something. Maybe she hated bears and wanted to hunt them all down while they slept in their dens. Hell, maybe she was just a gold digger looking for money. He wasn't loaded, but he did have a very substantial savings. Maybe she was just looking for a sugar daddy to buy her a new car.

He wanted her, but he also needed to keep some perspective. She could be exactly like his ex, and despite the pull he felt toward her, he was never going through that again.

God... Maybe this date had been a bad idea after all.

He glanced at his watch, and noticed that she was already late. It was only two minutes, but maybe she'd stood him up. Maybe he'd been obsessing over her for nothing, and she wouldn't even show. He glanced down the street, impatient and angry, but when he caught a glimpse of Carly, all of his wayward thoughts disappeared.

She looked like a goddess walking toward him, and all he could do was stare.

Unlike earlier, her hair was down, and the long, wavy locks were parted down the middle. It was easier to see the golden highlights with this style, and they shimmered as they caught the light of all of the businesses and streetlights she passed. She wore a dark brown coat that hung down to her mid-thigh, and it hung open allowing him to see a pretty, pink top and dark jeans that accented all of her curves. Her calves were encased in boots the same color as her coat, and for the first time in his life, he was jealous of a pair of shoes.

Though he only wore a sweater and jeans, the weather had cooled down a few degrees from when he'd seen her earlier, and anger flared as he briefly wondered why she hadn't fastened her coat. When she stopped and pulled her phone out of her

pocket, the look on her face caused a different emotion to swamp him. Something on that text had made her angry, and he didn't like the idea of anyone bothering his mate.

She shoved the phone back in her pocket without typing a response, and then she looked up and smiled at him and all thought fled his mind as his dick started to swell.

Fuck, she was gorgeous!

Serious caveman instincts were telling him to skip the meal, throw her over his shoulder, and take her to his secret spot. Once he had her there, he would strip her bare, and then lick and kiss every part of her body. By the time he was done, his scent would be embedded in her skin, and everyone would know who she belonged to.

Well, every shifter, and that was enough. For now. For the humans, he'd put a ring on her finger and dare anyone to come near her. Those thoughts both excited and scared him, and he shook his head, trying to clear the crazy, and willed his cock to go down. They were having dinner, that was all, and he wasn't getting married—or marking anyone—any time soon.

"Hi," she said when she reached him. "Everything okay?"

Her smile had fallen just a little bit, and he hated that he'd been the one to make that happen.

"You look gorgeous," he practically growled the words. "And everything is perfect."

Her radiant smile returned, and his bear preened beneath the surface.

"Thank you. Sorry I'm late. The free lot is practically full, and I had to park near the back. It took me longer to walk here than I thought it would. You should have waited for me inside."

"No," he growled again, affronted that she thought he would enter the dwelling without her. "We enter together. Unless you're here before me, then you wait inside."

"Okay," she smiled again.

"Good." He put his hand on the small of her back, and led her to the front door. "Are you hungry?"

"Starving," she laughed. "What about you?"

"I'm definitely starving."

Her eyes sparkled at his words, and he had a feeling she knew his hunger had nothing to do with food.

Once inside the restaurant, the hostess took them to the table in the back he'd asked them to hold for him, and he took her coat and placed it on one side of the round booth at the same time he motioned her to slide in the other side. He loved that she slid to the middle so he could slide in behind her with no questions asked, because there was no way he was sitting across from her at the huge table.

Her knee casually bumped his as they looked over the menu, and he found that he liked the feeling way too much. He also liked that she wanted a pizza with everything on it—his favorite—and that she wanted breadsticks, too. He liked to enjoy his food, and shifters ate a ton. While he didn't care how much she ate, he hated it when a woman ordered something small and then just picked at her plate and watched him eat.

After the waitress took their order, he glanced toward the front of the restaurant and openly groaned.

"I'm sorry in advance," he laughed. "I thought I'd have more time to warn you, but we're about to have visitors."

"What?" She glanced at Luke walking toward them, and her smile slightly fell. "What do you mean? What's going on?"

"That's my son, Luke, and I'm guessing the other two will be by shortly."

"Are they...," she glanced at Luke again. "Are they here to check me out?"

Her eyes sparkled, but her smile didn't meet her eyes, and he didn't miss the slight worry in her voice.

"Yes, but only because you're the first date I've had in years, and they want to meet the woman responsible for that."

Carly gaped at Ryker. She really wanted to know more about why this man hadn't dated in years, but she didn't have time to ask any questions, because suddenly, Luke was there, standing at the edge of their table.

"Hi, I'm Luke," he said, stretching his arm across the table.

She started to reach for his hand, but stopped when Ryker pushed his arm away.

"Carly, this is my son, Luke. Luke, this is Carly."

The sheriff had a huge grin on his face, and she couldn't help but notice that he wasn't that young. At least he didn't look it. He actually looked right around her age, and Ryker definitely didn't look old enough to be this man's father.

"It's nice to meet you, Luke," she smiled.

"Okay, you've seen her," Ryker growled, "now let us eat in peace, and tell your brothers to say home."

"You know that's not happening," Luke laughed. "But, I'm leaving. Bye, Carly, I hope to see you again soon."

They both watched the sheriff walk away without looking back, and once the man was outside, Ryker spoke before she could.

"Sorry about that," he sighed. "The other two should be here shortly, and then we can finish our date without any more interruptions. Well, unless my niece shows up, which is a very real possibility. She's the one you spoke to on the phone. She works the front desk for me part-time until lunch."

Carly smiled, happy to know more about this man, including who the woman he worked with was. Still, he didn't look old enough to have full-grown sons, and she wasn't going to hold back on her questions.

"Is the sheriff really your son? He looks about my age, and you definitely don't look old enough to be his father."

"He probably is your age," he laughed. "But he is my son. I adopted him when I was eighteen and he was eight. The twins were born later that same year, so I was a very young dad."

He'd been a dad at eighteen? God, she couldn't imagine having that responsibility so young. Hell, she didn't want that responsibility now. She liked kids, but she liked them better when they went home to their own parents.

Another thought crossed her mind, and she wondered if she was going to have some crazy ex visiting them next.

"And their mom? Does she live in town?"

"She left when the twins were four, and died a year later."

"Oh, I'm sorry, Ryker. That must have been devastating."

"It surprisingly wasn't," he said, his voice hard. "Here come the twins."

Well, she definitely wanted to know more about his ex, but Ryker's tone gave her the impression the topic was closed, and she wasn't going to pry. At least not now. The topic seemed way too heavy for first date conversation, and though she felt a little self-conscious, she was enjoying the enthusiasm of his sons.

Two men practically raced toward them, crossing the restaurant with purpose, and when they arrived at the edge of their table, their smiles were huge. Unlike Luke, who was huge with brown hair and brown eyes, these two men actually looked like Ryker. They were shorter, with a smaller build, but there was no lack of muscles on either man. They were identical twins, with black hair and deep blue eyes that weren't as dark as their dad's, and if she did stay in Ryker's life, she hoped she would learn to somehow tell these two apart.

"Hi!"

They said the greeting nearly in unison, and she couldn't stop the laugh that bubbled up. Had Ryker really not had a date in years? It certainly seemed that way with the way his sons were acting, but that couldn't be true. Could it?

"Hi."

"Carly, this is Noah and Rhys." She liked that he pointed to each man specifically as he said their names. "Boys, this is Carly. You've seen her, now leave. And don't tell

your cousin about this."

"We already told her," Noah laughed, "but she's busy and can't come."

"Hey, Carly," Rhys said. "Can we take your picture?"

"No, you can't," Ryker growled. "Leave. Now."

"It was worth a try," Noah grinned. "It was nice to meet you, Carly."

"See you soon," Rhys added.

Both men walked out of the restaurant almost as quick as they entered, and Carly watched them leave with amusement.

"Well, that was... interesting," she laughed.

"Yeah, that's one way of putting it," Ryker smiled. "Do you have kids?"

She wanted to laugh at his segway, but she didn't fault him for wanting to know. More so because he'd already raised three sons, and probably didn't want any more children. Or maybe he did, and because his ex was dead, he was looking for someone to give him those babies.

"Uh, no," she shook her head, "and I don't want any either. I'm a teacher—I teach art at the elementary school—so I obviously like kids, but I also like to send them home to their parents at the end of the day. What about you? Do you want more children?"

The look he gave her made her laugh out loud.

"No. I love my boys, but I'm definitely done with having my own kids."

She nodded, happy he wasn't looking for something she wasn't, and a few minutes later she practically groaned when the pizza came.

"Oh, my god, this looks amazing."

While they ate, the conversation flowed between them easily, and after telling him a little bit about her job and her reasons for leaving the city, she stopped eating when she found him just staring at her.

Oh god! Had she eaten too much? Was he one of those men who expected their dates to only munch on part of a salad. She eyed the pizza, and while it was almost gone, she knew she'd only had two pieces plus a couple of breadsticks.

"What is it?" She asked. "Is there something on my face?"

"No, and nothing," he shrugged. "I'm enjoying watching you eat."

And that wasn't weird at all.

"That's... weird," she said, pushing her plate away.

"Yeah, maybe that came out wrong," he laughed, pushing her plate back. She had been done anyway, but his words made her feel self-conscious. "I just meant that watching you enjoy your food is sexy-as-hell. The few times I've actually shared a meal with a woman, they've barely eaten anything at all, and it's not enjoyable to dine with someone like that."

Well, when he said it like that, she couldn't be mad. She picked up another breadstick and dunked it in the dipping sauce, and she was thrilled when he did the same.

"So, did your sons really come to check me out because you haven't had a date in

years?"

"Yes," he laughed. "And, not only that, I've never dated anyone in town, so they've literally never seen me with a woman before."

"Wow, that's....," She didn't actually know what to say to that. Why had he decided she would be the one? Was it because he was turning over a new leaf and she was the first in a soon-to-be line of conquests, or was it because he felt that same weird pull toward her that she felt toward him. She wasn't about to ask that question, so she just left her comment hanging.

"It's too much," he laughed, "especially for a first date. Sorry, but I'm not really good at this."

"It's all right," she smiled. "So, did I pass the test? Do they approve?"

"Oh, they definitely approve."

The way he practically growled the words sent a wave of heat racing straight to her core, and liquid heat dampened her panties. Rykers eyes flared, as if he could scent her arousal, and she once again wondered what it would be like to have him moving his thick cock in and out of her body.

This date had been a little weird, and there was a tiny place deep inside that wondered if Ryker was telling the truth about dating, but the way his sons had showed up seemed so innocent and wholesome, and she wanted to believe him. Was that stupid? Maybe, but she didn't think so. Not when her body felt drawn to him in a way she didn't understand.

Of course, it could all be because she hadn't been turned on by a man in a little over two years, but she didn't think it was that. She'd seen gorgeous men before—hell, his

sons were gorgeous men, too—but she hadn't felt anything aside of appreciation for any of them.

Ryker was different, and she wasn't giving up on him yet.

A little while later, Carly stopped on the street after exiting the restaurant, and fastened her coat. Despite the flurries on her walk to pick up her car from the auto shop, the temperature had warmed up a couple of degrees when it was time to meet Ryker, and she'd left her coat undone so that he could see her cute outfit when she arrived. The look on his face had been worth it, but now that it was later, the air was crisp, and she was cursing the fact that she'd left her gloves at home.

She shoved her hands in her pockets and curled them into fists as Ryker narrowed his eyes. He'd mentioned her lack of hat in his shop earlier, and she had a feeling he was about to chastise her about forgetting again.

"Thank you for dinner," she smiled.

"Where are your hat and gloves?"

The words came out low and growly, and liquid heat dampened her panties.

"I was excited about our date and accidentally left them at home."

His eyes seemed to darken as he slowly inhaled, and once again, she got the feeling he could smell her arousal. Of course, she knew that wasn't possible, so maybe he was just fighting off the desire to kiss her or something. Disappointmentswamped her, because she really wanted him to kiss her, but she understood his reasons for holding back.

"Let's get you to your car before you freeze."

He placed his hand on the center of her back to steer her in the direction of the free lot, but then he let it drop once they were going in the right direction. She glanced at him out of the corner of her eye, and noticed that even though he didn't touch her, he stood close enough that people would know they were together.

It was exciting and oddly comforting to have him by her side, and she once again admired his physique. She'd dated tall men before, but Ryker was a good seven inches taller than her, and she liked that she could wear her heeled boots around him without feeling like a giant.

He was dressed in black jeans and boots, similar but different from the ones he'd been wearing at work, and a dark gray sweater covered his chest. His head was covered in a grey beanie this time, and she desperately wanted to pull the knit cap off and see what he looked like without it. Not that she hated it or anything, because he rocked the look better than most of the men her age, but she wanted to know everything about him, and the beanie felt like a barrier between them.

She also noticed that he didn't have a coat or gloves, and that he didn't look cold at all.

"What about you?" she asked. "You didn't bring a coat or gloves?"

"I have a t-shirt on under my sweater, but I run really warm, and don't need anything more than that."

A blast of wind swirled around them as they turned into the lot, and while she felt the chill all the way to her bones, Ryker seemed to barely notice the cold.

He found her car easily, and walked her right up to the driver's side door. There were still plenty of cars in the lot, but because she was parked in the back, it felt like they had a little bit of privacy.

"Thanks again for dinner," she smiled. "I had a wonderful time."

"You don't ever have to thank me for feeding you." He growled the words, but before she could think about what that meant, he continued. "I want to kiss you now."

Though he didn't ask a question, she had a feeling he wanted her permission.

"Okay."

His hands encircled her hips, and she instinctively moved closer and placed her hands on his chest. Heat seemed to radiate off of him, seeping into her skin, and she desperately wanted to know what it would feel like to touch him with no barriers. His mouth descended on hers slowly, and when his lips finally touched hers, she felt it all the way to her core.

He must of have felt something, too, because he kissed her again, harder, and when she opened her mouth slightly, he shoved his tongue inside at the same time he pulled her flush against his body.

And... damn!

He was hot and hard everywhere. She could feel the heat of him from her chest to her knees, and even though they were separated by the layers of their clothes and her coat, she could feel his hard, thick shaft between them, pressing into her lower belly.

Ryker deepened the kiss, tightening his hands on her hips, and she met his tongue stroke for stroke.

She slid her hands up his chest and around his neck, weaving them in between the short strands sticking out from underneath the beanie. And that had been a mistake, because he immediately grabbed her forearms and took a step back. The sudden lack

of heat radiating from his body, combined with the abrupt change in his demeanor caught her off guard, and she stared at him dumbly as the bittercold wrapped around her.

"Your hands are freezing, sweetheart," he said, wrapping his fingers around hers. "You have to get home and get out of this cold."

She knew he was right, but she didn't want to go. She wanted to kiss him some more, but she could tell by the look on his face that he wouldn't touch her again tonight. Sadness swamped her, but she did her best not to let it show.

"You're right," she forced a smile. "I am really cold."

"Are you free tomorrow night? If you want to come over, I can grill some steaks. And we can watch a movie or something. Whatever you want."

She really hoped that 'or something' meant that she would get to kiss him again, because right now, that's all she wanted.

"Yeah, that sounds great. Should I bring anything? Like something for dessert?"

After the pizza, they'd ordered a plate of Italian cookies to share, and while she was too full to eat more than one, she'd enjoyed watching him clean the entire plate after making sure she didn't want any more. Watching that man pick up the crumbs with his fingers had been sexy and endearing, and though it wasn't the same, she understood why he'd been watching her eat.

"I do like dessert."

He growled the words while staring at her mouth, and she felt her pussy contract, as if readying itself for his touch.

And she definitely wanted him to touch her there.

They exchanged phone numbers, and after texting her his address, he practically shoved her inside the SUV. Carly wanted to laugh at the way he basically manhandled her into the car, but she honestly thought it was sweet. As she drove away, she could still feel the warmth of Ryker's lips on her own, and she couldn't wait for their date on the following night.

Hopefully they would do much more than kissing.

CHAPTER 4

Carly glanced down at the screen of her phone while she waited for Ryker to open the door. The message was from a different number than the other ones she'd received, but she was pretty sure they were all from her ex. It was the only thing that made sense, even though the whole situation didn't make sense at all. Why text her at all—and why use four different numbers to do it?

The messages were harmless—though incredibly annoying—and she didn't understand the point. Texting things like 'how are you' and 'what are you doing' made no sense to her. Especially since she hadn't talked to the man in almost two years.

Of course, they could all be random and have nothing to do with each other, but she didn't think that was true. More so because the first one had arrived the day before, not long after talking to her friend, Jules, and she rarely received random texts. If she did, they never came in like this.

Four texts in less than twenty-four hours, all from different phones, seemed excessive, and she was glad her ex lived in a different city that was very far away from where she was now.

Jules told him where you live.

Her friend had given out that information, but honestly, telling someone what town she lived in really wasn't that big of a deal. Especially when that person was a friend of a friend. He was an ex-boyfriend, sure, but they hadn't ended on bad terms, and

though she didn't like the idea of him knowing where she lived, she wasn't hiding from anyone.

Still, the texts were becoming too much, and an uneasy feeling settled over her at the same time Ryker opened the door.

He took one look at her and pulled her inside, and then he scoured the street with his eyes, as if looking for a threat. His actions were sexy as hell, and though she was sure nothing was out there, she felt safe and protected in his presence.

Once seemingly satisfied that there were no threats, he joined her in the foyer.

"What is it," he asked, gently pulling off her hat. "What's wrong?"

"Sorry," she said, surprised that he could read her so well. "Nothing's really wrong, but I've gotten a few annoying texts today, and another came in right before you answered the door. I just felt strange about them."

She shrugged, and started pulling off her gloves, and then bent down and grabbed the bag she'd set on the floor and handed it to him.

"I got almond croissants from the bakery on Main. I hope you like them."

She smiled, but Ryker's face was set in a scowl, and he didn't take the bag.

"What kind of texts?"

He growled the words, and she felt the rumble all the way to her core.

"Stupid ones," she said, pulling out her phone. She showed him the last one, and he growled again when he read the words. "My friend gave an ex my number and told

him where I live now, and then these messages started coming the same day. I keep blocking them, but they are all from different numbers, and I don't know if any of them actually belong to him. I haven't talked to the guy in almost two years, so him texting me doesn't make sense, but it also seems like a strange coincidence, and I just felt weird about it."

"Understandable," he nodded. "Did things end badly between you two?"

"No," she shook her head. "I mean, I was the one who ended things, but he had no problem letting me go. If he didn't live so far away, I'd say it was just a booty call or something, but I have no idea. I also don't care. I don't want to talk to him, and the texts are more annoying than anything. I just hope he gets bored soon."

"If it gets more frequent, or more...," he shook his head, seemingly unable to find the right word. "If they get more anything, then I think we should report it to Luke. If you don't feel comfortable talking to him, then one of the deputies. Promise me."

The last two words fell out of his mouth on another growl, and she realized that she would promise him anything if he kept using that delicious rumble. Liquid heat dampened her panties, and all she wanted to do was strip down and ride his thick cock. She glanced down and bit her bottom lip when she saw the huge bulge between his legs.

"Carly."

She met his eyes, and smiled. He obviously wanted her as much as she wanted him, but he was also waiting for her response, and she knew he wouldn't budge until she acquiesced.

"I promise."

The look on his face was almost feral, but she wasn't afraid. In fact, she wanted to laugh at how much she wanted him, but then he took a step toward her, and all thought of laughing died. He placed his palms on either side of her face, his fingers gently cradling her head, and then he leaned down and brushed his lips against hers. Her free hand immediately went to his chest, and when he kissed her again, she closed her hand into a fist around the fabric.

She could feel the heat radiating from him through her coat, and once again, she wanted to know what it felt like to touch him skin to skin.

The first few meetings of their lips were soft and sensual, but when he slid his tongue inside her mouth, the dueling of their tongues became hard and urgent. She dropped the bag of croissants onto the floor and slipped her hand under the hem of his shirt. Her fingers slid over his abs, and every bump was warm and hard.

Unfortunately, the sound of the bag hitting the tile seemed to break the spell, and he let her go, taking a small step away. The distance was minor—she could still touch him—but a second later his hands gently closed around her wrists.

"We have to stop," he said, his breath ragged.

"What? Why?" She definitely didn't want to stop.

"Because I haven't fed you yet—or given you the grand tour—and I didn't invite you over just for sex."

Which meant he did want sex, but just not yet.

She could live with that.

"Okay, fine." She sighed heavily, teasing him, and started unzipping her coat. "I am

excited about the tour. I love that your place is so close to the river. Do you ever have to worry about flooding?"

"Never," he shook his head. "The banks are surprisingly high in this area, and the river is wide enough that when extra water does come through, it doesn't reach the top."

"That's amazing."

A bout thirty minutes later, Ryker stood out on the deck, and smiled as he watched Carly chop up a tomato for a small salad. He wasn't a huge fan of salad in general, but something told him his mate would want more than steak and grilled potatoes, and he'd been right.

In fact, even though she'd eaten heartily the night before, she'd laughed when he'd showed her the steaks he'd prepared for the grill. He liked meat, and a lot of it, and he'd forgotten that most humans—even full-grown men—couldn't easily finish a steak cut the same size that a bear shifter could eat.

"No way," she'd laughed, shaking her head. "There's no way I can even eat a fourth of that thing. I do love grilled potatoes, though, and I can eat a ton of those."

He knew she wasn't lying, and he also knew she was telling the truth when he'd asked her about the salad and she'd been impressed over the fancy lettuce mix he'd purchased. He didn't think Carly was someone who always had to have expensive things, but he knew she had good taste, and he'd wanted to impress her.

She'd taken over salad duty easily, which had impressed him in return, and he had to admit that working in tandem like this soothed his bear in a way that he didn't even know was possible. His ex had made her share of meals, and had taken care of their boys while he worked, but they'd never really fit—not even when they were doing

stuff together as a family.

Being with Carly like this was definitely something he could get used to, and he couldn't stop the wave of fear that washed over him. It was only their second date, but she looked right in his kitchen, and felt right by his side. He still didn't want or need a mate, but he knew that the more time they spent together, the harder it would be to let her go.

He thought about the kisses they'd shared, and wondered if he was doing the right thing by allowing himself to touch her. Or even see her. Hell, maybe he should have never even asked her out. And what the hell had he been thinking bringing her to his home. Now that he'd given her a tour, her scent would linger in every room, and it would take forever for the smell to dissipate.

Fuck me!

He'd been thinking with his dick when he'd invited her over, and now he would have to let her down easy. Because Carly wanted him almost as much as he wanted her. He could see it in the way she looked at him, and because they were made for each other, he knew she could feel the pull between them, even if she didn't know exactly what it meant.

He looked at her again, and when she noticed him staring, she smiled and waved, and he was lost all over again.

He loved that she was a strong woman who could hold her own, but she had a playful, almost innocent side, too, and the combination made up the perfect woman.

Earlier, as they'd toured the house, she'd gushed over the light entering every room, and had been enthralled with the views of the forest from the upstairs windows. When he'd taken her to the river bank, she'd been amazed at how low the water was,

and how many rocks helped make up the rapids.

Unless she was the greatest actor in the world, she loved nature almost as much as he did, and seeing her excitement did something to him. In that moment, he'd wanted to skip dinner and take her to his secret spot, but something still held him back.

Fear.

Beneath the surface, his bear growled the word, and he couldn't stop the wave of anger that swamped him. He wasn't afraid, he was smart. Something he hadn't been twenty-eight years ago when he'd taken his first mate, and he wasn't about to make the same mistake twice.

Except Carly didn't feel like a mistake, and his ex always had.

What did that mean?

He shook his head, and opened the lid of the grill to flip the steaks. Shit! He'd let his mind wander, and he'd already ruined one side of the meat. He told himself it didn't matter, that he didn't need—or want—to impress Carly, but he knew the words were lies. He definitely wanted to impress her, and he'd fucked it all up because he couldn't get out of his own head.

He heard the sliding door leading to the patio open, and when he looked up, he was once again struck by how beautiful his woman was. She'd put on her light blue coat, the one she'd been wearing when she'd picked up her car the day before, but her hair was down again, and he wanted to wrap the strands around his fist and pull as he fucked her from behind.

As if she'd read his mind, she traced her top lip with her tongue, and his dick swelled.

"Oh, it's freezing out here," she laughed, zipping up her coat. "The salads are ready, are the steaks almost done?"

"Almost. I let my mind wander and burned one side, but they'll still taste good."

"Of course they will," she said, as if stating the obvious. "Do you want me to get your coat?"

He was shocked that she wasn't worried about the steaks, but deep down, he knew he shouldn't be. Without even trying, she made it really hard not to like everything about her, and that was a problem when he was trying to convince himself that he didn't need her in his life.

"No, I'm good. I run really warm, remember?"

"I do remember." She practically purred the words, and once again, he wanted to forget the steaks, throw her over his shoulder, and take her to his secret spot.

What. The. Hell?

He let out a low growl, wanting to get some sort of control over the situation, but her next words made that task nearly impossible.

"Mmmm... I love all the sexy sounds you make, but I'm also freezing, so I'll wait for you inside."

"I'm coming right behind you."

"I sure hope so."

She threw the words over her shoulder as she walked back inside, and though they

were said innocent enough, the smile on her face proved she knew exactly what she was saying. His dick went rock hard, and he was still staring when she turned back to close the sliding glass door.

For some reason, in that moment, his control snapped. Both he and his bear knew what they wanted, and he was going to get it.

He quickly removed the steaks and potatoes from the grill, and then rushed inside. Carly had removed her coat, and was standing at the counter waiting for him. She hadn't set the table, but she'd gathered up the plates and silverware they would need, and everything was piled nicely next to the salads she'd made and two bottles of water.

He set the huge plate of steak and potatoes on the counter, and then leaned up against her, pressing his front against her back. He caged her in with his arms, and his hard and aching dick fit perfectly between the soft globes of her ass.

"I want you," he growled. "Right now."

"Yes." The word came out sounding like a plea, and he found he liked her begging way too much.

She pushed her ass back slightly, rubbing against him, and his dick started to throb. It had been a long time since he'd been with a woman, but the fact that she was his mate wasn't lost on him. If she kept rubbing against him, he might come in his pants, and that wasn't what he wanted for either of them.

"Hands on the counter, and don't move."

She immediately followed his orders, and her compliance made his dick swell even more.

He wrapped one hand around her waist, and the other went to the button on her jeans. He unfastened the tab easily, and the zipper easily came undone when he pulled on the fabric.

"Is this okay?" He whispered in her ear before gently catching the lobe between his teeth.

"It's more than okay. Touch me, Ryker."

He slid his hand down the front of her panties, and she spread her legs a little wider, anticipating his touch. When he pressed his fingers against her swollen clit, she cried out and pushed back against him. Her mound was bare, which he loved, and her soft lips were warm and wet.

He slid a finger into her opening, and when he found her soaking, he added another.

The walls of her pussy immediately started tightening around his fingers as he moved them in and out, and he could feel her honey coating his hand. Her breath was ragged, and tiny moans and mewls filled the air as she tried to force him to go deeper. The only thing stopping her from riding his hand was his arm around her waist, holding her against him.

"You're soaking wet, sweetheart," he growled, licking the juncture between her neck and shoulder. The urge to sink his canines into her perfect skin was strong, but he kissed her instead, and added a third finger into her hole. "Is this all for me?"

"Yes." She bit out the word as more honey drenched his fingers. "Ryker, please."

His cock was hard and heavy against her ass, and all he wanted to do was pull down her pants and bury his cock deep inside her pussy, but he wasn't going to do that in his kitchen. Not this time. He wanted to be face to face when he fucked her for the

first time.

He pushed his fingers deep at the same time he pressed his palm hard against her clit, and she exploded, screaming his name as her pussy clenched down on his fingers like a vice.

Fuck!

Everything about this moment—about his mate—was so damn sexy, and all he'd done was finger her. What would it be like to watch her come with his dick buried deep inside her? Even as he thought the words he already knew the answer.

It would be perfect.

When her breathing started to return to normal, he slowly pulled his fingers out of her cunt and brought them to his mouth. The scent of her honey was amazing, and he had to taste her. He sucked his fingers into his mouth, and immediately realized his mistake. She was pure ambrosia, and he would never get enough of her.

"Fuck! You taste amazing, sweetheart."

Amazing seemed inadequate, but his brain wasn't fully functioning.

She turned in his arms and smiled, and his bear growled beneath the surface. The animal wanted to claim their mate, and he didn't understand what the human side was waiting for. Seeing his woman smiling and sated from his touch made him feel ten-feet tall, and he was having a hard time remembering why he was holding back.

"Thank you," she said, her hands reaching for his belt. "Now it's your turn."

She started pulling on the leather, and his hands grabbed hold of her wrists.

"I won't last if you touch me," he growled. "I want you too much."

"So?" She laughed. "I definitely don't see the problem."

Fuck yeah!

He let go of her wrists, and watched dumbly as she unfastened his pants and pushed his boxers down to free his cock. She wrapped one hand around the base, and started stroking him with the other, and his brain nearly short-circuited. He'd never felt anything close to the way Carly's hands felt on his skin, and he couldn't wait to know what it felt like to sink his dick into her soft pussy.

As if reading his mind, she tightened her grip and stroked him hard and fast.

He placed one hand on the counter behind her to steady himself, and gathered up her long hair in the other, wrapping the locks around his fist. The move forced her to look away from his cock, and the look on her face pushed him over the edge.

He leaned his head back and roared as he exploded, his come shooting in spurts against his shirt and dripping over her hands.

Carly kept stroking him until there was nothing left, and when he could breathe normally again, he pulled her head back and kissed her. Hard. Unlike their other kisses, this one was a claiming, and his bear roared beneath the surface when she slid her hands up his chest and claimed him right back.

When they finally came up for air, he leaned his forehead against hers, and closed his eyes. He wanted to take her to the bedroom to finish what they started, but her stomach growled causing them to both laugh.

"You're amazing," he said, grabbing a towel off of the counter and handing it to her,

"but I'm feeding you now."

She wiped her hands on the towel while he pushed his still-hard dick back in his pants, and then she went to the sink to wash her hands.

"I'm going to change my shirt, and I'll be right back."

Just like the night before, the conversation between them flowed easily. He told her all about how his dad had given him the money for the down payment on his shop when he turned eighteen—just a few months before he found Luke and married his ex—and how he'd purchased the house he owned now when Luke had turned sixteen, because they needed way more space and he wanted all of his sons to have their own rooms.

By the time they finished talking and eating both dinner and dessert, it was late, and he was walking her out to her car, cursing the fact that he hadn't thought to pick her up so he could now drive her home.

"I still don't like it," he said, "but text me when you get there."

"It's the only plan that really makes sense," she said, placing a soothing hand on his chest, "and I will."

"And text me when you get back tomorrow night."

He knew he was probably out of line, but she didn't seem to mind.

"I will," she smiled, "and I'll see you, Friday."

He wouldn't see her tomorrow because she was going to dinner and a movie with some people from work, and even though he knew they both had their own lives, he

was feeling grumpy about not getting to see her every day.

"Goodnight, Ryker."

She kissed him then, just a chaste brush of her lips against his, and then she slid into her car and started up the engine.

"Goodnight."

He stood in the street until he could no longer see her taillights, and then reality seemed to punch him in the gut.

He wanted Carly, but he didn't want or need a mate.

What the hell was he supposed to do now?

CHAPTER 5

Carly parked her car in the lot next the park, and couldn't help but smile when she exited the vehicle. Despite the cold weather, lots of townspeople always gathered in the park for the Winter Concert Series, and the available parking spots were filling up fast.

She hoped Ryker was able to find a space, but then quickly dismissed the thought. If he arrived too late and had to walk a few extra blocks to meet up with her, then that was on him. Of course, after the way he'd acted when she'd left his house two nights ago, she'd expected that he'd want to ride together, and the fact that he was meeting her here bothered her.

Only a little bit...

Okay, a lot.

She didn't want it to bother her, but it did. And she knew she was being silly. And probably reading more into it than she should, but she couldn't help it. She liked Ryker, and he seemed to like her, too. After what they shared two nights ago, she'd thought he'd be more eager to see her again, and she could admit that she was disappointed that he wasn't.

He might be... maybe he has a good reason for meeting you here instead of arriving together.

She knew the words were true, but even if they weren't, it shouldn't matter. They'd

only known each other a few days, and though she felt a pull toward him that she'd never felt before, she'd never fallen so fast for a man. Maybe she was just lonely. He was a sexy man, there was no denying that, and a few days ago she'd been content being single.

Still, Ryker hadn't cancelled their date—at least not yet—so she was going to do her best to focus on having fun, and try not to read too much into this one little thing.

She walked across the parking lot to the tree they'd marked as their designated meeting spot, and inwardly groaned when she saw Jessica, one of the women from work that she didn't like, standing a few feet away. She forced a smile when Jessica caught her eye, and then silently cursed when the other woman started to approach her.

"What are you doing?" Jessica sneered. "Waiting for your man?"

She'd never called Ryker her man, and had only mentioned her date with him to two other people from work. Either one of them had talked, or, more likely, the woman had been eavesdropping on their conversation.

"I'm waiting for my date, yes. What are you doing?"

She didn't really care about the other woman, but she definitely didn't want to talk about Ryker—or anything else—with her. Jessica was a gossip, but she was also mean and liked to stir up trouble when there was none. Carly found it odd that the woman was a teacher, but she had to admit that the children always seemed happy when she entered Jessica's classroom every week.

"Just seeing what there is to see."

Which meant she was looking for gossip.

"Oh, look. There's your man."

Carly barely held in the urge to roll her eyes as she followed the woman's gaze, but as soon as she found Ryker striding toward them, only one thought filled her mind.

Mine!

He wasn't her man—at least not yet, and maybe never—but she wanted him to be. She also wanted her coworker to leave so that she could have him all to herself. Of course, there was no way to make that happen, so she did the next best thing.

"I've got to go," Carly said. "Have fun tonight."

She walked away before the other woman had a chance to respond, and hurried to meet Ryker halfway. She knew Jessica was watching them with rapt attention, but at least she was far away and wouldn't be present to hear their words.

"Hey," he said, as she walked right up to him. "Why didn't you wait for me?"

"I missed you," she shrugged.

She didn't want to tell him about the nosey coworker, so she left that part out.

"Hmmm... I missed you, too."

He leaned down and brushed his lips against hers, and though the kiss was chaste, heat raced to every nerve-ending. She'd dressed in enough layers to keep warm while they enjoyed the concert, but it was nice to know if a gust of wind came around, all she would have to do was kiss him to warm up.

The thought made her smile, and she realized how much she'd overreacted to him not

wanting to arrive together. After she'd left his house on Wednesday night, she'd texted him when she got home, and then texted again the next night after going out with her friends. Both of those times he had replied back quickly and they'd even chatted a bit. It was only his message from today stating that they should meet at the park instead of arriving together, which had put her on edge.

The kiss hello had definitely pushed some of her doubts away, but the feeling didn't last long.

As they started walking toward the stage, she reached for his hand and he abruptly pulled it away. Considering he'd just kissed her hello a few minutes ago, the action shocked her, and she glanced up in time to see the regret on his face.

"I'm sorry," he said. "It was just a natural reaction. It's not you."

She understood that, especially since he'd claimed that he never dated, but she also noticed that he didn't try to fix the situation by reaching for her, and those feelings from earlier came rushing back to the surface. She was disappointed and embarrassed, and it didn't help that she knew her nosey coworker was watching their every move.

This was why she didn't date. She didn't have time for games, and she hated feeling like an idiot in public. She wanted him to leave, but she wasn't going to make a scene, so she just shrugged and forced a smile.

"Don't worry about it," she said. "I think the band is about to start. Did you want to get some hot cocoa?"

The heat she'd felt from his kiss was long gone, but she knew the chill she was feeling had nothing to do with the weather. Still, holding the cocoa would give her something to do with her hands, and she planned on keeping her cup filled until she

decided to leave. Because it was definitely going to be an early night.

"Carly, I..."

When he didn't elaborate, she got the feeling that the kiss he'd greeted her with really hadn't meant anything at all, and that maybe he wanted to leave. If that was the case, then she wanted him to go and stop wasting her time.

"Did you want to go? I do this every week, so I'm perfectly fine with hanging out here by myself."

"What? No!" He growled the words, and she hated the way her body reacted. "I want to be with you, I'm just sorry about what happened. I don't want to hurt you."

He already had, but she wasn't about to tell him that. Not when they had only known each other a few days and he didn't owe her anything. She wanted to tell him that he hadn't hurt her, but she wasn't going to lie.

"It's way too soon for hand-holding. I get that. If you're staying, then we should start heading over to the stage. I like to hear the band introduce themselves before the set, and I want to get some hot cocoa. You're wearing a coat today, does that mean you're actually cold?"

She knew she was rambling, but she was willing to say almost anything to get out of this hell. Ryker was just staring at her, as if trying to find the words to some big speech, and she was about to say goodbye when he opened his mouth to speak.

"I'm staying," he said. "Let's go."

"Great."

She shoved her hands in her pockets, and fell in step beside him. When they entered the park, she led them to the hot cocoa booth, and made sure to have her money out before Ryker could even think about paying for her drink. She was still hurt, and right now, she didn't want anything from him.

A few minutes later, Carly stood next to Ryker and sipped her hot cocoa as she looked around the park. The large grassy area was next to a very shallow part of the rapids where the river swelled out to create a nice sized pool of water that didn't have any rocks. Behind the pool was a mountain that had another body of water flowing in from the National Park, and the water poured down to create a waterfall that acted as the backdrop for the pool.

During the concert nights, they set up the stage with the waterfall in the background, and the band and all of their equipment stopped a lot of the cold blasts that came from the river.

Still, the evening was chilly, and she was glad she now had both hands wrapped around the steaming cup of cocoa.

"This is nice," Ryker said. "I haven't been to this park in a while."

"I love it here," she said, thankful for his attempt at some sort of conversation. The quiet between them would have been fine if they hadn't suffered that awkward moment in the parking lot, but she was having a hard time moving past his rejection. "Although, it's pretty crowded in the summer, and I prefer the walking path over this area. I visit it almost every day."

The same river that bordered his backyard cut through the entire town, and the little bit of land on the opposite riverbank connected to the National Park. She wasn't exactly sure how much land on the other side of the river was actually part of Hickory Bear Rapids, but it didn't really matter because the National Park was free for

everyone to enjoy, and there was even a bridge connecting the two sides on the walking path.

"Have you ever seen any grizzlies?"

"I've seen a few, and have even gotten some really good pictures, but I mostly stay on this side of the bridge. Usually, they just stare at me for a little while and then go on about their business."

"You're not afraid of them?"

"No," she shook her head. "I mean, they're wild animals, and it's their land. I'm not going to approach them or anything, and I try my best to keep my distance and not look like a threat."

"Smart plan."

Duh!

Of course, it was smart. She rolled her eyes at his ridiculous choice of words, and wanted to die when she saw a familiar face walking toward them. The sheriff was dressed in his uniform that included a thick black jacket that had a law enforcement patch on the front, and a pair of matching gloves.

"I saw that," Luke laughed as he came to stand next to them. She didn't know his sons well enough to know what kind of scene Luke would make, and she wished this night would just end already. "Is my dad being dumb?"

"What?" Ryker said. "Why would you ask that?"

"Um, because sometimes you are dumb," Luke laughed, "and I just saw Carly roll her

eyes at something you said."

"Traitor." She grumbled the word, pretending to glare at Luke, but his smile was infectious, and she burst out laughing. "He just told me I was smart to stay away from bears, so yes, he is being dumb."

She and Luke both started laughing, and Ryker's lips turned up in a smile. She could tell that he had no problem teasing and bantering with his boys, and Luke's approach had actually broken through some of the awkwardness between them.

Luke took off when the band walked on stage, and though she liked to support the arts, she lasted through only two songs before her ears couldn't take anymore.

"This is bad," she said to Ryker, careful to keep her voice low.

"Very bad," he nodded, his voice equally low. "Want to take a walk?"

"Sure."

She didn't really want to walk with him, but if he was looking for a way to end things, then she liked that he wanted to do it face-to-face. Not that there was really anything to end, but she would rather him be honest to her face, rather than just send a text, or worse, completely ghost on her.

Ryker gripped the skinny handles of the paper bag he held, and tried to get his thoughts in order. He knew he messed up earlier, and he wanted to tell Carly everything, but that conversation would have to wait until they had more privacy. Mainly because he wanted to show her his animal, and even though he could scent that there was no one around, he wouldn't shift on this side of the rapids.

A gust of wind blew around them, and he inwardly cursed when Carly shivered and

tried to bury her hands deeper into her pockets. He'd decided to walk along the river because of how her eyes had lit up when she'd talked about the walking path—and because of his need for privacy—but he should have just walked them down Main Street until they reached the street that would take them down to the exact spot where he wanted to go on the river.

There were a few benches along the path, but the area that held the bridge also housed a few trees and a couple of cropping of rocks that were the perfect height for sitting. The area had been landscaped for decoration more than anything, but lots of people used it as an unofficial picnic area, especially in the summer when the trees helped block most of the sun.

He was counting on those trees to work the same way against the wind coming off the river, and when Carly shivered again, he was happy they only had a few more feet before they reached their destination.

He wanted to put his arm around her and tuck her against his side, but after refusing to hold her hand earlier, he knew the action would be unwanted, and he only had himself to blame.

Fuck!

The look on Carly's face after he pulled his hand away was one he never wanted to see again. He honestly hadn't meant to hurt her, but deep down, some part of him still wanted to reject what was staring him right in the face. It was the reason he'd insisted on meeting her at the concert instead of picking her up, even when it went against every one of his instincts.

Unlike his ex, Carly was his true mate, and punishing her—and himself—because of what the other woman had done was beyond stupid. He'd been holding onto the pain of that mistake for over twenty years, and it was time to let the past go. He knew it last

summer when the ache in his chest forced him to think about selling the food truck, and he knew it a few days ago when Carly walked into his shop and instantly made the ache go away.

If he didn't get his shit together and fix what he'd done, then Carly wouldn't stick around, and he would have no one to blame but himself. Their initial bond was strong, but it could be easily broken if she found someone new, and there was no doubt in his mind that she would find someone.

He shot her a sideways glance, just to look at her again, but he didn't need another visual to know how beautiful she was.

When he'd arrived at the concert, he'd immediately sought her out, and the image of her standing under the tree in her light blue coat called to both the man and the bear in a way that soothed his soul, but the certainty that she was his scared him half to death and stopped him in his tracks.

For a moment he'd just stared, and though he could tell that she was irritated with the woman next to her, he doubted anyone else would pick up on the subtle difference in her demeanor. Though he didn't like the idea of her talking to someone that she didn't like, he knew it was sometimes necessary, and pride filled him at the way she faced the other woman with her head held high.

Minutes later, she'd impressed him again when he'd pulled his hand away. Not because she hadn't made a scene, though that was something he was grateful for, but because even though she'd been hurt and embarrassed, she'd been able to keep a level head. Hell, she'd even offered him a way out, which would have only hurt her more.

He'd seen the way the woman by the tree had been watching them closely, and after a second look, he recognized her from his shop. The woman was a notorious gossip, and after several failed attempts to capture his interest, she'd started taking her car

someplace else for repairs. He was glad that she'd finally given up on him, but the woman talked a lot, and those willing to listen would know how he'd abruptly pulled away from his mate.

When they reached the rocks, he was happy to note that the trees did block some of the wind. Unfortunately, he hadn't taken into account how cold the rocks would be, so he took off his jacket and spread it across the surface before motioning her to sit.

"Ryker, no," she shook her head. "I don't want you to be without your coat."

"You need it more than I do. I run warm, remember?"

When she opened her mouth to protest, he continued.

"Besides, we're going to share it."

She eyed him skeptically, but reluctantly agreed and sat down as close to the edge of the garment as she could get. He wanted to laugh at the way she tried to make herself small, but he didn't dare. Instead, he sat down on the other half of the coat, leaving about an inch of fabric sticking out, and he wanted to laugh when she leaned over to make sure he was completely on the garment.

Once satisfied, she scooted about an inch closer to him, and he wanted to pump his fist in the air at the small victory. They still weren't touching, but she wasn't keeping the maximum distance between them, so he took it as a win and reached into the paper bag he'd set on the ground between his legs.

Before leaving the park, he'd stopped at one of the food stands and bought a few meat and cheese hand pies and a couple of bottles of water. Unlike what happened at the cocoa stand, Carly had seemed fine with letting him pay for the food, but just in case, he didn't let her get anywhere near the payment window.

What she'd pulled at the cocoa stand had been annoying, but he'd understood her reasons, and the small gesture had been another push for him to get his shit together. It was his job—his privilege—to take care of his mate, but if he didn't step up, then she would take care of herself.

He handed her one of the pies, followed by a napkin, and they ate in silence for a few minutes. When she was done, he handed her one of the bottles of water, and then downed half of his own bottle in one gulp.

"Thank you for thinking to get those," she said. "I didn't even realize I was hungry."

His bear roared beneath the surface as pride filled his human side.

Feeding her was a small thing, but each time he'd done it she'd been grateful—even when he'd messed up and burned the steaks. Her gratitude was a gift, and though his ex had often said the words in the beginning, something had always been lacking. Sadly, it had taken him way too long to figure out what that something was.

He didn't want to compare Carly to his ex because there really wasn't anything to compare, but the differences between the two women were like night and day, and he was blown away by how perfect she was for him.

"Do you want another one?"

"No, I'm good. Thanks."

If she was done eating then so was he, and that meant that it was time for him to start talking.

"I'm sorry about pulling my hand away earlier. I?—"

"You already apologized," she said, keeping her eyes forward. "It's fine."

He hated that she wouldn't look at him, but he understood why she didn't.

"It's not fine. It was a stupid, and I promise I'll never do anything like that again."

"Ryker..."

She sighed, and he knew he wasn't going to like her next words, so he pushed forward before she had a chance to say anything.

"I want you to come to dinner with me and the boys on Sunday. Hattie will be there, too, and she's dying to meet you."

This time she did look at him, and the shock on her face told him she knew exactly what a big deal his invitation was. Sunday dinner at his house was family night, and he'd never invited a woman—or anyone else—to the weekly event.

She shook her head and gave him a small smile that didn't meet her eyes. He hated that smile, and he knew what her answer would be before she even spoke the words.

"I don't think that's a very good idea."

"I do." He linked his fingers with hers, grateful that she didn't pull away. "I know I messed up, but I'm not letting you go. At least... I don't want to. I know it's too soon, but I want us to beexclusive—I want you to be my girlfriend—and see where this goes. That means you'll be part of my life in all ways, and I want you to know my boys and Hattie."

"You want me to be yourgirlfriend?"

Her voice was serious, but he could see the sparkle in her eyes.

"That's a dumb word, isn't it?"

God, he felt like such an old man calling her his girlfriend. Not because of their age difference, but because he was forty-six years old and using the word girlfriend sounded ridiculous. But that's what she would be until they got married.

Or mated.

His bear didn't understand that humans didn't use the word mated, so Carly would still technically be his girlfriend, but he didn't correct the animal. He still wasn't sure he ever wanted to be mated again, but he did want Carly in his life, and he wanted to show her all of himself, including his bear.

A small part of him worried that Carly's reaction would mimic his ex's, but if she agreed to date him, he wasn't going to keep a piece of himself hidden.

"It's not a dumb word," she laughed, "but I think I know what you mean."

She raised their entwined hands, and looked at him again.

"So, if you're my boyfriend, then we'll hold hands in public?"

"Always."

She turned to look back at the water, and even though it was less than a minute, it seemed like an eternity before she spoke again.

"I like you, Ryker. And I feel drawn to you—like we just fit—but I don't like playing games. I don't want to date someone who doesn't want to hold my hand in public, or

doesn't want to arrive places together. I know that last one seems silly because we just met, but after dinner at your house on Tuesday, and then texting the last couple of days, I expected more. I don't expect a proposal or anything—I know we're not ready for that type of commitment—but I'm also not willing to settle for less than I deserve."

Damn!

He loved the fact that she was strong and fierce, and his dick started to swell at the same time a hard gust of wind blew through the trees. Carly shivered, and he stood, pulling her up with him.

"What are you doing?" The words came out as a whisper, and he inwardly cursed at the disappointment she failed to hide.

"Getting you warm."

He picked up his coat, wrapped it around her shoulders, and then sat back down on the rock and pulled her down onto his lap. She was sitting across his legs sideways, so that both legs were hanging on the same side, and he slipped his hands under his coat and wrapped them around her waist.

"Better?"

"Mmmm... yes," she said, pulling the lapels of his coat tighter around her. "I do love how warm you are."

The look of contentment on her face made his dick swell even more, and he wanted to kiss her then, but he knew he couldn't. Not yet. Not until she agreed to be his.

"For the record, I feel that pull toward you, too, and I don't want to lose you. You

deserve everything, and I'm going to do my best to be the man that you need. I can't say I'll never make a mistake again, but if I fuck up, then I expect you to tell me so I can try to make it right."

"Okay," she nodded.

"Okay?"

He needed to hear her say the words.

"Okay, I'll come over for dinner on Sunday."

A huge smile lit up her face, and he knew she was teasing him. He tightened his hold, and pulled her closer. When she felt his thick cock between them, her eyes flared and her tongue swept across her top lip as she looked at his mouth. She wiggled a little closer, and that urge to throw her over his shoulder came back full force.

He wouldn't do that now, not when they had to walk through the crowd at the concert to get to their cars, but he was doing that soon. Maybe Sunday, because unfortunately he wouldn't get to see her tomorrow.

"And?" He couldn't keep the growl out of his voice.

"And... I will be your girlfriend."

His bear growled beneath the surface, and he leaned forward to kiss her, loving the fact that she met him half way. Their lips touched tenderly at first, just a soft meeting of their mouths, but when she let go of his jacket to fist his sweater in her hands, he was lost.

He slid his tongue between her lips, eager to taste her everywhere, and she kissed him

back with the same urgency. They were only kissing, but everything about the moment felt right—perfect—and he didn't pull away until he sensed that someone else was walking down the path.

He hated to stop, but he didn't want to share this moment—or his mate—with anyone, and he knew Carly wouldn't want that either. He wanted her to keep his coat around her shoulders, but after insisting that he take it back, she snuggled up against his side, and they walked back to the parking lot with his arm firmly around her shoulders.

CHAPTER 6

"So, Carly," Rhys started, "what made you decide to become a teacher."

"Oh, here we go." Hattie rolled her eyes, and shoved another forkful of food in her mouth.

"And why art?" Noah added, unfazed by his cousin.

Carly looked around the table and smiled at Ryker's family. She'd been right about Luke being close to her age—he was only two years older—and at twenty-eight, the twins were only six years younger. Hattie was the youngest of the group at twenty-six, and even though she was their cousin, they all treated her more like a little sister. Not that she couldn't hold her own. The woman fit in with this group of guys easily, and wasn't afraid to call them out on their bullshit.

She couldn't think of any of them as kids, but their questions were similar to the ones she received from her students, and she'd been dealing with curious kids for more than a decade. Of course, she wanted to make a good impression, but the only thing she could do was be herself and hope for the best.

"Well, I really love art," she smiled, "but the idea of being a starving artist didn't have any appeal, so I decided to teach. I've done painting parties and other things like that, but I wanted a steady income that would also allow me to have free time to work on my own art, so I decided to become an art teacher. Sadly, art is being phased out of a lot of schools, so it might not be a forever type of thing, but until that happens, I'll keep doing it. I think it's important to share art with the world."

"Is that why you moved to Hickory Bear Rapids? Was your last job phased out?"

This time it was Luke asking the question. Unlike the twins, Luke was much more reserved, and she didn't miss the way he seemed to watch everything while still being an active part of the group. He also had a calming presence about him, and she understood why he made a good sheriff.

"Yeah," she nodded. "That and I was tired of living in the city. It's crowded and expensive, and I really like being around nature. I love walking along the rapids every day, and you just can't do something like that in the city. Not every day. So, when they phased out my job, I looked around for something better, and was lucky enough to find it here."

"And you found dad, too."

Noah's voice was serious when he said the words, but it only took a couple of seconds for everyone to burst out laughing, including herself. Ryker gently squeezed her thigh, and though he was laughing too, she took the gesture as some sort of affirmation his son's words.

The conversation flowed easily for the rest of the evening, and as she got to know his family, her attraction to Ryker grew. He'd raised his sons all on his own, and had had a huge influence on Hattie's life, and all four of them were pretty great.

After they cleaned up the mess from dinner, she brought out the box of cookies she'd picked up from the bakery, and everyone started teasing Luke when he only put one on his plate. Going by the amount of food she'd seen Ryker eat, she'd gone with two dozen cookies thinking his boys would have the same enormous appetites. As she glanced inside the nearly empty box, she knew she'd made the right decision.

"You don't like chocolate chip cookies?" She asked.

"No," Rhys laughed. "He likes them too much."

The guys all had their mouths full, so Hattie explained.

"Luke is in love with the bakery owner, so he visits the place every day. And practically keeps her in business with all the cookies he buys," Hattie laughed.

"I do not keep her in business," Luke practically growled the words. "She does that all on her own. I just visit to show my support."

"And to hope that one day she'll go out with you," Noah chimed in.

"Why won't she won't go out with you?" Carly asked.

"She's being..."

"Smart!" Noah and Rhys nearly shouted the word.

"Cautious," Hattie added.

"Thank you," Luke nodded at his cousin. "She's being cautious, and that's fine with me. I will wait forever for her."

"She'll come around son." Ryker said matter-of-factly, and all of the others nodded. She loved that they could all be joking one minute, and know when to stop in the next.

Carly smiled at Luke and started on her own cookie when someone changed the subject.

Hattie was the one to leave first, followed by the twins, and then Luke started saying

his goodbyes.

"Hold on, son," Ryker stopped him. "Carly, have you received any more of those texts?"

"Texts?" Luke asked, quickly turning professional.

"Ah, a couple," she said, looking between the two men. "The last one was Friday, though, so I'm hoping he might have finally given up."

"She's been receiving daily texts—sometimes more often—possibly from an ex, for about a week."

"I'm not sure it's him," Carly added, "but the texts started coming the same day a friend told me she gave him my number. I haven't seen him in two years, and deleted his contact info out of my phone right after we split, so I have no idea if any of the numbers actually belong to him. So far, all the numbers have been different, so I just keep deleting and blocking."

After explaining what types of messages were coming in, Luke agreed with Ryker.

"Right now, this just seems annoying, and maybe that's all it is, but it does seem weird. Sometimes things that seem like nothing are actually something, so if you get another text, even one that seems harmless, don't delete it and bring your phone down to the station. Whoever is doing this is probably trashing the phones after each text, but we can try to trace it and see if we find anything."

"Okay," she nodded. "Thank you, Luke."

"It's no problem," he smiled. "I'm going to head out, but you kids have fun tonight."

They all laughed at his joke, and Ryker walked him to the door while she hung back to let the guys talk. Aside from the box that now only held two cookies and some crumbs, the kitchen and dining area were spotless, and she was once again impressed by Ryker's family. After the main meal had ended, everyone had done their part to put away all of the leftover food, load the dishwasher, and clean the table.

They were like a well-oiled machine, and though it didn't seem like anyone was assigned one specific job, they all joined in and did what needed to be done. She'd done her part, too, of course, but that had mainly involved taking her plate to the sink and handing it off to Noah.

Watching everyone move gracefully and efficiently around the kitchen made her smile because it was one of the things that she taught in her classes at the beginning of every school year. Because she spent her days moving from classroom to classroom, she only had a limited amount of time to actually teach a lesson, and training the kids on efficient clean up gave them more instruction time when they moved on to bigger projects.

"What's that look?" Ryker smiled as he moved back into the kitchen.

"Just thinking about your family and how well every one works so together. I really like them, and I had fun tonight. Thank you for inviting me."

"They really like you, too, and I'm glad you came," he said, wrapping his arms around her. "I missed you yesterday."

They hadn't been able to see each other the day before because he'd had to go out of town to renew one of his certifications, and after their declaration to be exclusive on Friday night, not seeing him had been weird. They'd texted though, and she hoped he didn't want her to leave yet, because she really wanted to spend some time with him alone.

"I missed you, too. They told you they like me?"

"They didn't have to. I can just tell. Can you stay a little longer? I want to show you something."

She hoped whatever he wanted to show her involved him being naked, because she could feel his thick cock pressing against her belly, and she really wanted to know what it felt like to be filled by him.

"I can stay."

He brushed his lips against hers, and then he let her go and moved to the coffee maker.

"Good. Go get on your coat and gloves. We're going to take a little walk."

Ryker handed Carly the thermos he carried, and slowly lowered the draw bridge that would connect his land to the National Park on the other side of the river.

"This is amazing," Carly said. "You can't even see the bridge unless you're really looking for it."

Yeah, he'd built it that way on purpose. Because even though no one ever visited this part of the National Park, he wasn't dumb enough to ever let his guard down. He'd already sniffed the area before showing Carly the bridge, and even though there was no one around, he would still sniff his special spot before allowing her to enter.

Once the bridge was lowered, he took the thermos back and grabbed her hand.

"I'll go first," he said. "It's safe, but make sure to hold onto the rail as you cross."

"Okay," she nodded, her excitement palpable.

Ryker crossed the river and then waited on the other side for his mate. The way her face lit up as she crossed over the rocks made him feel amazing, and beneath the surface, his bear even sat up taller. There was no doubt in his mind that she was made for him, and some of the tension he felt at showing her his bear dissipated.

Carly was nothing like his ex, but that didn't mean he could predict how she would act at seeing his bear, and a small part of him still wondered if she would reject him. He didn't think so—not when she seemed to fit him so perfectly—but the possibility was there. It was one of the reasons he didn't want to wait to show her this part of himself, even though he wasn't ready to complete the mating bond.

When Carly met him on the other side, she bounced on the balls of her feet.

"That was incredible," she practically squealed. "Thank you for sharing that with me."

"There's more."

"More?"

He laughed as he secured the chain that held the "No Trespassing" sign so that it blocked the entrance to the bridge.

"Yeah, a lot more. Come on."

He grabbed her hand and led her down the small path that led to the entrance of his cave. Of course, it wasn't really his, but he'd claimed it as his own years ago, and no other man or beast had ever entered the space. When they reached the entrance, he subtly sniffed the air again, and then pulled Carly through the nearly hidden opening.

"Oh my god, this is beautiful."

The space was the size of a small bedroom, both in square feet and in height. One wall housed a small waterfall that came in from another water source, but the real treasure was the light pool on the opposite wall. The pool was oval shaped, and only about four-feet wide, but the rock inside sparkled and glittered like diamonds. The water covering the rocks caused all of that light to reflect on the walls and ceiling of the cave, making it look like he'd lit a lamp.

Unlike the brisk air outside, the space was warm, and Carly had already removed her gloves and was starting to unzip her jacket.

"How is this possible," she asked, walking over to the pool. "How is it so warm in here with all of this water? How is that rock lighting up this room like that? Can I touch it? Is it safe?"

"It's one of the miracles of nature," he shrugged, "and it's completely safe."

She dipped her hand in the water, and ran her fingers over a stone.

"I can't believe how warm that is."

"There's a place to hang your coat. If you want to take it off."

He walked over to the wall, and showed her the knobs that looked like they were carved from the stone.

"Did you carve these?" She asked, trailing her fingers over the rock.

"No," he shook his head. "They are just another wonder of nature."

"Wow."

She hung her jacket on the knob, and looked around the space again while he walked over to the tiny alcove where he'd stashed the oversized sleeping bag, blanket, and pillows. There was also a bag that held two disposable cups with lids, some bottles of water, and a couple of energy bars.

"Now, I did stash this stuff here," he said, showing her all of the provisions.

"Oh, good," she laughed, helping him spread out the sleeping bag. "I was hoping we were going to hang out here for a little while."

As soon as the sleeping bag was ready, she sat down and started taking off her shoes. They hadn't actually talked about sex yet, but he knew from the sparkle in her eye that she at least wanted to play, and he wanted that, too. So much. But she was important to him, and he wasn't going to sleep with her without telling her about his animal.

"Wait!"

He hadn't meant to shout the word, but he never wanted her to feel trapped, or frightened, with him. If she freaked out about his bear and decided to run, she would either fumble to get her shoes on, or run without them and get hurt. Both thoughts caused his chest to ache, but he pushed the feeling aside. He wasn't going to let fear stop him from telling her the truth.

The worried look on her face was so different from the teasing one she'd held a minute before that he wanted to forget this plan and join her on the sleeping bag, but he knew he couldn't. Not yet.

"Sorry," he said. "I didn't mean to yell, but before we go any further, I have to tell

you something. If you decide to leave, it will be better if your shoes are already on."

"Okay."

She dragged out the "O" while looking at him skeptically, and he knew he was totally fucking this up. Aside from his ex, who had found out about his bear by accident, he'd never actually told anyone about his animal. He was only telling Carly because she was his mate, and even though he didn't want to complete the bond, he did plan on keeping her in his life.

"Fuck," he swore, and glanced at the ceiling before taking a deep breath and meeting her eyes again. "I know this is weird, and I'm fucking it all up, but I've never actually shared this part of myself with anyone before. At least... not on purpose."

"Just spit it out, Ryker. That's the best way."

"You're right," he nodded. "No matter what happens, just know that I will never hurt you, okay?"

"Okay."

He could sense a small amount of fear radiating off of her, but she wasn't running yet, so he pushed on.

"I'm a bear shifter. I can change, or shift, into a grizzly bear."

She stared at him a full minute before speaking.

"You can change... Into a bear?"

She cocked her head to the side, as if trying to figure out whether or not he was

telling the truth, and though the small amount of fear was still there, it wasn't as strong.

"Yes. I'm still me, but I just change forms. Do you want me to show you?"

"You'll know it's me sitting here? You won't think I'm food?"

"Well, I'm dying to taste you again," he smiled, "but that has nothing to do with me being able to change forms. It will still be me; I'll just look different on the outside."

"Okay," she nodded. "How does it work?"

"The change is instant, so I keep my clothes on and sort of... call my bear. One second it will be me standing here, and the next it will be my animal form. You can talk to me, and I can understand you, but I can only respond back in grunts or growls."

"Hmmm." She laughed, and he could smell a small trace of arousal filling the air. He knew she liked the sounds he made, and he hoped that worked to his advantage in some way. She stood up, and disappointment flooded him. She was going to leave, and he had no idea how to stop her.

Fuck!

"Okay," she said, standing close to the knob that held her coat. The entrance to the cave was only a few feet away, and he liked that she was prepared to run if needed. Not that she could actually outrun a bear, but he wouldn't chase her if she left. "I do want to see him."

He shifted forms, and then sat down on his hind legs and watched her.

"Fuck," she swore. "You were telling the truth. I mean, I wanted to believe you, but... Ryker, this is amazing."

She took a tentative step toward him, and then paused.

"You do know it's me, right?"

He grunted and rolled his eyes, causing her to laugh as she took another step closer.

"Can I touch you?"

He nodded and she crossed the room slowly, keeping her eyes on him the whole time.

"You know the pamphlets say not to make eye contact with a grizzly, or they will take it as a challenge. Is this why you were asking me about the grizzlies? Have you seen me out walking before? No, I don't think you have, because you are darker than the other bears I've seen. Wait? Are Luke and the twins bears, too? What about Hattie? Are there other shifters living around here?"

She was babbling again, something he knew she only did when she was nervous, which wasn't often. He had to give her credit, though, because she was handling this like the fierce woman he knew she was.

When she finally reached his side, she only hesitated a minute before dragging her hand against his fur.

"Oh," she said, petting him again. "You're soft."

She dug her fingers into his fur, and suddenly, he was anything but soft. The feel of her tiny hands threading through his fur was fucking amazing, and he wanted to shift back and bury his very human dick in her cunt.

"I thought your fur would be coarse," she said, letting her hands roam, "but you're so soft. And look at those paws. My hand looks so tiny next to this thing."

She traced his claws with one of her fingers, and then she looked him in the eye.

"You have the same eyes," she said, placing one hand on his cheek. "I bet no one ever gets close enough to see that, but it's definitely you in there."

He turned his head, and gently licked her palm. Her eyes flashed, and a new wave of arousal filled the air, pushing away any trace of fear.

"Ryker," she said, her voice barely above a whisper. "Shift back."

CHAPTER 7

Carly watched as Ryker shifted back, and up close, the process was even more amazing. One minute he was an animal, and the next he was a man. Her man. She had so many questions, but right now, she only wanted one thing.

"Please tell me you have condoms in that bag," she said, wrapping her arms around his neck.

She was on the pill, and hadn't been with anyone in almost two years, but they hadn't talked that much about his past. She knew he never dated anyone in town, and that he'd only had one-night stands over the years, but they hadn't gone into the details about any of that yet.

"I do," he nodded. "I haven't been with anyone in over a year, but I always use condoms and then get tested after. You're safe with me, sweetheart."

"It's been almost two years for me, and I've been tested as well. I'm also on the pill."

He growled and then slid his hands under her ass, picked her up, and carried her to the sleeping bag. She wrapped her legs around his waist, and was surprised at how carefully he laid her down on the soft bedding. Instead of kissing her like she hoped, he started untying her shoes and then moved to the button on her jeans.

When he started pulling the fabric off, she glanced the entrance of the cave and a sliver of fear washed over her. She'd never had sex outdoors before, and they were in a cave. What if someone—or a real bear—decided to come inside?

"This cave is too high up on the mountain for any of the tourists to reach, and the bears stay away because they know it's mine. Plus, I have a really good sense of smell, and can tell if anyone is nearby, or has been inside. No one has ever entered this space except for me and you."

"Not even the boys? Or Hattie?"

"No. Our animals are territorial, and they've always known this space is off limits."

"Thank you for sharing it with me," she said, sitting up and removing her top. She was wearing a dark, navy blue lace bra and if he ever got her pants off, he would see the matching panties that barely covered her ass. She laid back down on the sleeping bag, and snuggled into the soft fabric.

"Mmmm... This thing is so soft and comfy. It doesn't even feel like we're on the ground."

Ryker growled again, and she looked up to find him staring at her. She'd always embraced her curves, but the fact that she was half undressed and he still hadn't removed her pants made her wonder if he didn't like the view. So far, they'd only kissed and touched with their clothes on, and maybe he hadn't realized how many curves she actually had.

"What is it?" she asked. Her head was resting on one of the fluffy pillows, so she could see him perfectly without moving, but she glanced at her top, happy that it was still within her reach. If Ryker changed his mind about her, she could grab the garment and cover up easily.

"You are so beautiful," he growled.

"Thank you," she smiled. She was glad that he liked the view, but she didn't want him

staring at her, she wanted him fucking her, and he was taking way too long to get her pants off. "I'm also very wet."

She watched him inhale, and then he started tugging on her jeans. Once her body was free from the fabric, he leaned down and placed a kiss on her mound. She spread her legs, showing him her damp panties, and he inhaled again.

"Fuck, you smell good."

Without another word, he grabbed the strips of fabric covering her hips and ripped the lace off of her body. Holy hell! She'd never had a man literally rip her panties off, and she liked it. A lot. Her pussy started convulsing, and liquid heat seemed to gush out of her core as she spread her legs wider.

"So pretty," he said, dragging one calloused finger around her plump lips. "And so wet."

He slid his finger into her core, and her hips shot up off the ground.

"No," he shook his head, and draped a meaty arm over her hips. "You have to stay still."

He was strong, and she liked the idea that he could pick her up—or hold her in place—more than she should, but right now she needed to come, and she wasn't above begging.

"Ryker, please..."

He growled again and added a second finger to her hole. She felt full, but it wasn't enough, and she grabbed her lace covered breasts and started rubbing the hard nipples through the fabric.

"That's it sweetheart," he said, moving his fingers faster. "Squeeze those pretty nipples."

She was so close, but she still needed more.

She was about to tell him, but then he sucked her clit into his mouth and she was lost.

The orgasm raced through her body at lightning speed, and she screamed his name as he continued to lick her clit. The way he feasted on her was too much, and the way his beard scraped against her inner thighs only added to the sensations racking her body. When she thought there was no way she could take anymore, she grabbed his head to push him away, and pulled off his beanie instead.

The long strands of his hair tickled her skin, and when she treaded her fingers through the locks and tried to bury him further into her cunt, he added a third finger to her pussy and sucked on her clit again. She screamed again as another, stronger, more intense orgasm raced through her and seemed to go on forever.

She had no concept of how much time had passed, but when she finally felt semi-normal again, she could feel Ryker's tongue gently licking her pussy. She glanced down at him and smiled at the way the strands of his hair fell down around his face. She hadn't seen him without the beanie on yet, and now she understood why he wore it all the time.

She reached down and smoothed a hand over his head, and when his eyes met hers, she was shocked by the intensity she saw there.

"Thank you," she said. "That was amazing."

"You are so fucking perfect," he growled, slowly crawling up her body, "and you never have to thank me for making you come."

He kissed her then, and she wrapped her legs around him, hating the fact that he was still fully dressed. She could feel his thick cock pressing against her clit, and she couldn't wait to feel him inside her. The kiss was hard and demanding, as if he was claiming her in some way, and she loved that his lips tasted like her.

"You have to ride me," he said, pulling back abruptly. "I have to feel that pussy on my dick, and I can't go slow."

He removed his clothes quickly, and then laid down next to her and pulled her on top of him. She immediately spread her legs and straddled him as she ran her hands over his expansive chest.

Damn! The man should never wear clothes. She knew he was big, but no one had ever manhandled her the way he did, and now she knew why. She'd never been with a man built like Ryker.

It's because he's a bear.

That thought caused her pussy to pulse again, and she reached for the bag that held the condoms. She didn't want any barriers between them, but though she trusted Ryker, she knew that something bad had happened between him and his ex, and she didn't want to push the issue. They had plenty of time to make decisions about condoms later.

"No," he said, grabbing her wrist. "We've both been tested, and you're on the pill. I trust you, too, sweetheart."

She was surprised at his decision, but she wasn't going to question him on it. Not when he was naked under her and looking so gorgeous her pussy was already soaking wet again.

She wrapped one hand around the base of his dick, and then slowly lowered herself down. He groaned when only the tip had entered her wet hole, and continued alternating between small grunts and deep breaths until he was buried balls deep.

She'd never felt so full in her life, and she needed a minute to adjust to his size.

"Take a deep breath, sweetheart," he said, sinking his fingers into the fleshy globes of her ass. "You were made for me."

She removed her bra, and started moving slowly at first, gliding up and down his cock at a leisurely pace, but when his hands moved to her hips, she knew she didn't have much time. She could feel his cock pulsing, strumming against the walls of her pussy, and she leaned forward to kiss him.

He stopped her half way and shook his head.

"I can't kiss you?"

When he shook his head again, something clicked, and she narrowed her eyes at him.

"Show me."

"Don't be afraid."

The murmured words slipped out right before he took a deep breath and showed her his teeth. His top two canines had grown larger than his other teeth, and while they were nowhere near the size of what they were when he was in his animal form, she understood why he thought she would be afraid.

"I'm not afraid of you, Ryker," she said, leaning down closer. "Does this always happen during sex?"

"No," he shook his head. "This has never happened before."

She didn't know what it meant, but she knew her reaction was important. She leaned down closer and kissed him gently. When he didn't respond, she slid her tongue inside his mouth, and licked one of his canines. His tongue tentatively brushed against hers, and she smiled as she stroked him again. He let their tongues mingle for less than a minute, but it was enough.

Suddenly, he gripped her hips at the same time he raised his own, and she sat back up and started rocking against him. This time she moved faster, bracing her hands on his chest, and using her knees to bounce up and down his cock. His fingers dug deeper into her hips, and she absently wondered if she'd have bruises later, but she didn't care.

She rode him hard, and when she faltered, he used his hands to move her at the pace he wanted. She was desperate to come, but she'd already had two orgasms and didn't want to go first. She kept moving until he roared beneath her, and then she let herself go, screaming his name.

Waves of pleasure wracked her body over and over until she'd milked him dry, and then she collapsed on top of him. One heavy arm immediately came around her, holding her close, and the other grabbed the edge of the sleeping bag and pulled it over both of their bodies. She was vaguely aware that he was still buried deep inside her—and still half hard—but there was no way she could move right now, so she closed her eyes instead.

She knew Ryker would keep her safe, and a second later she felt him kiss the top of her head and mumble something, but sleep had already called her.

She had no idea what the whispered words were.

Ryker cursed as his hand slipped and he broke off another bolt under the hood of the truck he was working on. He'd been having trouble concentrating on work for more than a week, and that was because all he could think about was Carly.

They'd had a couple of dates since that Sunday in the cave, and she'd come to dinner with his family again the night before, but they hadn't had sex again. They'd even visited the cave again a few nights ago, and though they'd made out and done a lot of touching, he hadn't wanted to take things further. Luckily, Carly had seemed okay with just hanging out with him, but his bear was going crazy.

The animal wanted to mark her—to claim her—and it didn't like being denied its mate.

Honestly, he wanted nothing more than to be buried deep inside her perfect pussy, but the fact that his canines had started to elongate while she rode him had scared him half to death. What if he had marked her by accident, and bound them together for the rest of their lives? Carly would hate him for taking her choice away, or worse, she would leave him forever.

As much as he wanted her in his life, he still wasn't ready to mark her. Once a shifter marked their mate, a mating bond formed that could only be severed by death. It came with the ability to communicate with one's mate telepathically, and his ex had taunted and teased him through that bond for the final year of her life.

When the other woman finally died, all he'd felt was relief, and he never wanted to be bound to another person in that way again.

Still, he knew he could only go for so long without having sex with Carly, and that meant that he had to tell her the truth—or at least some version of it—and find a way to get his animal under control before he touched her. He hadn't had the problem when they were just touching or making out, and maybe it was just being inside her

with no barrier.

The bond was formed when he bit her while being inside with no protection, so maybe that had been the problem. Maybe if he did wear the condoms—and took a long run before he touched her—then he could keep his animal under control.

Of course, that was a big maybe, but he had no other options.

The bear growled beneath the surface, but he ignored the beast and turned back to his work.

He also ignored the ache in his chest. The feeling had disappeared the day he'd met Carly, but this morning it had returned full force. He rubbed his chest, but the ache only intensified, and his anger grew. He'd thought that meeting Carly had put an end to the pain that had plagued him since last summer, and now that it was back, he wanted to question everything.

She was his true mate—he could feel it in his soul—but maybe she wasn't supposed to be his.

The ache intensified, but he pushed it away when he heard the twins laughing in the lobby.

"Hey, dad," they said in unison when he stepped out from behind the truck.

"Hey, boys," he said, looking between them. They might be grown men, but he could still tell when they were up to something. "What's up?"

"Where's Carly?" Noah asked. "Doesn't she come over to visit you after work?"

"Not every day," he said, narrowing his eyes, "but she is stopping by today. Why?"

"We wanted to take you guys out for dinner tonight," Rhys chimed in.

"Why?" He growled.

"What do you mean, why?" Noah questioned.

"You guys just saw her last night. What do you want?"

"We don't want anything except to spend time with you guys. What's wrong with you?"

Fuck!

Noah was right. What the hell was wrong with him? It wasn't unusual for any of his sons to join him for dinner out of the blue, and this time they wanted to include Carly. They accepted that she was part of his life, and even though she'd joined them for the past two family dinners, they still wanted to spend time with her. He knew that he should be ecstatic that his boys liked Carly so much, but he was in a grumpy mood, and for some reason their acceptance just pissed him off.

"I'm just in a grumpy mood," he said, shaking his head. "Dinner sounds great."

Ryker moved back under the hood of the truck, knowing that his boys would keep talking. He'd practically raised them in his shop, and it had always been this way between all of them. Even Hattie.

"Good, because we really like her," Rhys said.

"Yeah," Noah added. "Do you think she'll let us call her mom after you guys get mated?"

He could hear the teasing in his son's voice, but something inside him snapped. He left the truck, and turned to face them.

"We are not getting mated," he growled.

"What do you mean, you're not getting mated ? She's your mate, isn't she? Why wouldn't you mark her?"

"Carly and I are just having fun?—,"

"Dad—,"

"No, you both need to understand this," he said, raising his voice. "I'm glad you guys like her, but this thing between us is just temporary, and I'm never getting mated again."

"Dad!"

The humor on both of their faces was gone, and they were both looking at him with a mix of shock and worry. The visual was so at odds with their usual smiling faces, that it took him a minute to realize someone else was in the room.

Carly!

He turned toward the door, and saw his mate standing there. Her hair was up in the usual messy bun she wore to work, or to paint, and she still had on her favorite light blue coat. Her hands were holding a familiar white box, letting him know that she'd stopped at the bakery on her way over, but her eyes were sad, proving that she'd heard most of what he'd said.

Fuck!

"Carly, I?—,"

"Well," she said, setting the box down on the stool next to her. "I guess that's my cue to go."

She turned and left without another word, and for a moment, he couldn't move. She was everything he'd ever wanted, and he was going to lose her because he was an idiot. Yes, he'd made mistakes in the past—and paid for them—but Carly wasn't his ex. She was his true mate, and he needed to get over himself and start treating her the way she deserved.

And part of what she deserved was a mating bond. Not because it was what he or his bear wanted, but because it was the deepest connection a shifter could have with anyone, and they both deserved to have that happiness.

He dropped the wrench he was holding and raced out of the shop. She'd parked across the street, and had just reached the driver's side door when he called her name.

"Carly!"

She reached for the door, but then paused and brushed a hand across her face before turning to face him. He caught up to her a second later, and the tears pooling in her eyes shook him to his core. His beautiful, strong mate was hurting, and it was all his fault.

"I'm sorry," he said. He wanted to touch her, but knew he couldn't. Even if his hands weren't covered in grease, he'd fucked up, and she wouldn't welcome his touch right now. "I didn't mean those things."

"Then why did you say them?"

"Because I'm an idiot. Please come back inside so we can talk. I'll explain everything."

"I can't," she shook her head. "Not right now, and maybe never. You're the one who said you wanted to be exclusive, but you've been holding back since that first night in the cave, and it's clear that we've been moving way too fast. You're obviously not ready for any kind of commitment, and I don't really do the whole just having fun thing. I think it's time for us to take a step back, and maybe even take a break."

No!

"We're not taking a break." He growled the words and took a small step closer. The only thing stopping him from kissing her was the fact that he was covered in grease, and he didn't want to ruin her outfit.

"We can talk about it later. On the phone. If you call, then I'll answer, but right now, I need some space."

He didn't want to give her space. He wanted to lift her over his shoulder and carry her to his cave, but he knew he couldn't. Not now. She wouldn't appreciate it—not even after he explained everything—and he had responsibilities that needed his attention. One of his customers just pulled in to pick up their car, and he still needed to finish the truck before the end of the day.

"You'd better go. A customer is waiting."

"The twins can handle it." But he did have other work to do, which was the only reason he was letting her leave. "I'll give you space, but this isn't over."

He took a step back, and she turned away and got in her SUV without another word. She started up the engine without looking at him, and only rolled down the window

after he knocked on it. She looked at him then, but he almost wished she hadn't. The pools of unshed tears seemed bigger, and he hated the idea of her driving while crying.

"I'll be fine," she said, as if reading his mind. "I'm not an idiot."

"No, today I own that title." One corner of her mouth raised, but it wasn't a full-on smile, and the ache in his chest intensified. "I'll call you later."

She nodded, and looked away, reaching for the button to roll up the window.

"Goodbye, Ryker."

The words drifted toward him on a whisper as the window was rolling up, and as he watched her drive away, the ache in his chest kept his feet planted on the asphalt until he could no longer see her car. Even though she'd said they could talk, her leaving felt too much like a final goodbye, and his bear roared beneath the surface.

"Dad?"

He turned to see Rhys leaning out of the shop's door, and after another quick look down the road, he walked back toward the shop even though working was the last thing he wanted to do. He had a customer waiting, and tons of other responsibilities, so he allowed those things to occupy his mind until he could talk to Carly again and try to fix the mess he'd created.

He just hoped she would answer the phone when he called.

CHAPTER 8

Carly stopped pushing her cart and casually glanced around the produce department. There was a guy shopping alone looking at an eggplant, a woman with two kids having a very loud discussion about apples, and an elderly couple arguing about lettuce. The elderly couple's banter made her smile, but she couldn't shake the uneasy feeling that crept over her skin.

She'd also felt it in the parking lot after work, but shook it off as a reaction to everything that had happened the day before.

Ryker's words still rolled around in her head, and even though they weren't meant for her ears, she'd heard them. The irritation in his voice hadn't been surprising—the twins were obviously teasing him—but the vehement way he'd delivered the words about them not being serious had shaken her to the core. They'd only been seeing each other for a couple of weeks, but hearing him say those things had hurt a lot more than it should have. Maybe that feeling had something to do with the weird pull she felt toward him, or the fact that he could change into a bear, but either way, she didn't like it.

It was way too soon to feel so devastated by his words, but she couldn't help the way she felt. She could push it away and bury it deep, though, and that was exactly what she was trying to do.

Ryker had called her the night before just like he'd promised, but he'd wanted to meet up to talk in person, and she hadn't had the strength to see him. Not when she craved his touch even as her heart was breaking. She hadn't been lying when she'd said she

needed space. They had been moving fast, but she'd gone with it because he'd told her he was all in.

Hearing him say they were just having fun ,even if he hadn't meant it, had been a wake-up call.

They needed to slow way down, and though she didn't want to end things, it seemed like the right move. She didn't like to play games, and hearing Ryker say those words had immediately put her on alert. It had been nice to have sex with someone who knew what the hell he was doing, but she didn'tneed a man in her life.

Especially not one who never wanted to be "mated" again.

She was pretty sure that was a bond for his animal that was similar to marriage, but she didn'tknow because Ryker hadn't explained anything about that. All she knew was, whatever it meant, he didn'twant it with her.

Their phoneconversation the night before had been short, almost too short, and the fact that he'd ended it after she'd refused to meet him in person spoke volumes. She was okay for a good time, but he didn't really want her in his life.

The words didn't feel right, especially after meeting his family, but it was the only thing that made sense.

Sadness seemed to wrap around her like a vice, and after another glance around the produce department, she hurried to gather the other items she needed.

The feeling that she was being watched lingered for the rest of the shopping trip, and it followed her out into the parking lot. She glanced around, looking for anything out of the ordinary, but nothing stood out so she got in her car and started driving home. The uneasy feeling continued for a few blocks, and after several glances in her

rearview mirror, she passed the road that would lead to her house, and drove to the sheriff's office.

She picked a parking space away from the street, and as soon as she shut off the engine, she bowed her head and covered her face with her hands.

What the hell am I doing?

She'd never been so messed up over a man, and she was sure that's what was causing whatever this was, because she hadn't seen anyone in her rearview mirror, and she knew she wasn't being followed.

She was just a hot mess.

And she had to get out of here. Like now.

She shook her head and reached for the key when someone knocked on her window. The shadow hovering over her car made her jump, but when she looked up to see Luke standing there, she burst into tears.

"Hey," Luke said, trying to open her door. She unlocked the thing automatically, and after pulling it open, he squatted down next to her as she bowed her head. "What's going on? Are you hurt?"

"No," said, shaking her head. She swiped at her eyes, willing the tears to stop, but the action only caused more to fall. She felt like a complete idiot crying in the parking lot next to Ryker's son, but she knew he needed answers.

"Not hurt, just dumb," she sniffed. "I felt like someone was watching me—following me—so I pulled in here. I was just being stupid."

"Could be nothing, but maybe not," he said. "Either way, I doubt you were being stupid. I'm going to go inside and get one of my deputies to follow us while I drive you home, okay? After we check out your place, you can tell us everything, and we can go from there. How does that sound?"

"Good," she nodded. "I'm sure I just overreacted, but I appreciate that, Luke. Thank you."

"No reason to thank me." He had an easy smile, and she understood why so many of the townspeople loved him. He was good-looking, sure, but it was more than that. He had a calming presence that made you feel like everything was going to be okay. "Did you already call my dad?"

"No," she shook her head. "I don't need to call him. We... um... We're not together anymore."

"That's not possible," Luke smiled as he stood. "Whatever dumb thing he did, I can guarantee that he didn't mean it. I'll call him when I get inside. Stay here and lock the door while you wait for me."

Carly didn't argue with Luke, and instead did what he said while she waited. She wanted his words about his dad to be true, that Ryker hadn't meant the things that he'd said, but it was a silly thing to hope for because he'd already told her that he didn't mean them, and she didn't want a man who could spout off lies so easily. Still, she could admit that it would be nice to have Ryker's strong arms wrapped around her right now, but she knew that would never happen. His shop was open for at least another hour, and he wouldn't close it down early because she freaked out over nothing.

Besides, they weren't together anymore, and she was sure he had tons of better things to do.

She pulled down the visor so she could look in the mirror, and wanted to die at the image staring back at her. Several loose strands of hair had fallen out of her messy bun, and her eyes were red and puffy. She could see traces of salt marring her cheeks, and her nose was running.

She dug in her glovebox for a napkin, and did her best to wipe away any remnants of her crying jag, and then she pulled the hair tie out of her hair and fixed her bun.

By the time Luke came back, she looked more presentable, and she gladly moved to the passenger seat so he could drive. She could see his deputy following behind them in the side mirror, and she couldn't help but take a minute to close her eyes. Her work day had only been over for a couple of hours, but it seemed like forever ago, and she was so tired.

"Shit!"

Her place wasn't far from the sheriff's office, but apparently she'd fallen asleep, because the next thing she heard was Luke's angry curse. She jolted in her seat, and then followed his gaze to her home. The large front window that led into her living room was broken, and the hole in the middle was huge. It looked like someone had thrown a basketball through it, and the glass surrounding the hole had so many cracks that it looked like it would cave when a strong wind came.

"Stay here," Luke said, opening his door. "I need to call for backup before we go inside."

She nodded, trying to fight off another round of tears as she stared at her house. She'd only lived in town a few months, but she couldn't think of any reason why someone would do this to her property. Had it been a random act of violence, or did this have something to do with the how she'd felt in the grocery store? Had someone been watching her? What if she'd come straight home instead of going to the sheriff's

office? She could have been inside when this happened.

Fresh tears started to fall, and a tiny scream escaped when someone opened her door so hard the entire SUV shook. She leaned into the center console, trying to get away from the threat until Ryker's face came into view.

"It's okay, sweetheart," he said, sliding his hands under her back and knees. "I've got you."

She leaned into him and let the tears fall. Despite what had happened between them, she trusted Ryker to keep her safe.

He carried her to his truck, and after opening the door to the backseat of the cab, he placed her on the seat and slid in beside her. His arms encircled her, and she leaned into him while they waited for Luke and his team to search her house. Ryker's warm body chased away a lot of the fear, and after using her sleeve to dry her eyes, she eventually pulled away from him.

He didn't let her go far, and for that she was grateful. She took another look at her house, and even though she was further away, the damage to the window was huge. She wondered what had been used to make a hole that size, and a new wave of fear washed over her. Even if she could get the window patched up, there was no way she was sleeping in that place tonight.

"You'll stay with me tonight," Ryker said. "And every night after. At least until we know it's safe."

She met his eyes, startled by his words. It always amazed her that he seemed to know what she was thinking, but as much as she wanted to stay with him, she knew she shouldn't. They obviously wanted different things, and she couldn't do casual. Not with him.

"Ryker..." She tried to find the words, but they wouldn't come, and something else was bothering her. "How are you here? I mean, I know Luke called you, but your shop is supposed to be open for another hour."

"Are you kidding me? You went to the sheriff's office because you were scared and possibly in danger. I don't give a fuck about the shop when it comes to your safety. I only care about you. I will always come when you need me, sweetheart. I would have picked you up in town, but Luke wanted to check out your place, and it's a good thing he did. Once all this is over, we're going to have a long talk, and I'm going to explain everything. Because you are mine, and we are definitely not over."

"But..."

God, she was so confused. He wasn't acting like a man just having fun. He was acting like her boyfriend—a very possessive boyfriend—and she liked it way too much.

"Hush," Ryker growled. "Just rest until Luke and the guys are done."

She laid her head on his shoulder, and smiled at his bossy attitude.

Ryker walked into his bedroom, and his dick instantly went hard.

Carly was curled up against the headboard flipping through one of the art magazines she'd brought from her place, and the sight of her in his space—in his bed—felt perfect. When she looked up at him and smiled, he wanted nothing more than to sink his cock into her pretty, pink cunt, but he couldn't do that. Not yet.

Not until he told her everything.

"How are you feeling?"

"Good," she nodded. "I'm still a little freaked out, but I feel better. Thanks again for letting me stay here, and for having the boys patch up my window."

After Luke and his deputies had completed their initial investigation, he'd called the twins to come and board up the window. Tomorrow he would find someone to repair the glass. Of course, she was still fighting him on that, but it was a fight she would lose.

"I'm glad you feel better, but you don't have to thank me—or them—for the window. You're part of this family now, and we will always help with whatever you need."

"Ryker, I..."

She closed the magazine, and pulled the blanket she was snuggling in up to her neck. He realized it was her way of protecting herself, of creating a barrier between them, and he didn't fault her for it. Not when he'd hurt her so bad the day before.

When Luke called to tell him that Carly was in the parking lot crying, suddenly everything clicked into place, and he understood the ache that had returned the day before. For some reason, fate had finally brought him his true mate, and instead of celebrating that miracle, he'd only been half-in. He'd been giving just enough of himself to keep Carly around, but fighting the bond with everything else he had inside.

His bear grumbled beneath the surface, reminding him that it wasn't everything. The animal had been wanting to mark her since the day she'd walked into his shop looking for her car, and it was only the human side that had protested.

Never again.

Carly was his, and she deserved the truth. Hell, she deserved everything, and he was

done running from the past.

"I've been a complete ass," he said, moving across the room. He sat down at the foot of the bed, keeping enough distance between them that she didn't feel trapped. If she wanted him to leave, and sleep somewhere else for the night, then he would, but he didn't think it would go that far. "And I'm not just talking about yesterday."

"Okay."

Her tone was skeptical, but she gave him her full attention, and lowered the blanket to her waist.

He took a deep breath, trying to figure out where to start, but there didn't seem like a good place, so he jumped right in.

"The moment you walked into my shop I knew you were mine. I didn't want you to be, but I knew it, deep in my soul, and I couldn't stay away from you."

"That's a terrible beginning." She narrowed her eyes, and pulled the blanket back up.

Terrible was an understatement, but she wasn't trying to leave, so he barreled on.

"You're right," he nodded, "but I promise it will get better. Or I hope it will. I've never actually told this story before, but the reason is because you're the only one who will ever need to hear it."

"That's better," she smiled. "Keep going."

"When a shifter meets his mate, he just knows she's the one. It's not like a fated mates thing—we do have a choice—but there is a connection. It's why you feel drawn to me even though it's only been a couple of weeks. You might have even felt it that first

night in the pizza place, or even when you came to pick up your car, but you still could have walked away, and I could have, too.

"Except, I didn't want to. Not really. But I was also scared, because for the first time in my life, I wanted to mate with someone—

mark them—and that didn't go so well for me the first time."

"You and your ex didn't... get along?"

"We did at first, but it didn't last," he took another deep breath. "When a shifter decides to mate, it's more than just getting married. It's a bond formed by marking their partner during unprotected sex. It's why my canines extended that first time in the cave, and why I've been holding back that part of myself ever since. My bear wants you, and I want you, but I was letting the past get in the way. Letting fear hold me back, even when I know that you're mine.

"My ex wasn't mine. She saw me shift by accident one day when I was out trying to teach Luke how to control his animal. I'm not sure why she even followed us that day, but I'm guessing it was because she was a little bit jealous of the time we spent together. I'm not exactly sure, but she saw me and became fascinated by what we could do.

"Looking back, I understand that we were too young to make those decisions, and that she manipulated me more than I care to admit. I knew she wasn't the one, but she convinced me to form the bond when she got pregnant with the boys by saying all the right things. And I wanted those things. For myself, and for Luke, and for my future cubs.

"So, I went all in. We got married and mated, and I tried hard to be a good husband and father, but she soon lost interest, and despite giving her everything she wanted,

nothing ever made her happy. She finally left when the twins were four. As soon as she was gone, almost everything got better. I started the business as soon as I turned eighteen, so it was already building traction, and with her gone, I was able to put more money into savings. She wasn't a bad mom, but she did only the bare minimum, and the boys got over her leaving quicker than expected. Maybe it was because they had Luke as an example, I'm not sure, but it was like a weight had been lifted off of all of us, and we were all glad she was gone.

"What the boys don't know, was the hell I went through on the other side. When a shifter marks his mate, the bond that is formed allows the pair to communicate telepathically. You can't read each other's minds, but you can share thoughts to communicate. To talk to each other. After the first year, her thoughts were never overly affectionate, but after she left, they were..."

He didn't know how to put words to what it was like hearing her voice in his head. It wasn't just petty teasing and taunting. There was also anger and hostility that went beyond normal, especially when he had worked so hard to give her everything—including that stupid food truck.

"God, that must have been horrible," Carly said, linking one of her hands with his. She covered their joined hands with her other one, and then laid her head on his shoulder. "What a fucking bitch."

He smiled at her outburst, shocked that he'd been so consumed by his story that he hadn't even realized she'd moved away from the headboard.

"Yeah," he nodded, placing a chaste kiss on the top of her head.

"Did you ever worry that she would expose you and the boys? Tell anyone about your abilities?"

"Not at first. Probably because she hadn't been so filled with hate when she left—or at least, she didn't seem that way. But later I did wonder if she was trying to bait me. To get me to come after her and expose myself somehow. I'm not sure what the end game would be? Maybe to try and get the business? Or to gain sympathy that I had tricked her into fucking an animal? I'm not sure. She just left one day with no notice, but I knew she wouldn't be back, so I filed for divorce the next day.

"I could have found her if I wanted to, but of course, I didn't reveal that information to the courts, and after posting several public notices, the divorce was granted within a few months. I doubt she ever found out about it, so it could have been that she was just after the money. I honestly don't know. But, hurting or exposing me would have hurt the boys, and that part I just don't understand. They were her babies, and even if she didn't want them anymore, why try to destroy their lives?"

Her motives had plagued him for a long time, but moving on had been easier after her death. Though, apparently not easy enough, because he still carried around a lot of the bitterness that had resulted from forming the mating bond with the wrong person.

"Anyway," he lifted his other shoulder. "The bond can only be severed by death, and after about a year she killed herself. Not directly, and not on purpose, but she went down on her boyfriend while they were driving home from some bar, and he lost control and drove them off a cliff."

"Whoa." She raised her head to look at him. "That's terrible, but oddly satisfying. I kind of feel bad for her boyfriend though."

"Yeah, me too."

They sat there in silence for a few more moments before he spoke again.

"Last August, around the same time that you moved to town, I felt an ache in my

chest that didn't ease until you walked into my shop the first day we met. It returned yesterday, and stayed with me all day, and that is what prompted what I said to the boys. I was angry and fighting my animal, but those words were lies. They know it, and Luke knows it, but I know none of that matters because you don't know it. I meant it when I said I wanted us to be exclusive, but my bear wants to mark you and that scares the shit out of me. One, because I don't want to make a mistake and accidentally take your choices away, and two, because even though I know you're not my ex, having someone else's voice in my head isn't something I can get excited about."

"Given everything that's happened, I think that's completely understandable." She placed a soft kiss on his shoulder, and he could feel the smile on her lips. "So, what does that mean for us? What do we do now?"

"The bond is only formed if I bite you during unprotected sex, so in theory, if we use a condom, then it shouldn't be a problem. I also think I should go for a run in my bear form first. That will hopefully help burn off some energy, and then maybe it will be okay. But my canines have never elongated like that before—without me being able to stop them—and I can't guarantee that they will stay hidden."

"And I'm not complaining about that," she said, squeezing his hand. "What happens if you bite me while wearing the condom?"

"I honestly don't know. The bite to complete the bond is painful and forms a huge bruise that fades within a few hours. What's left behind is a mark so minute only another shifter can detect it. After that, any other bites are just as painful, and heal just as fast, but they don't leave a mark behind. I've never heard of a shifter's canines extending for anything except a mating, which is why I'm hesitant to try something like that with you."

"Okay," she nodded. "So, no unprotected sex, and no biting."

"Right," he nodded.

Which sounds completely fucking boring.

"But you're all in for everything else? This isn't only temporary, and we're not just having fun ?"

"This was never temporary," he growled, turning to face her.

"Good," she laughed, letting his hands go. "I think you should go for a run now."

CHAPTER 9

Carly set down the last box of paint, and did a quick inventory of all the supplies sitting on the table. She was painting with the first graders today, and she had come into their classroom early so she could set up everything before they came back from recess.

The stacks of paper, paint, and brushes always made her smile, and she was looking forward to seeing the outcomes of the lesson she had planned for today. Even though it was messy, painting was one of her favorite things to do with the kids, and she loved admiring all of their finished projects.

Her phone vibrated in her pocket, and though nothing had happened in the past week, she felt reluctant to pull it out and look at the message. She hadn't received any more texts from her ex—or any random numbers—but Luke and his team didn't have any leads on who could have vandalized her place, and though the two things could have nothing to do with each other, she wasn't convinced.

She pulled her phone out of her pocket, and laughed at the GIF that Noah had sent her.

Even though they weren't going to complete the mating bond, she and Ryker were acting like a married couple, and the boys were having fun calling her mom and sending her funny memes about cookies. She wasn't much of a baker, but she had no problem stopping by the bakery on Main and making sure sweet treats were available whenever they stopped by the garage.

Which was almost every day. Ryker and his family were close, and it wasn't odd to see at least one of them stop by the shop for a few minutes each day. They sometimes stopped by the house, too, but she was glad that they didn't do that without texting first.

After she and Ryker discovered that his wearing a condom was a reliable way to stop the urge to mate during sex, they had been making up for lost time by christening every room in his house. They'd even had fun in her own home, but even though the window had been repaired, and nothing else had happened to her property, she didn't want to sleep there—not even with Ryker by her side.

And that worked out well, because Ryker wanted her in his home, and that's exactly where she wanted to be.

A week ago, after Luke and his team had finished their investigation, Ryker had taken her inside and helped her pack a bag—which had ended up being three bags—and then he'd taken her back to his home and explained everything. The next day, he'd arranged for someone to fix her window while she'd been at work, and when he'd taken her out to dinner the next night, he'd been the one to grab her hand instead of the other way around.

Everything was going great, and though she was happy, she couldn't stop the nagging feeling that something wasn't right. Ryker felt it too, and though they didn't find any evidence to the contrary, Luke didn't believe the vandalism to her place was completely random. And it wasn't just because of the texts, either. Although that did play a part in all of their thinking, it was more because of the weird feeling she'd felt in the grocery store and then on the way home.

The feeling that had caused her to stop at the sheriff's office because she was afraid.

Neither man believed that feeling was just a coincidence, especially when her house

had been vandalized the same day.

The only place she'd been truly alone since that day was driving to and from work, and luckily, she hadn't had the feeling of being watched again. Unfortunately, she was still kind of afraid to be alone, and as much as she loved Ryker—because she did love him—she still wanted to do things by herself. She was glad that he understood her need for independence, but she hadn't felt very independent this past week, and that bothered her.

Not enough to do something stupid knowing that there might be a threat waiting around the corner, but enough that she was wondering if they were all just being too cautious.

She was still holding her phone when it rang, and when she saw it was her friend, Jules, an uneasy feeling settled over her. Sometimes she would get texts from friends during working hours, but they never called until she was on her own time. It could be that her friend just forgot about the time difference, but Carly didn't think so, and after a quick glance at the clock, she answered.

"Hey, Jules. I only have a couple of minutes before my break is over. What's up?"

"Carly." Her friend let out a relieved breath. "I'm so glad you answered. I'm sorry to call during work, but this is important."

"It's fine," she said, that uneasy feeling growing stronger. "Everything okay?"

"I'm not sure, but I want you to be aware. I just found out that the car that James Wheeler was driving wasn't his. Apparently, he lost his job a few months ago, and stole that car after his girlfriend left him. I don't know why she left, but he told a mutual friend that all of his troubles were all your fault, and that he was going after you. I'm so sorry, Carly. I didn't know."

That feeling of being watched returned full force, and she looked out the windows of the classroom, scanning for anything that didn't seem right. She could see the kids playing on the playground several yards away, but the hallway looked empty.

"Why would he blame me? It's been two years since we dated, and he had another girlfriend after me."

"I don't know. The story seems crazy, but what if it's true? Has anything happened?"

The bell rang, and she used that as an excuse to hang up the phone. Now wasn't the time to tell her friend about her house being vandalized, and she needed to tell Ryker and Luke this new information. She had given Luke all the details she could remember about her ex, including his address and place of work at the time they were dating. Hopefully Luke would be able to use his badge to get the local law enforcement to check on him.

Or something.

She wasn't sure how it all worked, but if her ex told someone he was coming for her, blaming her for whatever had gone wrong in his life, then she was pretty sure the cops could do something.

She created a group text with both Ryker and Luke, but she'd only been able to type a few words when the door swung open and James Wheeler walked in pointing a gun at her chest.

"Put the phone down and come with me."

She glanced out the window, and then looked back at him. Aside from a few strands of hair out of place, his appearance looked good. He was wearing a pair of Khaki pants, a blue polo shirt, and a dark brown blazer, and from where she stood, the

clothing looked clean.

"What are you doing, James?"

Even if she could distract him, the phone was too big to conceal in the pocket of her jeans. With no other choice, she set the device down on the table.

"What the fuck does it look like, bitch? You're coming with me, and then you're going to pay for fucking up my life."

She didn't want to go with him, but she could hear the kids lining up outside the door. Their teacher was walking down the hallway toward the front of the line, and she knew they would start filing in any minute. If James was stupid enough to bring a gun into the school, then there was no doubt in her mind that he would use it if provoked.

"Okay," she nodded. "I'm coming."

She started walking toward him, and when she reached his side, he grabbed her wrist with his free hand and leaned in close so that his face was only an inch away from hers. He wasn't an overly strong man, but his grip on her wrist was painful, and she was sure she would have a bruise there later.

"Don't try anything stupid," he seethed, "or someone will get hurt here today, and it won't only be you."

"Okay," she nodded. "Where are we going?"

"That's none of your business. For now, just walk out to the parking lot."

He shoved the hand holding the gun into his pocket, and pushed her toward the door. As soon as she opened it, she could hear the kids filing into the classroom from the

other side. Relief swamped her, but it only lasted a second.

"Miss Carly." One of the boys from the class ran up and grabbed her hand. "Where are you going? Aren't we painting today?"

"We are," she said, smiling down at him, "but I need to go to the office first. I'll be back in a few minutes."

"Who is that?" The boy asked, frowning at James.

James moved closer and shoved the pocketed gun into her back.

"He's a friend, and I need to get him something from the office." She squeezed his hand before gently pulling hers away. "Go back inside now, and tell Miss Anderson that I'll be there in a minute."

The boy was still frowning at James, but then he looked at her and smiled.

"Hurry now," she said, "I'll be there, soon."

"Okay."

He turned and ran toward the door, and James pushed on her back again.

"Move!"

The word came out as a harsh whisper, and she started walking, hoping they didn't run into any more kids on their way to the parking lot. Because she worked in every classroom at least once a week, she knew most of the kids by name, and they all knew her as well. It wasn't odd for any of the kids to strike up a conversation, and some of the older kids would be able to pick up on the fact that something was

wrong.

Luckily, they made it to his car without any more distractions, and once she was seated, he pulled some zip-ties from his pocket.

"This is so you don't try anything stupid like try to escape on the way." He tightened one tie on each wrist, and then used a third to bind them together. He studied his handiwork as he stood, and then he leaned down and pulled the plastic tighter. She could feel the hard material digging into her skin, and she knew that if she moved the wrong way the plastic would start to cut.

He lifted her arms by grabbing onto the middle tie, and then dropped them back into her lap. The rubbing of the plastic against her skin made her wince, causing him to laugh, and then he grabbed the plastic and did it again.

"You're not so tough now, are you?" He nodded and stood. "I should have kept you tied up like this during our relationship. Then maybe you would have learned your place."

She wanted to roll her eyes at his stupid comment, but instead she just looked straight ahead. She had no idea why he thought she'd ruined his life, and honestly, it was probably something trivial. He was a needy baby who always wanted to be the center of attention, and when things didn't go his way, he always blamed others.

Choosing her to blame—and following her half way across the country to do it—seemed excessive, but though he seemed mostly normal, he was obviously crazy, and she was more concerned with his end game than what his motives were.

Where was he taking her?

And more importantly, what did he want?

Carly was surprised when James drove her to Ryker's house.

"What are we doing here?"

"You'll see," he laughed. "You and your boy think you're so slick by going into the park to fuck, but you refused to suck my dick before my big presentation. Do you remember that? I needed you to help me, and you laughed in my face. Told me you didn't fuck in public places, and acted all haughty. Like you were better than me. I knew you were lying, and my presentation was shit because of it. Because of you. So now you're going to make it up to me, and your boyfriend is going to watch."

She remembered that day. He'd wanted her to suck him off while kneeling on the floor in the men's bathroom, and she'd told him exactly what she thought of that idea. She also ended things with him the next day, but neither of those things were the reasons for his shit presentation. His presentation sucked because he'd been overconfident and unprepared, and he was damn lucky his boss hadn't fired him on the spot.

He reached down and tucked something into his jacket before getting out of the car, and then he walked around the front of the vehicle, keeping an eye on her the whole time. When he reached her door, he slid his hand back into the pocket holding the gun and glanced around quickly. Even if there had been someone on the street, Ryker's neighbors were far enough away that she knew the chances of anyone seeing them and noticing her bound wrists were slim.

He led her to the side of the house, pulled a small crowbar out from under his jacket, and started tearing down a few of the slats on the fence. When he got three down, he pushed her through the opening, and led her to the riverbank.

There wasn't any snow on the ground, but the air was still chilly, and because she had left her coat back at the school, she only had on a t-shirt as a barrier against the

cold. She couldn't help but shiver when the water coming up off the rapids swirled around them, and though she refused to look down to check, she was sure her nipples were peeking through the cotton.

"Don't worry," he laughed. "I'll get you warm soon enough."

Her stomach rolled at the meaning of his words, and she took a deep breath to try and settle it. She wanted to believe that Ryker would somehow save her before James touched her, but she hadn't been able to send that last text, and he wouldn't be home for hours. Her stomach rolled again, and the only thing that chased it away was James yelling at her.

"How the hell do you get this thing down?"

He was talking about the bridge that was hidden in the tree. She didn't want to tell him, but she also didn't trust him not to shoot her, or throw her down into the rapids, so she explained how it worked. He didn't use the same care that Ryker did, so the thing was unsteady as they crossed, but there was no way to put the thing up from the other side, so at least it would leave behind a clue to her whereabouts.

If she survived that long.

He pushed her forward until they reached the entrance to the cave, and then he practically shoved her inside. The path down the side of the rock was narrow, and his careful footsteps gave her the impression that he'd never actually been herebefore. Ryker had said that he could scent any intruders, so that meant he had somehow watched them from afar.

His next words confirmed her suspicions.

"This is a nice little set up," he nodded, walking around the space. "You've fucked in

this water, haven't you?"

She hated that he was now wandering around Ryker's spot like he owned the place, but she knew there was no way to make him leave.

"We don't fuck in here," she said, her voice calm.

"Don't you fucking lie to me," he said, storming across the space.

He raised up the hand holding the gun, and hit her across the face with the barrel. Pain seared across her cheek and seemed to radiate around her head as tears filled her eyes. "You guys come in here and don't come out for hours. I know what you're doing. Fuck, the whole god-damned town knows what you're doing, and soon you're going to do it with me. Get on your fucking knees."

He kicked the back of one of her kneecaps, and she fell to the ground. Her hands slid against the dirt, scraping her palms, and she dug her fingers into the earth to stop themomentum.

He grabbed her messy bun and pulled hard, and when she sat back on her heels, he smiled.

"That's better," he said. "This is exactly where you're supposed to be—on your knees so your face is level with my dick. We'll get to the fun soon, but first you have to call your man. He's going to watch me feed my dick down your throat, and then I'm going to kill him and fuck you hard while his body grows cold. I'll kill you, too, but how fast or slow depends on how well you follow directions."

Another wave of nausea swept over her, but she tried to remain calm. She knew Ryker healed fast, so he might survive a gunshot wound, but he wasn't invincible. If James aimed for his heart—or his head—Ryker could die on the spot, and there was

only one way in and out of this cave, so he wouldn't have the element of surprise.

"Call him," he said, dropping a phone on the dirt in front of her. "Tell him to meet you here, and make it fucking believable. Give away any clues, and I'll still fuck you, but I'll shoot you first. Maybe more than once."

She nodded and picked up the phone.

Ryker took a deep breath, and glanced at the screen on his phone again. The metal threatened to crack under his grip, and he forced himself to relax his hand. Destroying his phone wouldn't help Carly, and right now, it was his only link to her.

And even that wasn't a guarantee.

They were only guessing that her kidnapper would have her call because he was the new boyfriend, but in reality, the guy could take her far away from Hickory Bear Rapids, and he might never see her again.

Fuck!

Standing around doing nothing was killing him, but it seemed like the best choice considering they didn't have any leads. Of course, that didn't mean they were doing nothing. Luke had deputies out searching the town and reaching out to neighboring communities, and Noah, Rhys, and Hattie were searching the National Park in their bear forms.

He wanted to be out searching, too, but he couldn't risk missing her call.

Their timeline had her missing for just over an hour, but a lot could happen in that amount of time, and as the minutes ticked on, his apprehension grew.

Of course, she would have been missing a lot longer if the teacher in her classroom hadn't acted quickly.

After receiving a message from a student that Carly had left with a man and would be back in a few minutes, the teacher knew something wasn't right when she'd found Carly's phone and jacket left behind. They were always careful about not leaving devices out for the children to find, and it was way too cold outside to be wandering around without a coat.

Once the teacher had confirmed that Carly had never made it to the office, the school called the sheriff.

While no one had actually seen her leave the school, the student had gotten a good look at the man she'd left the classroom with, and the boy had been able to positively identify who had taken her.

Unfortunately, they still didn't know so much.

Where was her ex taking her? And why? Was he working alone?

They literally had no answers, and the possibilities of what was, or could be, happening to her were shredding him up inside.

More so, because this not knowing was all his fault. If they had completed the mating bond, he would know all of these answers, but most importantly, he would know that she was safe, because he would have found her already.

Instead, he'd let the pain, anger, and fear from his past dictate what he did now, and because of that, he might lose his mate forever. His true mate, who unlike his ex, is his perfect match. Even thinking that she could be anything like his ex—that she could ever be filled with so much hate—had been a mistake, and it was one that he

would never make again.

Beneath the surface, his bear roared in agreement, and in the next minute, everything seemed to happen all at once.

Both his and Luke's phones started ringing at the same time, and when Ryker looked at his screen, he actually had two calls coming in. He ignored the one from Noah, and answered the unknown number.

"Hello?"

"Ryker." She let out a heavy breath, and her voice was strained, but she was alive. He didn't have to see her to know that she was hurt, though, and both the bear and the man wanted blood. "It's me. I'm in the cave, and I want you to come and meet me here."

Even if they didn't know that she'd been taken, those words alone would have clued him in that something was wrong. She liked visiting the cave, but she still considered it his space, and she would never go there without him.

"Whose phone are you calling from?"

"Oh, um?—"

She grunted, and there was a loud banging sound on her end of the line.

"Carly!"

"I'm here," she said. Her voice was tight before she forced out a laugh. "I just dropped the phone. My new phone. I had to get a new one because I lost mine."

Like hell she did, but he was done asking questions. If he said the wrong thing, she might get hurt again, and he didn't need any more information. They already knew where she was.

"Okay. I'm leaving now, and I'll be there as soon as I can."

"Okay...", there was a long pause. "I love you, Ryker."

Before he could respond, the line went dead.

She loved him.

They were pretty much living together, and they'd already decided to be exclusive, but they hadn't said those words yet. Maybe she'd only said it because she thought she might die—or that he might—but he knew she wasn't lying. His true mate loved him, and soon she would know that he loved her, too.

When he looked up, Luke was handing him one of the vests he'd brought from the station.

"Put it on," Luke said. "Did she say she was in the cave?"

"Yeah," he nodded. "Unknown number, and claimed it was her new phone. She was already hurt, but he hurt her again when I asked about the phone. I'm taking my weapon, but I know you might not be able to protect me if something goes down, and that's okay, son. I don't want to jeopardize your job—or ruin your life—in any way, so you do what you have to do, okay?"

"I will," Luke nodded. "One of the deputies found a stolen car parked on the street in front of your house, and the side fence has been messed with. He used a crowbar to take out three boards, and left the tool sitting right on top of the mess. I called

everyone else back in, so it's just you and me. Noah also called me after you didn't answer and confirmed they found her. They didn't enter the cave, though, and I told them all to take the long way back and meet us at your house. If this guy has a gun, he'll definitely start shooting if a bear walks into the cave."

Luke was right, and he didn't want any of his sons, or Hattie, to get hurt. He didn't want Luke going with him, either, but he didn't bother bringing it up again. His son took family, and his job of sheriff, very seriously, and there was nothing Ryker could say to change his mind.

"We'll get her back, dad," Luke said, clapping him on the shoulder.

"I know." And when they did, he was never letting her go. "Let's go."

"Where is your fucking boyfriend?"

Ryker could hear the shuffling of angry footsteps, and the way the sound was transitioning from loud to soft told him Wheeler was probably pacing. If he was moving around the room, then he wasn't touching Carly, and that was a good sign. Whatever his plan, the other man wanted Ryker present for it, and that knowledge eased some of the tension running through him.

He had no idea what he was walking into, but he needed to stay calm, and he wouldn't be if Wheeler was touching his woman.

"He'll be here soon," Carly said. Even though he could hear the pain in her voice, he doubted the other man could. Her words came out strong, and if he was standing in front of her, he would see the fire in her eyes. "His shop is on the other side of town."

"You'd better hope he gets here soon," the pacing stopped. "Because I'm getting tired of waiting."

Carly's cry of pain pushed him forward, and he walked inside the cave. Carly was kneeling on the ground with her hands bound in front of her, and Wheeler was holding her up by her hair, rubbing his covered dick all over her face. The man's other hand, the one holding the gun, was resting at his side.

Beneath the surface his bear roared, and Ryker drew the weapon he had tucked in his pants. He had no problem killing the man for touching and hurting his mate, but Wheeler was too close to Carly, and he couldn't risk the man getting off a lucky shot.

"Take your fucking hands off my woman, and drop your weapon."

His voice boomed around the cave, and Wheeler jumped back in surprise, letting go of Carly, but it only took him a few seconds to recover. He raised his weapon and pointed it at Carly's head.

"I don't think so," he laughed. "I'm the one calling the shots here, and this bitch is going to pay for what she did to me. Dead or alive, it doesn't matter, so I suggest you be a good boy and put the weapon down."

Carly was sitting almost impossibly still, and if they had completed the mating bond, he could tell her through their link that everything was going to be okay. He'd let her know that Luke was standing just a few feet away, waiting to bust in like a hero at the first sign of trouble, and that they would be going home soon.

Instead, he'd allowed his life to be ruled by fear, and now he couldn't tell her anything.

The ache in his chest tried to force its way back in, but he didn't allow it. Both he and Carly were walking out of here alive, and then, when she was ready, he was claiming his mate. He was done letting his bitterness over the past make his decisions, and right now, there was nothing he wanted more than to hear her voice in his head.

But that would never happen if he didn't follow the haphazard plan he and Luke had made.

"Okay," Ryker nodded. "I'm putting it down."

He leaned forward to place the weapon on the dirt, and took a deep breath as he stood back up. He knew what was coming next, and he hoped that Wheeler didn't aim for his head.

"Good boy."

Wheeler laughed, and then he trained the gun on him and pulled the trigger. The pain that filled his chest was more than expected, but as he fell to the ground like he and Luke had planned, he was damn glad the other man had aimed for his center mass.

"Ryker!"

Carly's scream filled the cave, and then Luke was there and more shots were fired. When he heard the heavy sound of a body hitting the floor, he started to sit up at the same time Carly arrived at his side. Tears were streaming down her face as her hands roamed her body, and he realized she must have gone into traumatic shock.

He grabbed her hands and stilled them against his chest.

"I'm okay, sweetheart," he said, lifting her chin with his other hand. "I'm wearing a vest, and he didn't hurt me."

As soon as his words registered, she sagged against him, and broke down into heavy sobs. He pulled her into his lap and wrapped his arms around her, wishing the heavy vest wasn't between them as she buried herself against his chest.

He kissed the top of her head.

"I love you so much," he murmured against her temple. "Not knowing how to find you nearly killed me."

When her sobs started to ease, Luke started walking toward them.

"He's dead, and I've already called it in," Luke said, handing him a tool that unfolded into a pair of scissors. "Use this for her wrists. I'll be outside waiting for the crews."

"Thank you, son."

"Anytime," Luke said. "You know that. You only have a few minutes."

"Let me cut these off," he said, loosening his hold so he could open the tool. He sat back and brushed his thumb across the gash on her cheek, and he silently wished he'd been the one to kill her kidnapper. "The emergency crews will be here soon. Are you hurt anywhere else? Did he... do anything else?"

She shook her head, and winced when he cut the zip-ties.

"He kicked me a couple of times, and pulled my hair like you saw, but that was it. He was waiting for you. Wanted you to watch him rape me. I don't know why."

More tears started rolling down her cheeks, but these ones were silent, and he wrapped his arms around her and pulled her against his chest. Soon, they were going to have to talk to the deputies and give statements—and she was definitely getting checked out by the paramedics—but for now, he was just going to hold his mate.

CHAPTER 10

Carly opened her eyes and took in the silence of the room. She didn't have to roll over to know that Ryker wasn't in the bed with her, but that didn't stop her from doing it anyway, and she leaned forward and breathed in the scent of his pillow before settling back on her own. He'd pushed most of the blankets on his half up against her back, and his side of the bed was cool to the touch.

She rolled onto her back and stared at the ceiling while trying to bury her disappointment.

Sunday was the only day the shop wasn't open, and she liked spending the morning tucked against Ryker's side.

Of course, she'd been occupying that place for the past few days, and maybe he was getting tired of her. She didn't think so, but things had been different since her kidnapping, and they'd been around each other a lot more in the past five days.

Not only had she taken the rest of the week off from work, but Ryker had closed the shop completely for one day, and then only worked half days the rest of the week. The result was a lot more time together, and unfortunately, none of that time had been having sex.

She hadn't wanted to at first, but after a couple of days, she'd been ready, and now Ryker was the one holding back. They spent the days together in what she thought was a comfortable harmony, and she'd spent the nights wrapped in his arms, but aside from a few kisses, he hadn't touched her, and she was beginning to wonder if he

wanted her to leave.

The thoughts didn't feel right, but she knew he never wanted to mate, and now that his cave had been invaded by her ex, maybe it was too much. When she'd tried to apologize for her ex being in his space, and getting killed there, he'd quickly shut down her worries, but they hadn't been back to the cave.

Well, she hadn't. Maybe he visited the space alone, and decided she was no longer welcome there.

Sadness swamped her, and she blinked several times, trying to fight back the tears that desperately wanted to fall.

After her ex was killed, it didn't take long for the law enforcement in the city to confirm that he'd fixated on her for some strange reason. They'd found lots of pictures and other things in his home that proved that he'd been planning to physically hurt her, and combined with the things that had happened in Hickory Bear Rapids, including her kidnapping, the case was closed pretty quickly.

After looking at all the evidence, Luke believed that the man had become obsessed with her after hearing about her move from her friend Jules. Because of the stolen car, he was already on a downward spiral, and hearing about her positive life changes could have pushed him over the edge. More so when she didn't answer his initial texts. Basically, because she wouldn't do or act the way he wanted, she became an easy target to blame for all of the bad things going on in his life.

She shuttered thinking about what could have happened if Ryker and Luke hadn't showed up to save her, but she pushed those thoughts away. She could spend all day going over different scenarios and possibilities, but honestly, she didn't want to know.

Luckily, she had been saved, and now the threat was gone. She could safely go back

to her own home if she wanted to, but that wasn't what she wanted.

Unfortunately, she might not have a choice.

She took a deep breath and swiped at an errant tear racing toward her ear. She had brought a lot of stuff from her place, and she briefly wondered if she should start packing, but quickly decided against it. If Ryker wanted her gone, then she would get out of his space quickly, but she wasn't going anywhere until they talked.

"Hey, what's going on?"

God, she'd been so stuck in her own head, she hadn't even heard Ryker come in the room.

"Nothing." She shook her head, and turned on her side to face him.

God, he was gorgeous.

He was dressed in a long-sleeved, black thermal shirt that molded to his broad chest, and, as usual, a matching beanie covered his hair. She could see the silver and black strands tickling his neck, and it thrilled her to know she was one of the few people in town—if not the only one—who got to see him without the covering on. Dark blue, denim jeans covered his legs, and though she couldn't see his feet, she knew they were probably bare.

Bare and perfect, just like the rest of him.

He was holding a to-go coffee cup that looked like it had come from the bakery, and though she was feeling unsure about what would happen next, she couldn't help but smile.

"Is that for me?" She sat up, and leaned against the headboard.

He narrowed his eyes, and walked around to her side of the bed.

"It is." He handed her the cup, and sat down on the edge. "There's also a bunch of scones in the kitchen for whenever you get hungry. Why were you crying? Are you in pain? Do you need more meds?"

"No, I'm not in pain. I..."

She wasn't ready to have this conversation yet. Not when he was dressed and looking so perfect, and she was still in her pajamas probably looking like a hot mess. She wanted to be on even ground, and that meant she needed to shower and get dressed before they started discussing their future.

"I was just missing you," she shrugged, her voice weak. God, she sounded pathetic even to her own ears.

He reached forward and cupped her cheek with his palm, and the tender look in his eyes tore her up inside. She covered his palm with her own and closed her eyes.

"What's going on in that pretty head of yours, sweetheart?"

She should have known better than to think she could hide from him. She opened her eyes and dropped her palm, wrapping it around the coffee cup and clutching the warm drink to her chest as if it would serve as some sort of barrier to his words.

"Do you want me to leave?"

"Wha..."

He dropped his palm, and tilted his head, studying her. His bunched-up forehead would have been funny if her stomach wasn't doing somersaults in anticipation of his answer, and she inhaled deep, breathing in the normally delicious scent of the coffee. Unfortunately, the move had the opposite effect that it normally did, and she suddenly felt nauseous.

"No." He shook his head, and one side of his mouth turned up in a smile as he took the cup from her hand and set it on the nightstand. "I definitely don't want you to leave. Why would you think that?"

She got the feeling he was teasing her, and hope flared. Ryker wasn't cruel, and if he was teasing, then there must be a reason for it. Still, she wanted—needed—him to say the words.

"I basically moved in here after the kidnapping, and we've been spending a lot of time together, but haven't had sex. I thought you might have changed your mind about us, and just don't know how to tell me. My house is safe. I don't have to stay here anymore if you don't want me to."

Ryker smiled and shook his head, but when his gaze met hers again, all the humor was gone.

"You were hurt," he said, the words almost patronizing. He gently slid a finger over one of the scabs that still marked her wrist. "Your wrists were red and bleeding. That fucker drew blood on your face, too, and your legs were covered in bruises. I'm not taking you like that. Not when you're in pain. But, unless you want to leave, I'm not ever letting you go. I want you to sell your house and move in here permanently. If you don't like this place, we can find another one. I don't care. All I care about is having you in my life. And not just half way, either. I want to complete the mating bond, and I want you to marry me."

God, she wanted to marry him, too, but she shook her head. Before her kidnapping, he'd been very clear about his desire to never be mated again, and while they hadn't talked about marriage, yet, she knew this was way too soon.

"It's not too soon," he said, shaking his head, "and it's not because of fear. The odds of another incident like that happening again are basically nil, and though I could have found you faster if we had been able to communicate while you were missing, that's not what this is about. That's not why I want to mate. I want to mate because I love you. You're my true mate, and I don't want to live without you by my side. I will, of course. This isn't me saying I'm going to off myself or anything, but I'm tired of letting fear dictate my actions when it comes to my mate. I want to give you everything—all of me—and that won't happen until we complete the bond."

He wanted to give her everything... All of him.

Forever.

And that's what she wanted, too.

"I love this house," she started. It was beautiful, and he'd never shared it with his ex, so she didn't mind moving in. "But what about your cave? No one had ever been in there before, and now it's been tainted with Wheeler's death. Doesn't that bother you?"

"It only bothers me if it bothers you. I removed the blood and packed down some new dirt that Luke gave me from the cave he likes to hang out in. We also found the spot that he was watching us from, and he didn't find it by accident. Most people don't venture that high into the park, so he had to have gone looking for it. Luke thinks he probably followed you here, and then saw us cross the bridge and got way too curious. He'd never been on the property before the day he took you. I know, because I would have scented him, so I know he'd never been in our backyard before. But, if

that memory—or any other one—is too painful, then I have no problems moving. Hell, we can build a new house if you want, and just live somewhere else until it's ready."

She was touched that he would build them a new house somewhere else, but she didn't want that for them. She loved Ryker's home, and she loved the connection he'd made to the National Park. She hadn't been back in the cave, but she wasn't afraid to go there. What happened with her ex was a little traumatizing, but him bringing her to the cave hadn't ruined the space for her.

"I don't want a new house. I want to live here, with you. If the cave becomes a problem for me, then we can figure out what to do then, but right now, I feel okay about going back there."

"I like that plan," he said, digging into his pocket.

He pulled out a ring box and flipped open the lid, and all she could do was stare. A huge diamond sat in the middle of two smaller aquamarine stones, and everything was set in a platinum band. The blue stones were the same shade as her coat, and she knew he didn't just walk into the jeweler's and pick this ring up off the shelf.

"Before I got the scones, I got this," he smiled. "Marry me? Even if you never decide to complete the bond, I still want you as my wife."

"Oh, Ryker." Her eyes filled with tears. "It's so beautiful. When did you order this?"

"The day after we met."

Carly snapped her gaze to his, and he didn't try to hide.

Ryker hadn't wanted to admit the truth, not even to himself, but he wouldn't lie to his

mate. He'd pushed the lunchtime meeting with the jeweler out of his head, but even though he'd been fighting it, he'd known that she was his from the moment they met.

"I know it hasn't been a perfect couple of weeks—I know I haven't been perfect—but I knew you were mine the moment you walked into my shop, and that will never change."

She held out her left hand, and though he would understand if she was nervous, it thrilled him that she was steady.

"Put it on me."

Confident, fierce, and oh so sexy. He loved everything about this woman, but he still needed her to say the words.

"I'm going to need you to say the words, sweetheart."

"Yes," she said, her eyes sparkling. "To everything. I want to marry you, and mate you, as soon as possible."

He reached in the box at the same time her words registered, and when he looked back up at her, she flashed him a knowing smile. His mate wanted to complete the bond now, and he wasn't dumb enough to deny her anything.

As he slid the ring down her finger, those thoughts didn't bother him like they would have in the past. Everything about Carly was different than it had been with his ex, and he was done wasting time comparing the two, because there was simply no comparison. He trusted Carly, and he knew their life together would be amazing.

"Oh, my god," she whispered, moving her hand from left to right. "It's even more beautiful out of the box."

"You make it more beautiful."

He leaned forward and slid one hand into her hair. He loved the way her locks looked when she first woke up. All wavy and out of control. It was the same way they'd looked after she'd rode him hard in the cave, and though they'd fucked in every room of the house, he'd only been inside her without a barrier that first time. He couldn't wait to see them spread out all over his pillow while he sank his cock deep inside her channel with nothing between them.

He wanted to take his time and make everything perfect, but he could already feel his canines pushing against his gums, and they were both still fully dressed.

Well, he was.

Even though it was cold outside, Carly was dressed in a pajama set that consisted of soft short shorts and a matching tank top that hugged her gorgeous breasts perfectly. She wore socks to complete the ensemble, and when she moved around the house, she wore a zip-front hoodie to help keep her arms warm.

He smiled as he remembered the night before. They were watching a movie on the couch, and though her legs were wrapped in a blanket, she'd snuggled tightly against him. He'd barely paid attention to the film, because all he could think about was her soft body pressed against his hard one, taking all the warmth she needed.

His dick had been half-hard since he'd walked into the room, but the minute she'd said yes, he'd swelled to the point of pain. He could feel the zipper of his jeans pressing against his length, and his animal growled beneath the surface as he pressed his lips to hers.

He worried that he might hurt her, that maybe he should go for a run first to burn off some energy, but his mate was having none of that.

"You're not leaving me," she smiled, even as she kissed him back. "I'm already soaking wet, and I want my mate now."

She pushed him away, and ripped off her tank top.

Fuck!

Her nipples were hard, the taut peaks reminding him of candy, and her breasts bounced as she shimmied out of her shorts and panties.

"You're wearing too many clothes," she said, moving toward the middle of the bed.

She laid down flat on her back with her knees bent, and when she opened her legs, he could how wet she was. Her honey was glistening on the lips of her pretty pussy, and he could see her hard clit peeking out from under its hood. He ripped his shirt over his head, knocking the beanie off in the process, and undid his pants. He pushed the denim down along with his boxers, and kicked the material free before joining her on the bed.

He crawled up between her legs and swiped his tongue from her wet hole to her clit. The taste and scent of her made his bear growl beneath the surface, and he felt his canines push through. The only other time this had happened, he'd been buried in her pussy without a condom, and if he wasn't about to mark her, he would go for a run and not come back until he was too exhausted to do anything but let her ride him.

Luckily, he didn't have to do anything so extreme. He kissed her mound, and then kissed a path up her body, careful not to nick her soft skin. When he reached her mouth, he placed a chaste kiss on her lips, but kept his mouth closed.

"Let me see."

He smiled big, relieved when she smiled back. He wasn't sure why he was worried. She'd seen his canines extended before, but for some reason he'd been afraid that she didn't remember what she was getting in to.

God, that even sounded stupid to him.

"I want this to be perfect," he said, his words garbled. "But I can't go slow. I want you too much."

"It's going to be okay, Ryker," she said, holding his face in her hands. "I'm ready."

He nodded, and used one hand to position his cock at the entrance to her core. He tried to slide in slowly, to not take her like an animal, but her hands slid down his back and held onto his ass at the same time she lifted her hips off the bed. He sank into her channel swiftly, and a low growl escaped his lips.

"Fuck, sweetheart."

He grabbed her ass and lowered her back down to the mattress, and she immediately wrapped her legs around him. The action pulled him deeper into her core, and he never wanted to leave. Her pussy fit around him like a glove, and he could feel the soft walls convulsing around his dick. He pulled out of her channel slowly, trying again for some semblance of control, but he was balancing on a thin thread.

He wanted nothing more than to slam into her cunt over and over, but they were about to complete the mating bond, and even though he'd told her that he couldn't go slow, he didn't want to ruin the moment. He pushed back into her slowly, and then she grabbed the nape of his neck and pulled him down for a kiss.

He stayed buried deep in her cunt, but kept his mouth closed while she licked the seam of his lips.

"Open your mouth for me," she said, moving her hips in a circle. The sensation caused his dick to throb, and when he growled, she used that opportunity to slide her tongue inside his mouth.

And then she moved her hips again.

"I need more, Ryker," she said, her voice low and nearly breathless. "You have to move faster... and harder."

Each statement was expressed after dipping into his mouth and tangling with his tongue, and then she licked one of his canines the same way she'd done in the cave. That was all it took. A sizzle of electricity seemed to race through his body, and he tingled all over. He moved in and out of her hard and fast, and every time he sank deep, her pussy clenched around him like a vise.

He kept pounding into her, in and out, until she tore her mouth away from his and screamed his name. It was only a few minutes later, but holding onto his control so tightly made it seem like forever, and he groaned as he sank his canines into the juncture of her neck and shoulder. As soon as he made contact with her skin, he came, roaring his release while he continued to move in and out of her soaking wet pussy.

He continued to move until he was milked completely dry, and then he retracted his canines and licked the wounds to seal them. The bruise on Carly's shoulder was huge, and even though he'd done this before, he didn't remember the evidence being so grotesque.

He pulled back to look at her face, and found her watching him intently.

Fuck! Did I hurt you, sweetheart?

Not even close. She smiled even wider. That was amazing.

Yes, it was.

Then what's wrong?

Her smile faded, and he knew he was fucking everything up again.

"Nothing's wrong." He pulled his dick out of her channel, and laid down on the opposite side of the bruise. She immediately turned toward him, and he wrapped an arm around her and leaned his forehead against hers. "The bruise is big, and it jarred me a little bit. That's all. I thought maybe I had hurt you or something."

"It only hurt at first," she said, snuggling closer. "After that it was nothing but pleasure. Will it be like that every time you bite me?"

"I don't have firsthand knowledge of that, but my parents said it did."

He didn't want to talk about his ex while in bed with Carly, and he was glad that she understood his meaning. His ex hadn't liked getting bitten as much as she'd thought she would, and she'd never let him do it again.

Oh, we're definitely going to test that out, and soon. But not yet. She kissed his chest before pulling away. I need my coffee and some of those scones. How many did you buy? Oh, and I have to see this bruise.

He watched her ass as she walked into the bathroom, wondering what it would be like to bite her there. He would have to do it on the weekend, and early enough that it would heal before the boys came over. Besides the fact that he didn't want her to be in any pain—and sitting on a bruise that huge would definitely be painful—he also didn't want to embarrass her, or share their sex life with anyone.

Whoa! This thing is huge. I wonder what it would be like if you bit my ass.

He glanced at the clock and decided they had time, and then he raced to the bathroom and bent her over the counter.

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Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 6:40 am

Three months later...

Ryker tightened his grip around Carly's hand, and the feel of her wedding ring took away some of his nerves. More so when she squeezed his hand back, and leaned her head on his shoulder. She only stayed there a minute, but even though she didn't say a word, he felt her love surrounding him.

It had been that way since they'd completed the mating bond, and once again, he was glad that he'd finally been able to get over the bullshit from his past and claim his mate the way they both deserved. Their bond was nothing like the one he'd had with his ex, and that truth had become evident the moment his canines had sank into her soft skin.

Hearing Carly's voice in his head completed him in a way he didn't understand was possible, and he loved everything about her.

He also loved being able to call her his wife.

They had married at the courthouse on the Friday after their mating, and even though he would have done whatever she wanted, he was glad that they were able to make things official as soon as possible. Carly hadn't wanted to invite any of her friends from the city, and with only a couple of close friends in town, she didn't want to have a big ceremony.

Instead, they had a small exchange of vows with the boys and Hattie as witnesses, and then they had all gone out to a family dinner to celebrate before he and Carly left for a weekend away at Grizzly Bear Lake.

He would have taken her anywhere, but because of her love of the outdoors, and his bear's need to run someplace safe, the resort had been the perfect place for them, and they'd gotten some special treatment because he and Liam Rivers had stayed in touch.

He still didn't fully understand how the Christmas Tree Lot Santa knew that he was planning to sell the food truck, but he respected Liam, and knew that the other man was telling the truth.

He thought back to the ache that arrived in his chest in early August, and smiled down at his mate. That ache had been the thing that had finally gotten him to think about letting go of that stupid truck, and though he had vowed to never buy another woman anything so large and costly again, he had no regrets about what was about to happen.

Carly had integrated into his home, and his life, perfectly, and every day since their mating had been better than the last.

She'd started moving her stuff into his home almost immediately after their mating, and that's when her love for art had really started to hit him hard.

Not only did she teach art, but she immersed herself in it every day, and though he'd seen some of her paintings when he'd visited her home, her love for the craft hadn't really hit home until she'd started taking over Luke's old bedroom to use as her studio.

Seeing all of her canvases leaning against the walls did something to him, and he'd decided she needed something bigger. He didn't want her out of his house, but if she ever wanted to display her work, then he didn't want anything holding her back.

Unlike the stupid food truck, buying her a building brought him nothing but joy, and he knew that was because Carly wasn't just any woman. She was his true mate, and he would do whatever was in his power to make her happy.

"You're very quiet," she said. And then, Everything okay?

She did that often, switching between talking aloud and using their link, and he loved it.

"I'm good. Just thinking about how much I love you."

I love you, too. So much.

They were almost to the corner of the street that would take them down to the rapids, and as she always did, she stopped and looked in the windows of the empty building. The space was located on the corner, and had walls of open windows on each of the exposed sides. The walls inside were painted a light brown, and years ago it had been a small, independent bookstore.

"This is my favorite building." Her voice was wistful, just like it always was when she looked at the space. "I wish someone would buy it and give it some life. It's in a great location, and look at all these windows. The light that fills the space is amazing, but there's more behind that wall. I wonder how far back it goes."

He already knew how far back it went, and though they had a lot of work to do, she was going to love it.

She started walking again, and he waited until they were in front of the door. The door had the unique design of facing the corner, and it was another one of the things that she normally praised about the place.

This time, he was the one to stop.

"Why don't you go inside and see for yourself?"

"Wha—?" She looked up at him, her eyes bright. What did you do?

She could read him way too easily, and though he loved it, he couldn't tease her for long. He reached in his pocket and pulled out a keychain that held two keys.

She stared at the keys in his hand, and then her eyes met his.

"Did you buy this place?" The words came out on a whisper, and he wanted to laugh at the awe in her voice. When he nodded, she added, "Why?"

"Because you love it so much, and I love you. I thought you might like to display your art here sometimes, or maybe teach classes. You could run an open gallery on the weekends, or pay someone else to run it, or rent out the space. There's no pressure, though. It can be something, or nothing. It doesn't matter to me. I just wanted you to have it."

"Oh, Ryker."

Her eyes filled with tears, but she blinked them away and pulled him down for a gentle kiss. It was just a chaste meeting of their mouths, but he loved the way she let her lips linger against his.

You didn't have to do this, but I love that you did. Thank you so much.

He wrapped one hand around her waist and pulled her closer, kissing her again. In that moment, he wanted nothing more than to forget the building and carry her off to his cave, but she laughed and pulled the keys out of his hand.

"Later," she said, patting him on the chest. "Let's go inside."

She ran to open the door, and he followed after her.

Unlike his first mate, she was the mate of his heart, and he would follow her anywhere.

The End

Thank you so much for reading