



Chomp's Challenge (The Shifted Misfits MC #2)

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Category: Action&Adventure

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

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

Ariel

My life is pain-filled and not my own. Im controlled with an iron fist. This wasnt how things were supposed to be, and it breaks my heart that Perry pulled the wool over my mothers eyes so well that she died thinking her girl was safe, secure, and loved. That couldnt be further from the truth.

One night of violence, and Chomp came into my life. Everything I thought I knew about the world shifted on its axis, and I was introduced to the paranormal. He saved me from the horrors I was enduring and then completely turned my world upside down when he told me I was his mate.

Im not good enough.

Im unworthy of a man like him.

I just cant seem to convince him otherwise.

Slowly, he breaks down my defenses by showing me what it really means to be cherished. Just when I think Im finally safe, a new threat surfaces, one who decides I need to pay for Perrys disappearance.

Chomp

I left the congregation I was born into when it became apparent that our alpha was a cruel, reprehensible piece of crap. He was the only one allowed to mate with the females as per our hierarchy, but he treated them horribly. After several fights, I chose to leave because

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ARIEL

This day is a disaster. I'm not sure why I'm surprised at how this camping trip has gone. It's always the same; Perry starts out having a good time, fishing and hanging out. And then it goes downhill from there, at least for me. He gets drunk, pushes me around, gets his fill of me, and then passes out. This is the worst, though. He brought his buddy, Ricky, who has always given me the creeps. And they are drinking heavily, and not just beer. Bottles of tequila and whiskey are being passed around, which makes Perry a bit... crazy.

Right now, my goal is to act as though I'm invisible, to be honest. Sometimes, it works. Other days are a reminder that there's no escape. Perry has seen to that. I send a silent prayer into the sky, hoping I can last the night without his attention. Unfortunately, when I hear Perry yelling, I realize my luck has just run out.

"Where's yer bitch, Perry?" Ricky bellows. "I got an itch that needs scratching." His chuckle is evil-sounding and almost maniacal, and I swallow back bile at what he's thinking.

I'll fight, not that it'll do any good. But there's a part of me that can't help trying to rebel against my current predicament. And it's not just Ricky or this camping trip. I wonder how the hell I got to this point in my life. I'm a good girl, or at least, I was one until Perry walked into my life. Things started out normally; he was charming and attentive. I moved in with him about a year after we started dating when my mom passed away.

God, Mom, I wish you were here, my mind whispers. Fuck cancer.

“Ariel! Git yer ass out here,” Perry yells. He’s slurring so badly, it’s difficult to understand him, but even so, I know from past experience he’ll resort to violence if I don’t respond.

“Oh no no no no no,” I mutter to myself as I pretend to be asleep.

“She’s probably sleeping in the camper... why don’t you give her a nice wake-up that she won’t soon forget? She likes it rough,” Perry tells Ricky, cackling as he says it. A frisson of fear courses through me while I try to maintain my charade of being asleep. And that’s when the door slams open.

The next thing I know, I’m being dragged from the camper, kicking and screaming while trying to grab what I can to stop what I know is going to happen. My fingers slide off a nearby wooden picnic table and leave claw marks on the surface, but it’s no use. Splinters gouge the tips of my fingers as I wince, desperate to prevent the inevitable.

“Shut the fuck up, you stupid bitch,” Ricky grunts as he rips off my nightshirt, and then punches me in the face when I try to bite him. My ears begin to ring, and I’m so dazed that I slump over. My face lands in the dirt and grinds against the rough ground as he flips me over and begins his assault, his fetid breath heating my cheek as he grunts out his pleasure. I gag as I try to fight back, even as tears flow down my face. The fire that courses through me as pain wracks me from head to toe has me sobbing.

How did I get here? I wonder. How did he fool me so well? I’m not stupid by any means, but Perry’s treatment of me has beaten me down so low, I don’t have any self-worth or self-esteem left.

What’s worse is this isn’t the first time Perry has allowed Ricky to do this to me, and the only reason I haven’t left before now is that I literally have nowhere to go. Perry controls everything with an iron fist. I have no access to any money. Even my own

paycheck has to be fully accounted for every time I get paid.

I've got no one.

Nothing.

Mom's treatments wiped everything out; her savings, my savings, and the inheritance she had left from her parents. Hell, I had to sell the house to finish paying off her medical debt, which is why I moved in with Perry when he offered. I just wish I had known the kind of hell I'd be walking into by accepting.

God, someone help me! My mind screams as tears continue to track down my face and I try to fight Ricky off. It's hard since I'm on my stomach, but I keep kicking my legs hoping to stop him.

"Ooh wee! I got a buckaroo!" He laughs as I continue to try to push him off of me.

I'm not sure how long this goes on as I begin to shut down and try to minimize the damage. He doesn't limit the assault to my lower body, but uses his fists to punch, his boots to kick, and then his hand surrounds my throat, cutting off my airway. The chokehold is nearly bliss. I black out with relief.

When I come to, I can hear Ricky mutter something about getting a refill before he comes back for round two. Pain reverberates through every inch of my body. I'm trying to do an inventory of what's physically wrong with me, and the list is extensive. I'm pretty sure my arm is broken, possibly some of my ribs and my wrist, too. My lip and right eye are busted and swollen, and as I start to drift away a second time, I swear I must be dying because I see glowing eyes.

Is that a wild animal?

God, please don't let me feel myself being eaten by wildlife. I really can't take that thought at all. But I'm tired, so very tired. The thought bubbles to the forefront of my brain. Is this it? How many minutes or hours do I have left?

I'm jostled awake from my reverie by Ricky stumbling into me, and a fresh wave of pain hits me, causing me to cry out.

"What's the matter, sugar tits? Ole Ricky more than you can handle?" He slurs while leering down at me.

I try pulling my battered and bruised body into a fetal position, but I'm no match for his strength, and once again, he begins assaulting me. As he thrusts into me, I suddenly go still as the glowing eyes I thought I saw earlier start moving, and I could swear I hear a hissing bellow.

Suddenly, I hear a god-awful screech coming from Ricky as he is plucked from me. The sudden cool air kisses my naked body, but that's not what I care about. It's the vision in front of me, straight from a horror movie. My one eye cannot fathom what I'm seeing.

"Ohmygodohmygodohmygod." I must be dead and in purgatory, I think. "Shit. Why didn't I finish catechism class so I would know more about it?" I whisper to myself.

No wonder I got in trouble with the nuns. My thoughts feverishly race as I try to comprehend exactly what it is that I'm seeing. Even though my body is screaming in agony at the damage Ricky inflicted, I almost feel as though I'm floating outside of my body. Maybe I'm in shock? I honestly don't know, but I'm equal parts fascinated and horrified at the sight in front of me.

Yet, somehow, I don't feel any fear from the beast that's attacking Ricky. The sound coming from the scaly beast reminds me of a chainsaw as it starts. It's gritty and

rumbling the ground beneath my stomach. But it's not directed toward me. All its rage is centered on Ricky. I must be insane because I don't feel afraid of this wild gator. Just the opposite. In fact, I feel safer than I've felt in years. It definitely must be shock from the attack, as well as my injuries, that's making me feel this way. My vision tunnels. I'm going to pass out again, and maybe I won't ever wake up.

Perry stumbles over and tries to help his friend, but the stick he uses to swat at the gator is swatted away like it was a twig, and the beast turns its wrath on him. Good gator, I think. Perry goes quiet, and Ricky continues to scream, until he doesn't anymore, just as my body and brain completely shut down. If Death is coming for me, at least Perry and Ricky went first. It's a small consolation, but at this point, I'll take it.

My eyes are closed, but I feel an incredible warmth enveloping me, accompanied by a soothing rumble. Warmth washes over my face and neck—so gentle. The darkness is relentless and resumes control as the last of my strength wanes. My last thought is that I've become a snack for an alligator. Thank goodness I don't have family that will be looking for me.

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Chapter One

CHOMP

Ever since I scented my mate a few months back, my gator has been a bit ornery, impatient, and restless. He's constantly trying to steer me toward the swamp or local lakes, eager to search the water for our elusive female. It doesn't matter that we've been looking for her daily. He's still pissed we haven't found her yet. Last night he hissed at Spike. The president of our club and one of my closest friends doesn't take shit from my gator. Not surprising since he's a dragon. Yep, a dragon.

People don't know about us or other shifters. It's supposed to stay that way, but humans are unpredictable and feisty, and I have a feeling my mate is out there somewhere, tangled up with the wrong ones. It's just an itch. A scratchy feeling under my scales I can't get rid of. And my gator hates it. He chumpfs loudly to remind me.

After last night, Spike said I need to get my shit straight. Well, more like he growled and ordered it, so I decided a few days in my shifter form might turn my thoughts around. I figured it was the best course of action considering he had smoke billowing from his nostrils. Waking his dragon isn't something any one of us enjoy doing, especially since he's fearsome. Usually when he's ticked, we smell smoke, but when we visually see it, there's typically a rush to leave the immediate vicinity.

The cool water is calming to my gator as we enter, almost entirely submerging beneath the surface. It's hours later that my gator hisses. I've been floating, and of course, checking out the club's properties, so I'm not sure what draws me close to the

campsite that we recently opened as an adjunct to our kayaking and rafting business.

We own so much land, there's no reason not to expand our businesses, especially when so many customers want to know where they're able to camp. We don't have RV spots, just areas for tents, but each is nicely landscaped, and comes with a firepit, a picnic table, and a concrete grill. The weekend draws plenty of business.

What I don't like is the people. Some of them give off bad vibes. I wasn't crazy about the two men who rented a spot for the weekend with their small truck. While we don't allow huge RVs, the truck has a camper top and they had the tent and other camping gear strapped to the top, so we let them rent despite my misgivings.

And now that itchy feeling has suddenly become a sting so strong that my scales nearly burn. My gator is riled up, and I have no choice but to investigate. Nosing around, I catch the elusive scent of my mate, thrilled to finally find the sweet aroma again after so long. Without hesitation, I move closer only to freeze in my tracks when I hear her screaming and crying. What the fuck is going on?

As a shifter, I have heightened senses and can move faster than a normal alligator. I'm also much larger in my gator form, so when I see what one of the men is doing to my mate, my first thought is to get him off of her. The primal part of my brain takes over. It's the beast in control now.

My gator's U-shaped snout opens, and his teeth snap down, biting into our prey. Pleasure rolls through me as the human male's screams of pain fill the air. The crunch of bone satisfies us both as the metallic taste of blood coats the gator's tongue. I have no qualms about ripping him apart, especially when I see some of the damage he inflicted on my mate. His cries are music to my ears. My only goal is to ensure he can never touch anyone ever again.

I sense movement seconds before I see another man rush in our direction. When he

comes near me with a stick to defend his friend, then swats me, I bellow, showing him all my teeth, now coated in his friend's blood and gore, before using my front leg to toss it aside. My gator is eager to tear him apart, too. He's furious that two males were harming our female. With this new human now in my sights, I set about making sure neither can ever hurt my mate again. While I have no clue who he is to her, I instinctively know that he's been her primary tormentor. There's a sour odor on him that's slightly attached to her, although the scent of the other male smothers her more. It's enough to enrage both me and my gator to the point that we feel murderous.

But it's my mate's whimpers that keep me from fading into my beast completely. I hear her occasional murmurs but focus all my attention on the fucker in front of me. Somehow, he broke my mate, so now, I'll break him. Then I'll take all these parts and submerge them at the bottom of the lake for the other predators who live below the surface. I mean, everyone's got to eat, right?

But I don't expect my gator to fling the body parts from side to side in his jaw, showing off because he's proud that he destroyed the vile humans. I don't realize he's tossed the pieces into the lake and let them sink on their own because he's anxious to return to our mate. It's when his tongue begins to lick her clean and try to heal her with his saliva that clarity soaks into my brain. She's close to death. Fuck!

By the time I shift back to my human form, my mate is unconscious. I gather her close, unsure of what I should do first; find clothes so I don't freak her out because I'm naked or reach out to Spike and have him or one of the brothers bring a cage so I can take her back to the clubhouse. She needs medical care, food, water, and medicine. She's hurt beyond my comprehension.

An agonized hiss leaves my throat as I stand and hold her against my body heat, desperate to help this woman who already owns my heart before I hear her speak a word or gaze into her eyes. I make a quick decision to take her back to my place first, knowing I have first aid supplies on hand. She won't die on my watch.

I've got a cabin set far back from the road. When my gator gets antsy and I need the lake to soothe my beast, I'll spend a few weeks here. It's not noisy or crowded like the clubhouse. Out here, it's just nature and wild things and the calling of the water that soothes my itchy scales.

This is the only place I feel truly at ease and where my monster can roam without fear of discovery. Even the campers know from the posted signs that gators roam these shores, and I'm strict about hunting. This area and the surrounding campground are for recreation only.

The walk to my cabin happens so quickly that I don't realize I've reached it until I see the familiar door. Kicking it open, I enter and take my mate straight to my room on the second floor. I don't hesitate to place her on the bed and don't care if her blood stains the linens. I'll buy everything new and provide all that she needs.

"I wish I knew your name," I whisper as I rest her head on my softest pillow.

She's yet to regain consciousness, and my gator's worry magnifies my own. I don't know the extent of her injuries and won't until I can cleanse her body from the rest of the blood and dirt. She's filthy and bruised and beaten so badly my hands shake as I push her hair off her face. Tenderly, with great effort, I stroke her cheek where it isn't swollen.

"I won't let anyone harm you again," I vow, rising to my feet. In the bathroom, I gather supplies and fill a basin with hot, soapy water. When I return, I place everything on my nightstand and drag it close, sitting on the edge of the bed as I begin to wash my mate's soiled skin and delicate limbs.

I've got her mostly clean when I can't help gazing at the juncture between her thighs. They're slightly parted, and it's the bruising and blood that causes a muscle in my jaw to tick. Rage floods my body as I feel my gator's fury rise again. She was

violated in the worst way, and I know she won't want a stranger to touch her there. As much as I want to cleanse those vile humans from her body, I won't betray her trust while she's sleeping. Not that she knows who I am. Yet. Every part of her has been washed except for her intimate areas, and it'll have to suffice for now.

Once I'm finished, I cover her with a blanket and leave her to rest, knowing I've done all I can for now. The human part of my brain insists that she needs to go to a hospital so a doctor can examine her, but my beast knows I've done more to heal her than any human medicine. The enzymes in my saliva coated her wounds as my gator licked them. The healing properties inside should be enough to help her body recover from the wounds. Even the broken bones are already mending, which pleases my gator tremendously.

He's also happy that she's here in our burrow, surrounded by our things, and permeating our bedding with her scent. I take one last look at her, breathing in her essence before I turn and walk away. Right now, she needs rest so she can heal, even though I want to know every little thing about her.

I close her in my room and head downstairs to put on a pot of coffee. As it brews, I send a text to Spike. He needs to know I won't leave my mate's side until she's fully recovered. I know that means that I'll miss church and other club functions, but I don't care. My mate is the only reason I would defy my president, and she's worth any punishment I could receive.

It's not surprising that he shows up at my cabin an hour later. Spike doesn't bother knocking first before he enters, scowling as his gaze bounces around the cabin. "Where is she?" he asks. While his tone is harsh, I don't take offense since that's normal for him. Only Callie, Kodiak's mate, causes him to soften his speech. Granted, we all find ourselves acting differently around her since she's the first mate that any of us have found. Now, I've found mine, so I'm sure it'll give the rest of the brothers even more hope that theirs is out there.

“Upstairs. Resting,” I grunt out through a mouthful of coffee. I’m now on my second pot as thoughts and scenarios run through my mind. I need to figure out how to help her heal the things that my saliva won’t; her heart, her mind, her inner self.

“Tell me what happened,” he rumbles as he starts pacing the living room. With my open floor plan, he can walk a circle around the bottom level without bumping into furniture. Of course, if he keeps it up, I’m gonna need new flooring, but that’s the least of my worries right now.

I go through everything, stopping when I remember there might be body parts floating on the river, and the campsite is probably a bloody mess. “Fuck.”

“Your gator tore shit up, huh?” he questions.

“The motherfucker was assaulting her, Spike,” I growl, instantly keyed up with the memory. “I pulled him off her.”

Spike curses and grips my shoulder. “She’s safe now. You made sure of that.”

I did, but my gator’s bloodlust still burned bright. He wasn’t satisfied. Ripping the two men apart would never be enough after what they did to our mate. Even now, I wish I could go back and do more damage to them, but there wasn’t much left to begin with after my rage.

“I don’t even know her name yet,” I murmur.

Ours , my gator whispers. I shake my head at his statement, because that’s all well and good that she’s our mate, but I know she’s got a name I need to use.

“You stay with her, I’ll get some of the brothers, and we’ll go see if any further cleanup is needed,” Spike advises. “Plus, I’m sure she’s got shit there that we can

bring back to you that might help you figure out who she is.”

I nod, liking where his thoughts are going. “Think we should find out where she lived so someone can go and gather the rest of her stuff?” I ask.

“Honestly, Chomp, she might be better off starting from scratch after all you said was going on,” Spike replies. “It’s likely she brought her purse, so she’d have her identification shit, plus most people have a phone. That’s what I’m thinking she’ll want the most. Everything else? The club can get it new for her.”

We can get new for her , my gator says, reiterating Spike’s words, but then adds, just us. My gator is feeling possessive over our mate already. I have to admit I am, too. I like the thought of helping her rebuild her life from the ground up, although I don’t like what she had to go through to get to this point whatsoever.

“Okay. Do you think Kodiak would let Callie come out to the cabin so she could figure out what sizes my mate wears?”

Right now, I have her in one of my T-shirts, along with a pair of my boxers since my sweatpants would swim on her. While I like her being cocooned in my clothing, I’m sure she’d be more comfortable in stuff that fits her slender frame.

“Yeah, since I’m gonna have him go with me to the campsite, that’s not a bad idea, especially if she wakes up. You’re a big fucker, Chomp, and after what you shared, men will probably scare the hell out of her.”

Sighing, I nod. “You’re right. While I plan to be by her side while she heals, she might worry that she’s gone from the frying pan into the fire or something.”

Spike puffs smoke from his nostrils. “That will never happen on our watch, to any woman, ever.”

“I know. Let me know when you’re at the campsite.”

Once Spike is gone, I finish the coffee and start making food. My mate will wake hungry, and I plan to have a variety of foods available to tempt her palate. Since I have no idea what she likes, I cook breakfast items like scrambled eggs with cheddar cheese and bacon, but also cut up fresh fruit, toast a few bagels, and slather on cream cheese. Since I’ve got the cutting board out, I chop up veggies and prepare salads, placing them in the fridge to stay cold.

I’m still not satisfied, so I make a few grilled cheese and ham sandwiches and start a crockpot with homemade chicken noodle soup. I figure I’ve got enough of the basics here to cover whatever my mate needs for nutrition. I recently bought cookies and brownies from Beanie’s Brew, a local coffee shop, since they have the best baked goods in town. I don’t think I’m missing a single thing to care for my mate. If I am, I know one of my brothers will pick it up for me without question because that’s what family does for one another.

All that I own is hers now. And I now understand why Kodiak acted the way he did after he met Callie and realized who she was to him. Mates are precious and need to be protected at all costs.

The house is silent, so when I hear the bloodcurdling scream upstairs, my gator is instantly ready to eliminate any threat. I rush from the kitchen up the stairs and into my bedroom, barely touching the wooden boards on my way.

No one will harm my woman ever again.

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Chapter Two

ARIEL

A wareness is slow to return. It feels like I'm trudging through layers of sticky, thick mud as I claw my way out of sleep and into reality. Pain is the first thing that I notice. It's clinging to every bone and muscle in my body. I feel weakened by it, but not ruined.

How odd.

I wiggle my fingers and toes, blinking as the fog slowly lifts and the memory of what happened to me returns with ferocity. I don't want to relive every horrid, agonizing minute of it, but I can't help it. Everything comes rushing back as my fingers clench the comforter until my knuckles turn white. They ache, like the rest of my body does, but they're no longer covered in blood, dirt, and grime like I remember them being.

Wait.

Where the hell am I!? And more importantly, who gave me a bath?

I don't recognize this room. The bed isn't mine, and it's not the dump where Perry lived. My wild gaze bounces around the wooden walls and simple, sparse furnishings. Am I a prisoner?

Oh, God. Did Perry give me to someone else?

My mind fractures at the thought, and a scream rips from my throat. I shove off the covers, looking down at my body to see a shirt and shorts that don't belong to me. Confusion and terror seize my thoughts as I scramble from the bed and nearly trip on the comforter that was neatly wrapped around me.

The door slams open as I bolt upright. There, standing in the doorway, is the biggest man I've ever seen. He fills the entire open space with broad shoulders and rippling muscles. I can't seem to make my brain make sense of his clothes as I stare. He's not wearing a shirt, but there's a frilly white apron tied around his waist. It's so . . . domestic.

"Who," I choke with a dry throat, clear it, and try again. "Who are you?"

The man lifts his hands, and all I see are long fingers and palms that look as large as my head. He's huge. Tall. And wow, covered in ink. I don't think I've ever seen arms that big or tattooed in my life.

"Hi. I'm Chomp. It's my, uh, road name. But everyone calls me that."

He sounds awkward. Almost nervous.

"Why am I here?"

"I brought you here." He says it so matter of fact, like I should understand.

I don't.

"Is this your house, Chomp?" What a weird name. I wonder why he's called that.

"It is. You needed medical care, and there's nothing close. The nearest hospital was too far to go to with the extent of your injuries."

I have so many questions, but there's only one pushing to the forefront of my mind. Mortification sets in, but I decide to ask anyway. "So, did your wife or girlfriend bathe me?"

His cheeks turn red, but he doesn't lose eye contact with me. "No, I uh... I did. But not your um, private areas," he rushes to add, the blush now spreading and covering his upper chest.

I don't think he's the type of man who embarrasses easily, yet right now, he's almost reticent. I nearly giggle when I realize that I'm using huge words, as if there'll be some kind of test when we're done talking. Shaking my head, I say, "Thank you."

Yes, it's weird that he chose to help me, but at the same time, if he hadn't, God only knows if I would've survived more of Ricky and Perry's attention. "Um, Chomp? What happened to Ricky and Perry?"

"Do you really wanna know?" he rumbles out, his eyes flashing like the creature's did yesterday, or maybe it was last night. Hell, I don't even know how long I've been out of it. "Because the short answer is, they'll never hurt you again. Ever," he states. "But, if you want the long answer, I'll give that to you as well."

"No, I'm good," I hastily reply as flashes of memory hit my brain. Body parts being flung all over the place, the screams of both men. Yeah, I don't think I need the long answer at all. Something comes to mind, and I ask, "Will you be in trouble?"

"For what?" he replies. "Ridding the world of two absolute pieces of shit?"

I snicker because he's not wrong; both Perry and Ricky were beneath the bottom of the proverbial barrel. Still, the last thing I want is this man, who obviously helped me by rescuing me to get into trouble. "I mean, don't I need to give the police a statement about how an alligator attacked them or something?"

Something quick flashes in his eyes. The pupils close into vertical slits and I swear his eyes take on an inhuman glow, more reptilian than man. They remind me of that alligator, but that's impossible, right?

I must be losing my mind.

"Your eyes," I whisper, gesturing to his face.

He blinks, and suddenly, his eyes are brown again with a hint of green. "I don't know your name yet."

The change of subject is almost jarring. "Ariel."

He repeats it, but when he does, it's like his tongue is caressing every letter. I shiver at the warm timbre as he speaks. "Ariel."

Wow. How is he even real? He's like some Greek God that's been chiseled in stone and brought to life. He's sculpted and nearly perfect. All rounded edges and not an ounce of fat on his lean frame. There's not a thing about him that I don't find attractive, and that freaks me out. I don't want to feel like this or be near him. I don't want to be around any men after what Perry and Ricky did.

My arms wrap around my torso, and I take a step back, wary of Chomp and his intentions. "I want to leave."

His expression falters. "Are you sure? I thought you might like to rest and recover where there aren't a lot of people around. The lake is beautiful this time of year."

Why do I feel like he's trying to sell me on remaining here with him?

"I don't want to take advantage of your hospitality."

I'm actually afraid to stay because I shouldn't be feeling the way I do right now. In fact, the last thing I want is to embroil him in my shitty life. Perry destroyed who I was as a woman, and I have nothing to offer this man named Chomp. Nothing at all. Sadness seeps into my soul because I suspect that in another place and time, I might feel differently.

He smiles, and it's breathtaking. He's too handsome with his dark hair, jawline sharp enough to cut glass, and a short and neatly trimmed beard. "You're welcome to stay as long as you like."

"I think it's best if I leave," I insist.

His smile wavers. "Okay. But how about you eat first? I made a few different things since I wasn't sure what you'd like."

I guess that explains the frilly apron, which surprisingly doesn't make him look effeminate in any way. "Um, since you went to the trouble to cook, I'll come and eat, but then I should probably leave."

"You come down as soon as you're ready. No rush." He winks at me, spins on his heel, and leaves the bedroom, taking a bit of the light in the world with him.

My life had become such darkness that I felt swallowed by it. How ironic that the first light I feel is after such a brutal assault and with a stranger. There's something open and honest about Chomp. He feels genuine and sweet. I don't know how to process that.

How can I after so much cruelty?

But it's the slight flutter in my heart that decides for me. That teasing bit of light is too enticing to resist. I slowly make my way to the door, noting that my ribs and the

bones I thought were broken don't feel more than sore right now. I move with more ease than I anticipate. I'm definitely not at my best, but considerably less injured than I remembered. In fact, my bruises are yellow and not the deep purple and blue I expected them to be after the brutal beating I received.

How is this possible?

Chomp is in the kitchen when I reach the bottom of the stairs. He's still wearing that apron, and I know there has to be a story tied to it. I don't ask because my focus turns to the mouthwatering aromas filling his kitchen. There's so much food! I can't believe he cooked all this. It's enough to feed a houseful of people, not just the two of us. My gaze flicks over the taut muscles on his body, and I smirk. He probably needs all that fuel.

"Is all this supposed to be for the two of us?" I ask, taking a seat on a nearby stool. He's got a center island piled with dishes, and I note there's a crockpot full of chicken noodle soup; it's just what I need.

"Uh, yeah." He shrugs like it's no big deal that he must have spent hours making all of this while I slept. "What can I get ya?"

"Soup and grilled cheese, please." It's the best place to start. I love scrambled eggs, sausage, and breakfast food, but I'm not sure my stomach can handle the grease right now.

Chomp ladles a bowl with soup and places it down, followed by a grilled cheese that he cuts in half the right way, into wedges like my mom used to do for me when I was sick. It's that little detail that brings tears to my eyes, stinging as I hold them back. When was the last time anyone cared enough to treat me with respect or kindness? He even folds a napkin and places it beside me, grinning until he sees the sheen of tears in my eyes.

“Shit. You okay, Ariel?”

No. Yes. Maybe. I don’t know. They’re all correct answers. I settle on one. “Not sure.”

“Hey, I’m not expecting anything from this. I had all the food. It’s no hardship. I wanted to cook for you.”

One lone tear slips down my cheek, and I brush it aside. “Thanks. It’s been a long time since,” I pause, not wanting to continue. “It looks good.”

“I hope it tastes better than good. I used up all the Gouda,” he laughs.

Gouda? My fav! I bite into the sandwich and nearly moan. It’s so freaking good. I almost smile.

He fixes himself a hearty plate full of the breakfast foods, along with a bowl of soup and some crackers, which he crushes up and then tosses into the bowl. He sits down at the table, careful not to get too close to me, leaving an empty stool between us.

“It’s delicious,” I finally admit after taking another bite, chewing, then swallowing it down. I reach for an unopened bottle of water and raise my brow at him.

“I wasn’t sure what you’d want to drink, but I figured water was a safe bet. I also didn’t think you’d want me to open the bottle, all things considered,” he replies. “I also have coffee, juice, and soda, if you’d rather have any of those.”

“No, water’s fine.”

I don’t tell him that I wasn’t allowed to drink anything but water while living with Perry. I’m not sure my stomach would be able to handle anything else. Occasionally,

I had Kool-Aid, but again, that wasn't frequently enough that I trusted my gut wouldn't expel everything. And this sandwich is too freaking delicious to waste in that manner as far as I'm concerned.

He clears his throat, causing my gaze to collide with his. I see concern and compassion, but no pity, which is a good thing, because it was my own fault for staying with Perry instead of leaving. I deserved what I got.

"No, you damn sure didn't!" Chomp exclaims, letting me know that I spoke my last thoughts out loud. "No one ever deserves to be treated the way they did you, Ariel. You were obviously in a situation that was outside of your control, and someday, I hope you trust me enough to share all of that, but for right now, just know that you're safe here. You're also safe around my club brothers, and Callie, Kodiak's old lady."

There's no way I can share anything like that with him! I might as well just go and jump into the lake and drown myself. Shame courses through me as I let myself think of how horrible the past year has been since my mom died. Practically right after the funeral is when Perry changed toward me. It started with small things: a shove or a push when I didn't move quickly enough for him. But then, he'd slap me if dinner wasn't ready when he got home from work. Never mind the fact that I was working as well, he still expected it on the table by six every night. He didn't like the 'fake' cooking as he called it, so all my crockpot recipes were out, and he hated when I tried to meal prep in order to make sure I could accommodate his wishes.

A warm hand gently covers mine, and I look up to see Chomp's expression change to one of sorrow. It's like he already knows life has kicked my ass or something. He doesn't look at me like my coworkers used to when I went to work and wasn't able to fully cover the bruises. There's a flicker of fury in those chocolate depths but no disgust.

"It's going to be okay, Ariel, I promise."

A knock at the door has him standing as it flies open, and a woman practically bounces in saying, “Spike said to just come on in, Chomp, I hope you don’t mind. God, it smells good in here. Have you been cooking again?”

Chomp chuckles, the vibrant sound sending a wave of pleasure through me as he says, “Slow down, Callie. To answer your question, yes, I’ve been cooking again and there’s plenty if you’re hungry. This is Ariel.” He points to me as I duck my head and shyly nod.

“Hey, Ariel, I’m Callie, but you probably figured that out since Chomp used my name. So, I brought some stuff over for you, but if you’ll tell me your sizes, I’ll go shopping!”

I blink at her words. Shopping? For me?

Chomp shakes his head as he grabs a plate from the cupboard and some more silverware, before bringing it over to the table and setting it in front of Callie. “What do you want to drink, Callie?” he asks.

“Oh! I need coffee, of course,” she replies, grinning at me. “Gotta keep this engine revved up.”

I start giggling because she already seems to be hyper enough to me without adding caffeine. Chomp’s luscious laughter joins in until Callie finally smacks her forehead and grins at the two of us. “Yeah, I might be a little bit excited because Spike told Kodiak that you...” She suddenly stops after glancing at Chomp’s face. “Never mind. I think Kodiak must’ve had Beanie add an extra espresso shot in my drink this morning.”

“Who’s Kodiak?” I ask. “For that matter, who’s Spike?” I pin my stare on Chomp, who can’t hide his wide grin, or the dimple that pops on both sides of his face.

“Spike is the president of our motorcycle club. Kodiak is one of my brothers. Don’t worry, you’ll meet them all eventually.”

I attempt a smile, but just as I start to relax and my belly gets full, I’m hit with a wave of fatigue. I wobble on my seat and nearly tip over.

It’s the look of panic on Chomp’s face that causes me to giggle . . . right before I lose my balance.

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Chapter Three

CHOMP

I watch in horror as Ariel loses her balance on the stool, reacting faster than humanly possible as I reach her. My arms scoop under her knees and lift her, too concerned that she's unwell to worry about touching her without permission. "Are you okay?" I ask, anxiously awaiting her answer.

"I'm so tired."

Shit. I should have realized this would be too much for her. "You need rest."

"But it's not my house," she feebly argues.

"Do you have anywhere else to go?" I wanted to ask that question hours ago.

"No," she admits, yawning before her head rests on my shoulder.

My gator rumbles my chest with approval as I ignore Callie's knowing smile and head up the stairs. Once I enter my room, I gently lower Ariel to the mattress and cover her with the blanket, watching as her eyes flutter. She's exhausted. Purple shadows rest on the delicate skin beneath her eyes. I already know she's underweight, and there are scars from old injuries that must have occurred in the last year or two. Those assholes hurt her for months, maybe years.

Fuck. My hands clench at my sides as I watch this fragile, beautiful woman, wishing I

could have found her sooner. She's suffered so much trauma. How do I help her through it all?

I close the door and head downstairs, fighting a headache. My gator is still prodding me, wanting to submerge into the lake and hunt for any other threats. He wants to guard her as she rests, and I appease him, conceding that we'll shift soon. I'm most effective while in my gator form. No one will get close to the cabin while I'm on patrol.

Callie sips her coffee as she watches me. "Your mate is lovely."

"She is," I agree.

"You need to take it slow, Chomp. She's in a delicate state right now."

My chin drops. "Fuck. I know."

"Let me help. She needs to trust us if she's going to stay."

Hope floods my body with warmth. "Will you? I don't have the right words to help her through this." I crack my neck, fighting the gator's urges. "The rage is too strong."

"Spike told Kodiak what happened, and he told me." She sighs. "I'm sorry."

"Not your fault."

"No, but I think she needs a friend. Another woman."

I nod. "Yeah."

“We’ll help her through this, Chomp. Promise.”

I’m so fucking grateful all I can do is nod again. I suspect before it’s all said and done, Ariel’s going to need each and every one of my brothers to fully heal. While I’d prefer to do it all on my own, I realize I’m not equipped for every scenario at all, and my brothers, whose backstories I don’t know in full, might have experiences that’ll help Ariel heal in all ways; mind, body, and soul.

She’s still ours, my gator grumbles. I shake my head at how stubborn he’s being right now. I know she’s ours, for fuck’s sake! But we’re out of our league right now, and the best thing to do is reach out to my chosen family for help. He’s just gonna have to accept that fact. He chumpfs in my head like he’s trying to argue, but we both know I’m right.

Spike and Kodiak arrive an hour later after stopping at the campsite. I join them outdoors, close to the lake where my gator can watch over the property. They’re both tense, and I bristle as I sense their anger. What the fuck is wrong now? I almost ask when Spike blows smoke from his nostrils and cracks his neck.

“Too much blood at the campsite.”

Fuck. I know what he means. It’s not the men I butchered, but my mate’s blood that resulted from her injuries and the assault.

Kodiak tilts his head back and roars. The thought of any of our mates suffering in that way makes his bear want to tear through the forest to search for threats. There are only two, but that doesn’t matter. Once we bond to a woman, our animals consider all females precious, regardless of who she mates. Kodiak and Spike, along with the rest of the club, will protect Callie and Ariel with their lives. It helps to ease the bloodlust since my gator won’t relent. He still feels danger is lurking too close to Ariel.

Spike ticks his chin in the direction of the campground. “Your gator must have done a better job than you thought. We didn’t find much left.”

“The local authorities think it’s a wild animal attack. No foul play. We’re good,” Kodiak adds.

“How did you manage that?” I wonder, curious how they covered it up since I knew my gator’s prints must have been left in the mud.

“Didn’t want them to go after the gators or your scaly ass so we picked up a mountain lion and left plenty of prints.”

I snort at Spike’s word usage. “Picked up?”

“Might be more accurate to say we had a snack and his help.”

Despite the seriousness of the situation, I snort. “Uh-huh.”

“Is she okay?” Kodiak inquires, ticking his chin toward the cabin.

I’m not sure if he means Callie or Ariel. “Ariel is resting. Callie is drinking all my coffee.”

Kodiak chuckles. “My mate enjoys her caffeine.”

I know the second that Ariel wakes. There’s a slight shift in the wind, a vibration that my gator senses. She’s opened the bedroom window, and her feminine scent brushes across my nose. My reaction is instant. I’m hard that fucking fast. But I’m also concerned since I still smell blood on her and other fluids. The remnants of those males I need to cleanse from her body.

She needs a shower, and I can't wait any longer. My gator pushes me to care for our female, and I don't hesitate to turn toward the cabin, not bothering to tell Spike or Kodiak what I'm doing. They probably figured it out almost the second I took off. When I reach the door, I rush inside, taking the stairs two at a time.

I only pause when I reach my bedroom, hearing movement inside. It's odd to knock, but I do, trying to show my mate I can be thoughtful and patient. "Hey, beautiful, I thought I'd check on you and see if you'd like a bubble bath."

Yeah, part of my master plan to win her over and make her fall in love with me. Women like bubble baths, right?

The door cracks open, and I see Ariel with a smirk on her face. "You want to know if I want a bubble bath."

"Yep."

She nibbles on her bottom lip. "I think I want a shower first, then the bubble bath."

I don't ask why when it's obvious she doesn't want to sit in the filth that clings to her, despite how much I tried to clean her skin off when I brought her here. "Tell you what, I've got plenty of towels and products you can use already stocked inside. There's a big fluffy robe hanging behind the door, too. You take that shower and I'll find the supplies for the best bubble bath you've ever had."

I can't tell what she's thinking, but there's a little sparkle in her eye I haven't seen before now. My gator loves it, and I grin. I'm hoping this means I've made my new mate happy.

I leave Ariel alone to tend to her needs and gather up supplies: candles, a lighter, liquid bubble bath I bought by accident once when I thought it was body wash, extra

towels, a wine glass, and sparkling water flavored with strawberry and kiwi. I need to find out what Ariel prefers to drink, but I noticed she only wanted water to drink when we ate earlier. Something seemed off about it, and I intend to find out the details once she feels ready to talk more about her past.

Out in the hall, I pace while Ariel showers. Below me, gathered in my kitchen, I hear Kodiak, Spike, and Callie talking. They aren't discussing me or my mate, which I appreciate.

Once the water turns off and I hear Ariel exit the bathroom, I knock on the door again. "Bubble bath service," I joke. "Can I come in?"

"Sure," Ariel answers before she opened the door.

Fuck. Me. I didn't expect to find her in my robe, covered in fluffy gray, and so goddamn attractive. My scent tangled with hers does wicked things to my brain. My cock hardens and I am glad I thought to wear loose jeans instead of sweats. That wouldn't have gone over well. Lust spikes in my brain and then fizzles out. Sex is probably the last thing on her mind as a result of her attack, and it isn't on my radar either. Someday, when we both are ready, we can take our relationship to the next level.

Now? I just want her to feel cherished, cared for, and safe. The rest will come later.

"Gonna set this up for you. Go ahead and relax. I'll let you know when it's ready."

She nods, dropping onto a nearby chair. I see her eyes flutter and worry she's too tired for a soak in the tub. Ultimately, though, it's her call to make, so if she gets in the bath, I'll stay outside her door and remain vigilant in case she gets too sleepy.

It takes less than ten minutes to run the bath, fill it with suds, and surround the rim

with candlelight. I pour the sparkling water into her wine glass and set it within reach. I even turn on the space heater and leave it on the low setting. She'll be warm and comfortable and can relax as long as she wishes.

I leave the bathroom with a smile on my lips, excited to show Ariel what I've done.

She stands as I exit the bathroom, and my gaze slides over her, taking her in from head to toe. There isn't much skin showing, but that doesn't matter to me. I still think she's the most beautiful woman I've ever met. And those secret, rare smiles I've seen twice? Heartstoppers. They sure stole mine.

Was the thought cheesy? Yep. Did I care? Hell no. This was my mate. I'd take things slow and enjoy every moment.

Ariel gasps as she enters the bathroom. Her wide eyes meet mine as she turns around, appearing shocked by my effort. "You lit candles."

"Yep. Thought you might like to relax with candlelight. I heard it's good for the soul."

She blinks and sadness overtakes her features for a few seconds before it disappears, replaced by a soft smile that is my favorite yet. "You did good, Chomp."

"There's sparkling flavored water too."

"What kind?"

"Strawberry kiwi." I wait to see if she hates it or not.

"Well, that's a stroke of luck. It's one of my favorites."

Yes! “And the others?”

“You can never go wrong with orange or citrus.”

“Good to know.” I wink and back away, heading toward the bedroom door. “You need anything, just holler. I’ll hear you.”

“Thanks.”

“My pleasure,” I state and mean it.

Maybe our meeting was unconventional, and the foundation we’d built had to start from scratch, but that was okay. I’d layer every brick and build it so strong, nothing could tear it down. Not the past, or those who had harmed Ariel, or the rules of society.

She was mine, and I’d do everything to ensure she stayed by my side. If that meant convincing her every minute of the day until she decided to stay, I’d do it.

Chapter Four

ARIEL

Chomp lit candles for my bubble bath. Wow. Despite my caution where he's concerned, he is showing me what it feels like to be treated with care and respect. Never in my life, even before Perry entered it, has any guy treated me this way. He's like a unicorn or something. Shrugging, I slip off the robe and carefully enter the tub, biting back a moan as the warm water envelops my body.

Surprisingly, I'm nowhere near as sore as I expected I would be, especially since I've experienced beatings at Perry's hand before. Still, my skin is a bit raw because I had to scrub the residue of Ricky from me while I was in the shower. Even now, I feel as though I should be gouging my skin off, but I won't disrespect Chomp in that manner. He's been so kind, kinder than anyone who's been a part of my life since my mom died, anyhow.

Perry had no kindness in him whatsoever. I just wish I hadn't been so damn blind that I didn't see his true colors until it was too late. He said and did all the right things, of course, and then I was so blinded by my grief, I didn't realize he had morphed into a monster practically in front of my eyes. By then, it was too late, and I could no longer get away since my money was held hostage by Perry.

"You're clean now, and neither Perry nor Ricky can hurt you again. Chomp said so," I murmur as I take hold of the sparkling water and sip at it. "He hasn't misled you yet, Ari," I continue as I notice that there are jets bubbling in the tub.

The steady hum of the jets is soothing, as are the lightly scented candles that he lit for me. While I'm still so tired I feel as though I could fall asleep in the tub, I appreciate the thought and care Chomp went to for me. Each time the memories of what happened attempt to encroach on my peace of mind, I push them back. Sometimes verbally, although I'm quiet about it because I suspect Chomp is nearby in case I need him. Sometimes in my head is where all the rebellious thoughts I can muster stay. It's something I learned to do because speaking out against Perry was a surefire way to get hurt. So instead, I'd make lists in my head of everything he did that was hurtful to me, and I'd 'talk back' in those notes, then burn them before Perry got his hands on them.

I nearly squeal when I notice a fluffy loofah by some body wash. Picking it up, I smile because it's such a feminine thing for Chomp to own, but maybe he likes exfoliating his skin from time to time. This one is brand new with the tiny price tag still attached, so I know he probably pulled it from his stash. The body wash is a clean, crisp scent, like one I used to use when my mom was still alive, and tears well in my eyes at the memory.

"God, Mom, I miss you so much," I whisper as I dunk the loofah into the water until it's wet, then I add some body wash and begin leisurely cleaning myself. When I spot a new disposable razor as well, I practically swoon. Perry wasn't much on his own personal hygiene, so unless I was able to sneak off to the store, which was seldom, I rarely got to shave my legs or armpits. By the time I'm done, I feel like a brand-new woman.

Even the achy places hurt less than they did earlier. Smiling, I pull the plug to let the water out, then stand and reach for one of the fluffy towels that Chomp placed nearby. Wrapping my body up, I turn then rinse out the tub to get the rest of the bubbles out and down the drain. I'm so used to cleaning up and not leaving a mess that I don't realize I'm chanting to myself until I hear a knock on the door.

“Ariel? Are you okay?” Chomp’s deep voice comes through the closed door, and I can hear the worry in his tone.

“Um, yeah, I was just cleaning the tub.”

“Leave it, babe. I’ll get it later.”

Mortification hits me at his words. There’s no way that I want him to see how long the hair on my legs or underarms was, for heaven’s sake! It completely escapes me that he tried to clean me up after bringing me back to his home, so he already knows. “That’s okay, I’m just about done,” I reply.

After I’m sure the tub is pristine once again, I blow out the candles, then quickly dry myself off before slipping into the comfortable clothes that Callie brought with her. Everything is soft, and as someone who has tactile issues from time to time, I appreciate her forethought. I take another look around the bathroom to make sure everything’s nice and clean, then open the door and come face-to-face with Chomp.

“Um, hey,” I say, looking up into his handsome face. “The bubble bath was just what I needed.”

He grins at me, and my insides melt, which I don’t understand at all because he’s a man, and I was hurt by one rather recently. Is there something wrong with me that I could be attracted to Chomp so soon? I don’t have anyone to ask, either so I shove that thought to the back of my mind.

“I’m glad, Ariel,” he says. “How about we eat?”

I start giggling. “Again?” I ask. “It seems like we just ate not that long ago.”

“There’s always room for more food,” he teases, patting his flat stomach before

gently taking my hand in his.

I almost pull away from his touch, but I remind myself that he's not a danger to me. He helped save my life. Exhaling a breath, I treat him to a smile and allow him to lead me from the room.

* * *

Chomp cooked for me again. In the time it took for me to take a bath, he cleaned the kitchen, put all the food away from earlier, and made another meal.

My eyes widen as I see loaded baked potatoes and a loaf of bread on the table, still steaming from the oven. On a large platter, he's got enough steaks stacked to feed ten people, let alone just the two of us. Is he expecting company again?

Chomp pulls out my chair and I sit, caught off guard as he gently pushes me closer to the table. It's a sweet gesture, amplified by his carefree grin. He lifts a bottle of sparkling water and ticks his chin toward my glass. I can see it's been chilled in the fridge to ensure I'll have a cold drink.

It's almost too much.

"Uh, sure. Thanks," I say, scanning the table. "You're a meat and potatoes guy, huh?"

He shrugs, placing the bottle within reach as he takes his place across from me. "Sure. Why? Is it that obvious?"

"Well, there's no veggies or salad," I say with amusement.

He looks stricken for just a second. "Is that what you want? I'm happy to make it for you."

Chomp rushes to his feet as I wave him off. “No. It’s fine.”

“It’s not any trouble,” he assures me.

“I know.”

“But maybe next time you’d like some vegetables or salad with your meal?” he clarifies.

“Yes. If it’s available.”

“I’ll make sure it is.” Chomp chooses the juiciest, largest steak from the pile on the platter, and I think it’s going straight to his plate.

When the steak is placed on mine, I blink at him in shock. Perry would never give me the best portions of food. I often got scraps since I wasn’t allowed to eat until he finished. There were even meals that I got nothing at all. It’s partially why I’m so thin and likely malnourished. It’s not normal to see the vertebrae in your back, or the bones sticking out from your shoulders and hips.

“Shit,” Chomp curses. “You like meat, right?”

“I do,” I say as I swallow. “It’s just that I’m not used to this.” I gesture to the table with my hand.

He appears confused. “What are you talking about? Food?” He’s joking, but when he sees my serious expression, his body stiffens. “Tell me what you mean, Ariel. Please,” he adds.

I take a sip of my drink to help clear my suddenly dry throat. “Growing up, it was just me and my mom. My dad died when I was one due to a work accident. I had a great

childhood, Chomp. My mom was the absolute best person and I honestly never realized that we were probably on the poverty level while growing up. She was handy with a needle and thread, and made most of my clothes, although she would look for deals at the thrift stores, then remake them to ‘jazz them up’ as she would say. I was loved and always had food on the table. She had planned to stay at home and raise their babies, but I ended up being the only one. The problem with that was she only had a high school education, and jobs aren’t exactly high paying for someone like her. Thankfully, she owned the house outright as it was an inheritance from her parents, so we always had a place to live. Still, we had a garden so we always had plenty of fresh vegetables, and I learned to can by her side so we could stock up. She taught me how to be a bargain shopper and she never, ever complained. She pushed me to do my best in school, and when the opportunity to dual enroll came along, I did that and graduated with an associate degree in secretarial science, which allowed me to get a decent paying job.

“Then Mom got sick. She had state insurance, but it doesn’t really pay for the good treatments when you have the type of cancer she got. Perry came along and we started dating about six months or so before she died. He would bring over bags of groceries, pay for her medication, and pretty much acted as though he was our savior. He told my mom over and over again that he would always take care of her little girl. Chomp, the day she died was the first time he hit me. It was so unexpected, I truly thought it was because he was so distraught.”

“You blamed yourself for him putting his hands on you?” Chomp’s voice is low and lethal sounding.

I nod but bite back a scream when I see his eyes change to an elliptical shape before going back to normal again. “By then, I had moved in with him, and since Mom’s medical bills were so overwhelming, I had to have an estate sale then sell the house itself to take care of everything. I was left with nothing because Perry had taken over my paycheck by then as well.”

Shame coats my tone and I hang my head as tears drip down, but I keep going because if he wants to know, he's going to hear it all. It's as if now that the seal's been broken, I can't shut up. "All the food he used to bring to the house? That stopped for me. I cooked enough for us but wasn't allowed to eat until he was finished. Sometimes," my voice drops to a whisper, "he'd bring Ricky over to eat, and he'd eat my portion. So, a lot of times, I just didn't get to eat."

"Jesus fucking Christ," Chomp roars. This time, I don't imagine his eyes changing. Not only that, but it looks like scales ripple up and down his muscular arms.

"Chomp?" I question. "What's... what's going on?"

A bellow of rage flies from his lips as he pushes off the table. "I can't." His fingers spear through his dark hair. "Fuck. I'm so fucking angry right now."

My voice is barely a squeak. "At me?"

His gaze swings my way. "Never. You understand me, Ariel? I will never, ever put my hands on you, and I'll never be so furious that I can't control myself around you." He's seething.

I can see the rage in his eyes and it's then that I realize they're the same. The identical glow and reptilian pupil. Oh. My. God. It's him. He's the massive gator that pulled Ricky from my body and attacked Perry. He's the one who saved me.

I shove away from the table and retreat a couple of steps. "You," I say, blinking rapidly as I try to understand and make sense of this revelation. "It's you. You're the alligator."

"Shit." His shoulders slump.

Chomp. His name echoes in my head. Jesus. How did I miss connecting the dots?
“Chomp,” I murmur with trepidation. “That’s why you’re called that. Isn’t it?”

His gaze meets mine as he nods. “Yes.”

But . . . how ?

“I could explain but it’s probably gonna make a hell of a lot more sense if I show you.”

Show me!? Oh, hell no. I don’t want to see that alligator again!

I’m shaking my head from side to side so fast that I stumble. “No. I-I can’t. I don’t want to see it.”

He looks devastated by my response which only makes me feel worse. “Ariel.” He sounds sad, which grips my heart, but that gator scared the ever-loving crap out of me! There’s no way I want to see it again, that’s for sure.

“I’m grateful that you saved me, Chomp. Truly. You’ve been so kind to me. I’m grateful for all you’ve done.”

The big man in front of me clenches his fists at his sides. I can’t see his expression because he turns around, hiding his face. A part of me feels guilty, like I did something wrong. But this isn’t on me. I’m not the one who’s partly a monster.

Shit. I don’t mean that. Perry was a monster. Ricky too. But Chomp? He’s been nothing but sweet.

A sigh escapes my lips. “I think I should leave.”

He spins around, his face a carefully blank mask that hides his true feelings. I don't know how I know this, but I do. "I won't ever harm you and I'll never force you to do anything you don't want. If you need to leave," he pauses and swallows loudly, "I won't stop you."

Darn it. Now I'm conflicted. But I don't think I can stay here, not now that I know what he is. Well, I sort of know. I guess I didn't let him finish telling me.

That makes me feel guilty too. For a few seconds, I feel anger flood my body. I was so tired of being a doormat and basing my choices and actions on someone else's needs first. I had to make my decisions for me now. It was okay to be a little selfish.

But I didn't have anyone or know anyone. Except Callie.

"Will you do something for me?"

He doesn't hesitate to nod. "Of course."

"Will you call Callie? Tell her I need a friend."

His features falter for a moment before he turns away and pulls his cell from his pocket. I hear him dial a number and it rings twice before she answers.

"Hey, Chomp. Everything okay?"

"No," he growls. "I need you to come over. Ariel says she needs a friend." His voice is almost bitter, but it's gone as quick as his tone betrays the emotion.

"I'm on my way."

Callie hangs up and Chomp gestures to the table. "Please eat."

I don't want to waste the food although my appetite seems to have diminished with our conversation. Sitting as he remains standing, I cut into the steak, taking a bite. It's delicious. In fact, the potato is too. Cooked to perfection.

When I've had my fill, I push the plate aside. "Won't you eat?"

He shakes his head. "Later."

I hear a car approach and figure it's Callie. When I hear the door open and she parks, I'm on my feet and already walking to the door.

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Chapter Five

CHOMP

Callie doesn't even knock; she just walks in and heads to Ariel's side. After taking her hand, the two of them walk out the front door as Kodiak stomps inside. He pauses, his nose in the air, then he veers to the kitchen table. Not even bothering with a fucking plate, he grabs one of the steaks on the top and starts chowing down while I glare at him. Here I am, crushed beyond anything I've ever experienced and he's eating the food I cooked for my mate.

After he chews then swallows, he asks, "So, what did you do to fuck this up?"

I roll my eyes remembering all the missteps that he made when pursuing his mate, Callie. Maybe I shouldn't have gone after those two pieces of shit with her watching, but damn it, they had already hurt her and were doing so again. There was no way my gator was going to allow it to happen.

"She was telling me about before, when she lived with him and I lost it because he was hurting her in other ways besides physically, brother," I reply. "My gator peeked out and she recognized my eyes from the campsite and guessed it was me who was involved. It freaked her out. Kodiak, what do I do? My gator is shredding my guts!"

He grabs another steak and starts eating it while he looks at the ceiling. I realize he's probably thinking about what I've said, but I'm dying right now. Since he's the only one of us who's got a mate, he's the logical choice as far as who I should ask. Then it dawns on me that if he continues, I won't have anything to eat and that simply will

not do. Sitting at my place at the table, I grab a steak for myself as well as a baked potato and begin slowly eating. I may not feel hungry per se, but I know I have to eat regularly to keep my gator happy. Otherwise, he wants to go hunting for prey.

“Did you explain about shifters at all?” he questions.

“Didn’t get the chance,” I grumble. Maybe I should’ve pushed the issue, but her words were so devastating to me, I couldn’t think beyond what she said.

“So, she doesn’t realize that she’s talking to Callie, who can now shift because of our mating,” he muses.

My head hits the table. At the rate I’m screwing all of this up, I’ll be a grouchy old gator exiled to the river permanently. I’ll become a cautionary tale to younger shifters about how to best handle telling your mate that you have the ability to shift into an animal, especially if your mate happens to be a human.

“Oh, fuck, what do I do?” I groan into the tabletop.

“For starters, quit your damn bellyaching and start acting like the apex predator you are, for fuck’s sake!” Kodiak yells. “I’ve already sent a text to Callie to let her know how you fucked everything up. Luckily for you, my mate likes Ariel, so she’s going to try and undo what you’ve done.”

A flicker of hope burns in my chest as I lift my head. “Really? Do you think it’s possible?”

“My mate managed to convince me to play Santa Claus every year for the kids at the refuge, what do you think?” he snarls.

I hide my grin because I know most of what he agrees to is because he’s so damn

happy he's going to be a father, he'd agree to fly to the moon and paint it if Callie wanted him to. "I think it's more than possible," I whisper, afraid to hope too much in case Callie's powers of persuasion go on vacation or something.

She's our mate, my gator grumbles. Even if she leaves, we will follow her and protect her. Change her mind.

Okay, he makes a good point. We can follow her to make sure she's safe.

It's not stalking if we're mates. Right?

"You got a weird look on your face," Kodiak observes. "Don't do anything else stupid."

I ignore him, chewing on another piece of steak. I barely notice as I swallow because my thoughts are centered on Ariel. Callie took her for a walk and they're too far for me to hear their conversation. Should I follow?

Yes! My gator shouts. Go!

I rise to my feet and drop the utensils, striding toward the door. I think I'm slick and gonna pull it off until I see Spike. He's got his arms folded across his chest and wears a scowl. He's practically standing in the doorway to block me.

"Not happening."

The fuck?

"My mate needs me," I attempt to argue as my gator considers whether or not he can take down a dragon.

Smoke blows from Spike's nose. "Not yet. Give Callie a chance to talk to her first."

I turn an accusing eye on Kodiak. "You're an asshole." He told our pres, so I had to stay put. The bastard.

The bear looks gleeful. "I know you too well, Chomp."

I flip him off in response.

Spike shoves his way inside and I take a few steps backward. He's the only one my gator will concede to and that's only because of his position as president.

"This is an attempt to help you, Chomp. Get your head outta your ass."

Uh-huh. "She's freaked out about the gator. I tried to show her," I begin to explain.

Kodiak starts laughing. I shoot him a glare.

"She wasn't ready," Spike announces like I don't already know that. "Be patient."

"She rejected me," I say with a snarl. My gator is so pissed but he's also hurt. We both are. This feels worse than when I left my original congregation all those years ago, and that nearly destroyed me.

Kodiak shakes his head. "She didn't reject you."

"How the hell do you know?" I thunder at him. "You weren't here."

Spike pinches the bridge of his nose like we're all irritating him. "None of you fuckers have any patience at all. It's a fucking miracle that any of our businesses have repeat customers."

“Says the dragon,” I snort. Glaring at Kodiak, I ask, “How do you know she didn’t reject me?”

He smirks while Spike grabs the last steak from the plate, flicks his fingers until they light, then he proceeds to burn the steak before he ingests it. “Because, Chomp,” Kodiak retorts, tapping his temple, “I’m chatting with my mate. Ariel is understandably distraught. She was brutally attacked then she witnessed you brutally decimating those fuckers.”

“So, there’s still hope?” I ask, my emotions bouncing all over the place. “Dammit, Spike, when you do that shit, it smokes up the whole fucking house.” I stomp my way over to the windows and jerk them open to air out the smell of the burned meat.

“It’s going to take time,” Spike says.

“And patience,” Kodiak interjects. “I want you to think about it objectively, Chomp. For at least a year or longer, she’s been under that fuckwad’s thumb, being abused in every way possible. Now, thanks to you, she’s free. She hasn’t been allowed to make any decisions of her own, so she won’t fully understand how fated mates work and you’re going to want her to choose you on her own. Yes, I know y’all are mates. I get that completely. But in this, you have to let her decide.”

“I might as well go ahead and build my exile sanctuary,” I mumble, causing both of them to start laughing hysterically. “Shut it, assholes,” I hiss, my gator taking over just a little.

“You can do this, Chomp,” Spike encourages. “It’s your mate.”

Kodiak grins. “The only one you got so don’t fuck it up anymore.”

“You know, I think I’m banning you from my fucking house, Kodiak.”

He doesn't appear to care. It's not a threat and he knows it.

I hear another vehicle approach and groan when I realize more of my club brothers have arrived. Great. What did Kodiak do? Call them all over to watch me make one mistake after another?

The fucking bear begins whistling a tune like this is fucking entertainment. "Kodiak," I warn.

He lifts his hands. "You don't wanna distract me. I'm focusing on my mate's conversation."

My gator chumpfs. He's done with all this. I return to the table before somebody rips off the rest of my steak sitting on my plate and finish my meal, ignoring the house as it fills. It seems like a bad idea to invite all these shifters over at once, especially with Ariel's reaction to my gator.

Spike senses my distress. "Hey, we're not gonna complicate shit more for you. This is just support, brother."

As much as I'm riled up and hating the situation, I also realize he's right. They're here for me. Every brother in the club, regardless of what type of shifter we are or our roots. That doesn't matter and never has, not since we all patched in. Spike brought us together and gave us a home. A brotherhood. And more than that, a family.

When I think of it that way, I'm not nearly as agitated.

But the biggest part of this, now that I found Ariel, is that I want to share this family and the club with her. I can't imagine my life from here on out without her in it. It's like I've been walking in a daze, and nothing made sense. It's been a fog that never lifted. But once she entered my life, that fog lifted, the sun shined on me, and my

heart beat for her alone.

Wow. Intense. But I fucking love this feeling. I don't want it to end. And that means that I have to fight for her, for us , even if we don't exist as a couple yet. I'll do everything in my power to convince Ariel we belong together, and if that means I take it slow, that's what I'll do.

And the part about my gator? We can come back to that later when she's ready.

If we have to wait, we'll wait, my gator grudgingly agrees.

Kodiak sinks onto the chair beside me. "It's worth it, Chomp."

I know. He doesn't have to tell me that, but I nod, grateful he's here even if he is a furry asshole.

"It'll work out."

"Because she's my mate?" I guess.

"Yeah. Life has fucking been cruel enough to all of us. Our mates are the reward if you wanna look at it like that. They're our soulmates. Worth fighting for, no matter what we have to go through."

"I agree." One hundred percent.

No matter what, I was all in.

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Chapter Six

ARIEL

“S o, you’re saying it’s all real? Shifters really exist?” I ask, staring at Callie like she’s partially lost her mind. I mean, I’ve read shifter romances before, but I never thought the fictional stories I love had any basis in truth.

“I know,” she laughs. “It sounds crazy, and if I didn’t see Kodiak change into a big bear in front of me, I wouldn’t have believed this was possible either.”

I hold up a hand. “Wait. Kodiak is a bear?”

She nods.

“And he changed into one in front of you?” I’m flabbergasted. “How is that even possible?”

Callie shrugs. “I don’t know the specifics of his DNA or how he’s able to do it, I just know that he can.” She gives me a tiny smile. “And Chomp is an alligator shifter.”

I saw the gator. I firmly believe it exists. No delusion there. But I don’t know if I believe that Chomp is changing into it or shifting or whatever Callie is saying. It’s too fantastical to even fathom and after all the mental hits I’ve taken recently, I’m feeling just a bit overwhelmed. The reality of what I saw the other night wars with how Chomp has treated me since I woke up in his home.

As the gator, he was lethal, ruthless. He never hesitated as he pulled Ricky off of me, then destroyed him, nor did he allow Perry to continue to live when he came to help Ricky. As the man, he's been very charming in so many ways. He's been attentive, taking care of me in a way that makes me feel safe and secure, something I haven't felt in a very long time.

"He's never hurt me, Ariel. Kodiak never would. His bear is protective of me, possibly more so than Kodiak."

"So, it's two different parts? Like a human part and an animal part?" This is a lot to take in, and my head is swimming as she continues to lay it all out for me.

"Yes, that's a good way to explain it. They're shifters. Each of the guys in the club are different animals. Spike is a dragon, you know."

No way! "A dragon. Like an actual dragon?" Okay, that's kinda impressive. "How can Spike fly around as a dragon without anyone seeing it? Or Kodiak's bear? Or even Chomp's alligator?" This just isn't logical. People would know about this if shifters existed, right?

"They're very good at keeping that secret. At least, until they meet their mate."

Mate? "What's that? I don't know what you mean by mate."

"Soulmate. Each of their animals recognizes the one female destined to be their mate. Or lifelong companion, I guess you could say. A wife, but also so much more."

As she describes it, I finally get what she means. Um, shit. Does that mean Chomp thinks I'm his mate?

Callie reaches for my hand and squeezes. "I think your situation is unique. Chomp

found you during the worst possible time. His gator lost it when he saw you being abused. It's made this whole thing tense and strange for you, I'm sure."

She's right. I close my eyes, and I can still see the image of that gator as he attacked Ricky and Perry. Their screams don't bother me. Neither does the fact that they died. But it does freak me out to know that Chomp is the one behind it. It wasn't just a wild animal attack.

Chomp killed them for hurting me.

Blinking, I struggle to process what this all means. "He saved me." My voice is barely above a whisper as it dawns on me that because of Chomp's actions, I will never be violated like that again by the likes of Perry or his disgusting friends.

Callie squeezes my hand again. "Yeah, he did. Kodiak protected me too. It's because he's my mate. He'd never let anyone or himself or his bear ever harm me." Her gaze meets mine, trying to offer comfort. "And Chomp is the same with you."

"He's my mate." It's a statement, but I don't know that I believe it. Maybe if I say it often enough, it'll sink in, but right now, it's information overload for me. My mom and I used to watch *Married With Children*, and the daughter, Kelly, would forget stuff. When pressed, she finally said something along the lines of her brain could only hold so much info, and when something new came along, it kicked out something old. That's kind of how I feel right now.

"Yes," Callie confirms. "But if you don't believe me, that's okay. It might take time for all of this to get sorted for you. But think of how Chomp has acted since he found and rescued you. How has he been?"

"Kind. Thoughtful. He's cooked for me twice now, and he drew me a bubble bath with scented candles." Wow. He's been doing all of that because he thinks I'm his

mate. “Is that his motivation? Because he thinks I belong to him?” I don’t need another guy trying to control me or dictate my life. I won’t let that happen a second time.

“It’s not like that at all. I promise. Kodiak is fiercely protective of me, but he doesn’t interfere much in my choices. He’ll voice his opinion, and sometimes it’s pushy, but it’s because he worries for my safety. We’ve got a baby coming too.” She pats her slightly rounded belly. “I’ve never felt coerced or forced to do anything. Kodiak respects me and my decisions, as well as my boundaries. He just gets grumpy about them on occasion because he’s a bear.” Her laugh makes me smile.

“What if I don’t believe or want any of this?” I dare to ask.

“Then that’s your right and Chomp will honor your choice, whatever it is.” She releases my hand but gives me an encouraging smile. “I can’t imagine what you’re going through or how hard this must be. If you need time, I think I can help.”

“I do. Chomp has been great but being in that house is starting to feel stifling. I need space and to heal.” In more ways than just physical. I have to return to the independent woman I was before I got involved with Perry, because I’ve forgotten pretty much everything when it comes to making my own decisions.

“That’s understandable. I’ve got a friend who lives in town who’s looking for a roommate. She works at Beanie’s Brew, the coffee shop with the best beans in the state. If you’re interested, I can give you Michelle’s number.”

“That would be great.” This is perfect, except for the fact that I don’t have a job. “I don’t have a way to pay for rent,” I admit, feeling vulnerable. “My ex had control of everything.”

I don’t have to say more. Callie gets it. “Then we help you with a job too. I know a

secretarial position that's opened up. Are you interested?"

"Sure. I have a degree in that field of work." Granted, I probably won't get a good reference from my former employer since Perry managed to get me fired when he came up to my job and threw a hissy fit because I had to work late. He was angry because his dinner wasn't ready on time.

"Oh, that's perfect!" Callie exclaims with excitement. "There's just one tiny hitch. I hope you won't mind your new employer."

Uh-huh. Was he a jerk or something? "Who is it?"

"Chomp." She shrugs. "He runs a canoe and rafting shop on the river. It's one of the club's businesses. He also gives tours, oversees the campground, and takes kids on school trips onto the lake, and handles guided fishing trips. On top of that, he's got to run the store and oversee the finances. It's a tall order for one person. While he has part-time helpers with the tours and stuff, no one but a club member or someone affiliated with the club handles the paperwork aspect. Unfortunately, while I help where I can, I've got my own business, so it's been hit or miss. He is organized, though." She grins at my confusion then explains further. "I'm a professional organizer. I come in, assess a company's needs, then make recommendations. He didn't have a filing system at all, nor did he have the right software. He has all of that now, but it's still not been fully filled in since this is one of their busiest seasons."

"He must be swamped." While I'm a tiny bit worried about working alongside him given the current circumstances, what she's talking about that his business needs is right up my alley.

Her lips twitch with humor at my reference. "He is. That's why he's been looking for help. Someone to handle the appointments, keep the books up to date, work in the store, and keep everything organized. Also, inputting all the old data into the

computer system while keeping up with the demand on current sales.”

I can do that. In fact, I love to keep things organized. “I think this could work.”

“Good. You want to let him know, or should I?” she asks.

“I can.” I’m not afraid of Chomp, I just need a little space from the eager, caring, intense gator shifter who thinks I’m his mate. Working together shouldn’t be too hard. And at night, we’ll go our separate ways. “How soon does Michelle need a roommate?”

Callie rises to her feet, and I stand, hopeful I’m taking the right steps to put my life back together. “Michelle has been looking for a month. She’s going to be thrilled to meet you.”

“Do you think she’s working? Could we see her now?”

“Not sure, but we can drive to Beanie’s and get a cup of coffee anyway. I’ll call her if she’s not there, and you can talk to her about the room.”

“I could use a good cup of coffee. It’s been a long time.”

“Then it’s my treat. Let’s go.”

* * *

Beanie’s Brew, as I find out, is always busy. A steady stream of traffic is constantly present, but there’s a friendly vibe as soon as you walk in the door, regardless of how crowded the shop seems to be. It’s a stroke of good fortune that Michelle is working as we enter.

Callie greets her as we approach the counter, and Michelle takes our order. “So, you still looking for a roommate, Chelle?”

“I sure am. Why?”

Callie gestures to me. “My friend Ariel just moved here and needs a place. Thought you might like to have a chance to talk and see if it works for you.”

“Ariel?” Michelle asks as I nod. “Nice to meet you! I’m off in thirty minutes. Mind hanging around so we can talk after my shift ends?”

“Hi. Not at all.”

“Yay! I’m so excited. Let me get your drinks while you find a seat.”

We manage to find a table in the corner and sit, striking up a conversation as we wait for Michelle to deliver our drinks. While there’s a line for people ordering to-go, the staff takes the time to deliver the orders to each table for those who are dining in. The shop has a glass case filled with the most tempting pastries, brownies, and cookies. If I had money, I would have bought one of each! Desserts were always my favorite as a kid, and Perry knew it. He never let me eat sweets. God, I crave them now.

Blinking, I focus on Callie and realize I haven’t been paying attention. “Sorry,” I mumble as she catches my distraction with a laugh.

“No worries. You’ve got plenty to keep your thoughts occupied.”

True. While minimal, I still have stuff at Perry’s that I want to get. Mementos from my mom, an antique hutch, some clothes; nothing major, but it means something to me, and I wonder if Callie would ask Kodiak to go and retrieve it for me. I don’t know if the room Michelle has will be big enough for the hutch, but maybe they can

store it for me until I get my own place. I also know where Perry hid his money, and quite frankly, I have no problems getting it since he won't need it anymore. I'll just consider it payment for all the hell I endured at his hands.

"Are you okay with this? Getting a room in a stranger's house?"

"Well," I admit, "not under normal circumstances, but I'm taking my recommendation from you. Someone who's proving to be a friend and trustworthy."

Callie looks surprised before a dazzling smile lights up her face. "Yeah, I think the same about you. We're going to be close. I can feel it."

"It feels weird to start over," I confide. "I don't have a cent to my name or a piece of furniture. I don't even have a bed."

"But it still feels good, doesn't it? To have the freedom?"

"It's amazing. I can almost brush all the bad stuff away." I take a few sips of my coffee before I continue, "But everything is going to be okay. I can believe that now."

"Good. You deserve it."

"But there's some things I wish I had. A few things of my mother's."

"Where are they?"

"At my ex's place." I shiver with the thought of ever returning to that house. "I won't go back there, though. I can't."

She nods in understanding. "What if I send Kodiak? Chomp can go with him, and they'll pick up your belongings."

Thankfully, she's falling in with the mental plans I made, and I didn't even have to ask her.

I shake my head. "Chomp has done enough for me. I don't want to ask him for more."

"He'll insist once he learns about it from Kodiak."

She's probably right.

"You should make a list of what you want," Callie suggests, pulling a pad of paper and a pen from her huge purse. It looks more like a tote bag to me, but she's been calling it a purse, so I'll go along with her.

Taking the items from her, I lean down and start writing. "Um, Callie? Do you think it's bad if I list where Perry used to hide his money?" I whisper so no one can hear me.

"Hell no! Jot that shit down," she advises. "I'll also tell Kodiak to make sure they search the house thoroughly just in case there are other places you weren't aware of him having."

"Good idea," I muse as I continue writing. "Maybe with that, I'll be able to get a bed and stuff."

She starts laughing while shaking her head. "I can already tell you that Chomp has ordered a bedroom set for you based on what Kodiak told him we were doing."

"Wait, how does Kodiak know where we're at?" I ask.

"Um, well, with us being mates, we're able to telepathically talk to each other. It's

the only reason that he and the rest of the club haven't barged into Beanie's by now. I let Kodiak know what we were doing and after a brief tussle with Chomp, he got on his phone and placed the furniture order."

I shake my own head in disbelief. "He really believes I'm his, doesn't he?" I ask.

"What you have to understand about them," she says, looking around while carefully choosing her words in case anyone is listening in, "is they can sense when they've met their one. It's built into that side of their genetics, Ariel. While they can choose someone to build a life with, they won't have the same connection as I have with Kodiak and as you'll eventually have with Chomp once you complete your bond."

I open my mouth to respond when I spot Michelle headed our way. We'll have to finish this conversation later.

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Chapter Seven

CHOMP

“What’s Ariel saying?” I ask, hovering behind Kodiak as he finishes off two of my baked potatoes. When Spike approaches the plate, his fingers already flaming, I glare at him. My house is just starting to clear out from when he made his steak overdone. “Take it outside,” I rumble. “I don’t have any of that shit to help odors.”

Spike chuckles as he grabs one of the remaining baked potatoes, then he goes to the cupboard and grabs a plate before he heads outside to ‘finish’ cooking his snack. Shaking my head, I poke Kodiak in the shoulder.

“Knock it off, I can’t listen with you talking in my ear,” he growls. “She’s making a list of things from the house she wants, but she’s worried because she doesn’t even have a bed.”

“I can fix that,” I retort, pulling out my phone and finding the website for the furniture store in Mercy Falls. I scroll to the bedroom furniture and examine each set because it has to be perfect for my mate. And also, I don’t want my feet to dangle off the end.

It doesn’t occur to me that I won’t be sharing that bed. I’m in no hurry to push Ariel into an intimate relationship after what she’s endured, but I’m going to be there, holding her, until we reach that level. She won’t want me there right away, but I plan to make her fall in love with me, so I’m patient enough to wait for it.

Until then, I'll just stalk, err, keep an eye on my mate.

"What's she saying now?" I ask, bugging Kodiak again. Why can't he just say shit aloud without me asking?

"Dammit, Chomp. You're hissing in my ear!"

I chuckle as my gator threatens to bite down on his ear if he isn't forthcoming soon.

We can give him a nice piercing. His mate will like it, my gator says, chortling.

"She finished the list. Michelle is talking to her about the room she's gonna rent out."

I scowl with the reminder. My mate should be sleeping here, in my cabin, not with a stranger.

"She's missing her mother," he confides. "She died and everything that means something to Ariel is in her ex's house."

Sorrow consumes me for a few seconds. My sweet mate has lost so much. She's been wronged, abused, and lost her parents. My heart clenches as I think of how much she's suffering. I have to make this right for her.

"We're going to that house, Kodiak. Right fucking now."

He smirks at me. "Should I get the address or just let your gator scent the trail?"

I could do it, my gator insists.

I flip Kodiak off. "Get the address." My gator chumpfs.

The big bear laughs as he communicates with his mate. “Callie is going to take a screenshot of the list Ariel made and the address. As soon as we have it, we can go.”

Spike walks back inside, licking the ash from his fingers like it’s candy. He even makes some kind of happy noise in his throat before he places the empty plate in my sink. “Where are we going?” he asks, coming in at the end of Kodiak’s statement.

“To get my mate’s things,” I answer with a grunt. I understand missing things that remind you of something special. When I left my congregation, I didn’t really have much except a few pictures of my mother and my siblings, and they’re one of my most valued treasures. They’re from a happier time when I was young and felt loved. I push those somber thoughts away, knowing that I can’t afford to go down that road right now when Ariel needs me.

“How far?” Spike questions, staring at me with a smirk on his face.

“Doesn’t matter.”

Spike puffs smoke from his nostrils and turns to Kodiak. “Where?” he demands.

Kodiak’s gaze bounces between us. “On the outskirts of Mercy Falls. I recognize the neighborhood. It’s old, and some of the houses aren’t in the best condition.” He glances at me. “I’m sure that’s not where your mate lived.”

I’m not so sure about that. Everything I’m learning about Ariel’s past indicates she’s been living in the worst conditions. “What neighborhood?”

Kodiak rattles off the address and I shoot to my feet, feeling my gator pushing for release. He knows that neighborhood. We both do. The street Ariel lived on borders a fucking swamp.

I've hunted in those waters. Scales ripple across my arms as I struggle to keep my gator in check. He's pissed. It's not safe there. We both feel danger creeping in on our mate and I can't wait another second.

"Go," Spike hollers as I rush out the door.

My spine erupts in pain, and I can feel my skin morphing into the tough layer of scales and bony deposits that provide protection but are also smooth and incredibly durable. I've been shifting since I was a boy, so the pain is manageable and nowhere near as brutal as my childhood. When it's over, I'm sliding into the lake, vaguely aware of Kodiak's bear rumbling through the bushes and keeping pace with me as I glide along the surface. While I might give him hell most of the time, I'm grateful that he's with me right now to keep me in check. Because while I know those two fuckers are dead, their malodorous scent will be everywhere, which will throw him into another rage.

It doesn't take long to reach the swamp or the street where Ariel used to live. I try to console my gator that she's no longer there, but her scent still clings to the air as we pop to the glassy surface, water rippling around us as my gaze searches the area. When I don't detect any threats, I slowly rise up the bank and move toward the trees, staying hidden.

I can smell Ariel. Her sweet scent is muted, but it's here. It tickles my nose and my gator hisses, smelling the odors of the males trying to oppress her. I can't stay in this form. The gator will kill anyone who threatens his mate, and I can't have more blood on my hands without cause.

I shift back and move from the trees as Kodiak joins me. "Her scent is close."

He nods. "I know. The males too." His lip lifts in a snarl. "It's nauseating."

“Where’s Spike?”

“He went back to the clubhouse. He said he locked the door before he left your place.”

“He probably thought it was overkill to come with us. We’ve got it handled.”

“Well, we’re still gonna need a truck.”

Shit. Why didn’t I drive here instead?

I needed a swim , my gator responds as I shake my head. He just wanted to be the first one to arrive and scope the place out.

“Good thing I thought of that. Peanut said he’d bring his pickup to the address.”

Good. “Let’s go. I can’t be held responsible for my gator if I linger too long.”

“Noted.”

There’s a mixture of newer houses and older ones on this street. Most are in okay condition but there’s a few that aren’t. Among the structures needing repair, one stands out. It’s overgrown with weeds and long grass with car parts and a rusted engine sitting on cinder blocks in the front yard. There’s wicker furniture that’s seen better days on the porch, but it’s mostly clean. I can see that someone took the time to sew any holes.

The front door is slightly ajar and that tips me off. It’s a red flag. Who leaves the house and doesn’t close the door? Yukon Bluff is a safe, quiet, small town. It’s got plenty of charm, but there’s still crime here. Just not on the scale you’d see in larger cities and nothing near as violent. Unless you counted the motherfuckers who

attacked my mate.

I stiffen as I enter the house and Kodiak follows. I'm overwhelmed by the stench and it's not dirty dishes or sewer. She cleaned this house to the best of her ability. I can see that as I look around, noting a woman's touch like plants and organized bookshelves. But it's the underlying stink of sweat, blood, and fluids that causes me to gag. They partially belong to Ariel but also the males who hurt her.

She was violated more than once by those assholes. I want to kill them again, slower this time, and watch them suffer. They died too quickly. My gator agrees. My only solace is that they're at the bottom of the lake and hopefully, the wildlife has rendered their pieces to nothing more than bones.

"Fuck, Chomp," Kodiak growls. "My bear is furious for you and Ariel."

"I can't focus on it, Kodiak. I'm fucking shaking." My hands curl into fists as I fight the urge to let my gator tear the place up. "Show me the list."

He pulls out his cell and shows me while I scan it and commit each item to memory. We notice the hutch first. It's a beautiful piece of furniture and I can tell why Ariel loves it. It's not tainted like everything else in this house. The wood feels like it's alive, breathing with love and support for Ariel. It's an odd notion, but I know I'm right. This belonged to her mother.

"Shit, what will we pack her things in?" I ask as I make my way down a small hallway and into a bedroom. The overwhelming scent of Ariel somewhat calms both my gator and me, but my rage is still underneath the surface because I see the holes in the walls. Holes that are roughly head shaped so I know my mate was thrown into those walls multiple times.

"How can someone treat a person they claim to love and care for like this?" I mutter

as I start opening up the dresser drawers. All but one hold men's clothing which has me seething, especially when Kodiak comes out of the closet with two women's shirts. The remaining drawer only has a few pairs of panties, one bra that's seen better days, two pairs of socks, and one pair of jeans.

"First of all, Peanut's bringing boxes and tape. Secondly, I wouldn't treat my worst enemy the way it appears that she was treated. It's gonna take a lot of patience to break through to her, Chomp," he warns as his gaze sweeps the room once again to make sure we haven't forgotten anything.

"Let's see if we can find the hidey hole Ariel mentioned to Callie, then search the rest of the house to make sure we get any other money he tucked away. She definitely deserves it," I state, grabbing the items from the dresser. "I'll put this on the hutch. Do you think we should check the kitchen to make sure there's nothing else she might've wanted?"

"I think she'd probably like the plants to brighten up her room," Kodiak muses.

Nodding, I follow him into the second bedroom which appears to have been used to store nothing but junk. However, with our superior sense of smell, we're quickly able to unearth the firebox that Perry hid, as well as two totes that are full of cash. I have no clue what the fucker was involved in, but the money here will be more than enough for Ariel to get on her feet.

By the time Peanut walks in, we've got everything of value stacked neatly by the hutch, including two recipe books that smelled like a combination of Ariel and another female, a sewing machine and table, as well as a tote full of fabric. If my mate likes to sew, then I'll make sure she has the stuff from her mom so she can feel as though she's still with her.

"She doesn't really have much, does she?" Peanut muses as we begin boxing

everything up. He even remembered to bring a heavy blanket and some newspaper so we're able to wrap the hutch, as well as a set of delicate China dishes that were showcased inside.

"No, she doesn't, but she'll have whatever she wants from here on out," I reply. "Even if I have to allow her to get it."

It's slowly starting to sink in that where Ariel is concerned, I'm going to have to tread carefully. I wonder if Cheryl, Callie's friend, knows of any good trauma therapists because I want to make sure Ariel has whatever tools she needs to fully heal.

Will she ever forget the trauma she endured? I seriously doubt it, but both my gator and me will ensure she has the best life possible once she's ready.

"I think we've got it all," Kodiak states after doing another sweep of the house. He has a small photo album that he tucks into the top of the box I'm about to close. "Found that tucked on the top shelf in the closet."

"Do you think we should give Fang all the money so he can get an account set up for her?" I ask. "Because it looks like quite a bit, and I know he can smooth the way at the bank. Or should we let her do it?"

Kodiak closes his eyes and I know he's talking to Callie. A few minutes later, he smirks at me and says, "Ariel is okay with Fang setting up the account for her, but she'd like to keep some of the cash since apparently, the bedroom set arrived so she and Callie need to go shopping for sheets and shit."

"Fuck, I forgot about that," I hiss.

"Chomp, she needs to do this, it's part of her process of becoming her own person again," Kodiak advises. "You need to head to the business and see about getting her

some of the company T-shirts, so she's got them for when she starts working."

"But I want to help move her stuff in," I state, my stance defiant.

"And she needs space from you right now," Peanut replies. As our Enforcer, his word is law, just like Spike's and Kodiak's. "You take care of that, we'll run the money to Fang, then take her some cash and her things to Michelle's house."

I chumpf but shrug because there's no sense in arguing with either of them right now. I know where she's staying, so I'll just start watching over her at night. "How is she going to get the T-shirts?" I ask.

"We'll get Callie to run them and the employment application over to her, along with the employee handbook," Kodiak says.

"Fine."

It's not fine, my gator argues. It should be us doing all of this for our mate.

While I agree, my hands are tied right now, so after we make sure we have everything packed up, then loaded into the truck, I shift back into my gator and head over to our business to gather the things Ariel's gonna need to start work. At least I'll see her every day that I don't have a tour to run. It's a small comfort to me, but right now, I'll take it.

Small steps, I remind myself. They still lead to the right path.

Chapter Eight

ARIEL

“Y ou sure there’s not anything else you need?” Callie asks, leaning against the wall as I sit on my new bed and sheets, gliding my palm over the pretty floral pattern. I haven’t had sheets this soft and pretty since before my mom passed away. It feels much longer than a year. I’d been so systematically torn down, everything I loved stripped away until I had nothing. Now, I’m determined to surround myself with all the things I love and miss, including the items Kodiak and some of the other bikers in his club brought to my new place.

Tears burn my eyelids, but I won’t let them fall. Not for Perry. Or Ricky. They don’t deserve them.

“Yeah, I think so,” I reply, releasing a ragged breath as I meet Callie’s gaze. I won’t let this drag me down into depression again. I lived that way for months. The horrid past was behind me, and I intended to keep it there.

“You’re tough, Ariel. You’ve got this.”

“Yeah, I do,” I reply with confidence. A week ago, I wasn’t capable of thinking or reacting this way, but now, free from the abuse and horror of my living conditions and Perry’s control, I feel like a new woman.

Callie beams a bright smile. “I think you’ve got everything you need for your new job, too.” She gestures to the stack of shirts on my dresser. “You know, we should

exchange numbers.”

Oh, right. With all the money from Perry’s place, I bought bags of supplies, toiletries, and essentials. The best purchase? My new cell phone.

I pick it up from where it has been charging on my nightstand and check the power level. One hundred percent. I unplug the cord and tuck it away for later use before turning to Callie. “You’re my first contact!”

Callie squeals with delight and rushes to my side, entering her information. “You know, I’m going to add Chomp too. And Kodiak. You should have their numbers in case of an emergency. It’s a good idea to have your boss’s number as well.”

Good idea. “Okay.”

“Call me and I’ll add you.”

Once her phone rings, she clicks off the call. “Got it. I’m so excited! Now we can text whenever you want.”

“I’d like that.”

“I’m going to leave you to it, but I think we should meet up on Friday so we can have coffee and treats at Beanie’s. I wanna know all about your first few days working for Chomp.”

I can’t help smirking. “You just want to hear any gossip.”

“Of course!” she laughs. “I’m hoping it’s everything you want and then some.” She winks and tugs me into a hug. “I’m here for you. You need someone to talk to, reach out. Anytime. Okay?”

“I will. Thanks.”

The house is quiet after she leaves. Michelle, Or Chelle as she insists I call her, ran out to pick up groceries and a few other items, stating she'll return in a couple of hours. For now, I have the place to myself.

And boy, do I need a few minutes alone to process all this. It's been a hectic day, but one that will live in my memory for a long time. And that's when I decide I need to keep a journal and maybe a scrapbook too. I've always loved crafts and sewing. My mom got me started on it when I was young. Maybe this healing process will be smoother if I can sink my free time into things I love and enjoy and find my happiness again.

And that's what I decide I'm going to do. Reclaim my joy. I'll start with taking photos of all my favorite things, places, and moments. With a grin, I slide across my phone and open the camera, snapping my first shot. It's my new bed with the sheets. The next? My new room.

I'm so full of restless energy that I decide I'll go for a walk and check out Yukon Bluff with fresh eyes. I've got plenty of snacks and drinks from my shopping trip with Callie, so this is more exploratory than necessary. Still, I slip some cash in my pocket just in case I see something I want, since money's no longer an object. Kodiak told me that once Fang had all the information, he'd either give my stuff from the bank to Callie or bring it by himself. I briefly glance at the information packet that he dropped off for my new job but decide that can wait until later on.

Mom, things are looking up!

The guys set up the hutch along one of the walls in my room, then took the sewing cabinet and made a sewing nook for me. My fingers itch to go through the totes of fabric they brought, but I push that off as well. I know I have Sundays off, and only

work half a day on Saturdays to check in any campers or folks who are there for a tour on the lake with Chomp. My hourly pay is more than enough to cover my room, as well as my cell phone bill, although I want to talk to Chelle about pitching in for the internet and ask if I can pay for a few streaming services. I have so many shows to catch up on, and thanks to the huge television the guys brought then mounted to my wall, I'll be able to do so.

Contentment settles in my soul. Realistically, I know I'll probably need to seek professional help, but that's also a problem for future Ariel. Present Ariel wants to explore since she doesn't have a car. Thankfully, work is within walking distance, so not only will I get exercise, but I'll also get plenty of fresh air and sunshine. Yukon Bluff is definitely a hidden gem with little to no crime, or the environmental pollution that seems to permeate most major cities these days.

I grew up in Mercy Falls which is the closest neighbor to Yukon Bluff. I spent nearly as much time here as in Mercy, so I know enough of the landscape to feel confident I won't get lost. There are beautiful mountains here, but also the prettiest lake. Trees stretch as far as the eye can see and dot the landscape with pops of color, proving spring has reached Yukon Bluff. I smile as I glance over and see my plants around my room. When Callie and I went to get my bedding, she found a gorgeous stand that now sits in front of the window in my room and is heavy with my plants. She also found the cutest little watering can which matches my decor.

I'm not walking long before I reach the pier that's a bit of a tourist attraction here, if you can call it that in such a small town, but the locals love it too. It's the lake framed by the mountains that'll sometimes draw people to Yukon. The view is breathtaking, and I soak it in, basking in the rays of soft sunshine. It'll be dusk soon, but until then, I want to find a bench and snap a few pictures.

From what Callie has shared, the club has started businesses to bring people to Yukon Bluff. In addition to the kayak shop, they also have ski lifts further up in the

mountains that are very busy once the snow falls. Thankfully, that's months away from now, since the beautiful flowers are permeating the air with their scent. I can hear the buzzing bees and grin, knowing that we need them.

As long as you don't mess with them, sweetie, they won't hurt you, my mom's voice whispers in my head. A memory from long ago pops into my mind; I was maybe six and got scared when a bee buzzed rather close to me. She explained that we needed bees because they helped pollinate the plants and trees that kept life as we know it going. While I'll never be a beekeeper or anything, I respect the tiny creature who plays an important role in the environment.

I use the camera on my phone to document my first adventure and use the panorama mode to get the whole horizon. The sun's rays sparkle on the water like diamonds. It's so beautiful and serene, I can almost forget the recent past. Focusing on the present, I make a pact with myself to stay in the moment. I can't change what happened to me, I can only take what I've learned and grow, even if it comes at the cost of a few tears along the way.

"Callie will help me," I murmur, smiling. When I was younger, before Mom got sick, I had several close girlfriends, but by the time she passed, I was already under Perry's thumb. It wouldn't matter anyway, because a lot of the people my age moved away, wanting the excitement of a bigger, busier lifestyle in the city. Not me, though. I've always enjoyed the quieter, simpler life that living in Mercy Falls and now Yukon Bluff provides.

That thought brings me to Chomp. I haven't thought of him much since I left earlier today. But he's been in the background of my mind, lingering and waiting, proving he's forever patient where I'm concerned. I decide to send him a text, letting him know that Callie gave me his number. I know he'll want mine and this enables us to have open communication for work purposes.

Me: Hey, Chomp. It's me, Ariel. I got a new phone today and wanted to give you the number. I thought this would help if something comes up with work.

Chomp: Hi. Already saving you in my contacts.

Chomp: Btw, don't think I won't text you outside of work concerns, Ariel. Did you get settled in okay?

I smile at his words since I can practically hear him saying it to me.

Me: Pretty much. I think Callie and I bought out the stores, but with the stuff that your brothers brought to me, it's definitely homey looking. And thank you for the bed and television.

Chomp: You're welcome. As your mate, it's my privilege to take care of you, Ariel.

Warmth fills me at his words. He's been above board and honest with me from the get-go, and there's a part of me that wishes we had met before Perry ever walked into my life. I'm so disgusting and damaged now that there's no way Chomp will want me, regardless of whether or not I'm his mate as he claims.

Me: What time do you want me to come in tomorrow?

"Smooth, Ari, real smooth," I mutter. Could I have been any more obvious about changing the subject?

Chomp: Does nine work?

Me: That's perfect. And jeans with one of the company T-shirts, right?

Chomp: Yes. See you tomorrow.

It's a quiet evening once I'm home. Michelle is dating a guy who works construction, so I don't see her for more than fifteen minutes when I arrive home. We're quick to exchange numbers as she spies the cell phone in my hand.

"Could I get the wi-fi code? I'd like to catch up on some shows."

She lightly smacks her forehead and laughs. "I should have done that already."

Once I have the info jotted down, I nod. "Thanks."

"I'll be out late." She gives me an apologetic smile. "We need to plan a day to hang out and get to know one another."

"I'd love to," I say, and I mean it.

I wave from the doorway as she grabs her purse and dashes out, rushing to her car. It's cute. Michael, her boyfriend, sounds like he's a nice guy, and I'm sure I'll meet him soon. Flipping the lock, I ensure I'm safe for the night, and head into the kitchen. I need snacks.

It's odd to have the evening to myself. I don't have to rush to cook or clean for someone else or worry that I'll be hit or kicked during the process. After my popcorn is ready, I take it into my room with my Diet Coke and settle in for the night.

Just when I'm getting sleepy, I hear my phone vibrate with an incoming text. Since there are only a handful of people who have my number, I decide to look. It might be important. Before I can swipe across the screen, another text follows. I smile when I see who sent it.

Chomp: Goodnight, Ariel.

Chomp: Sweet dreams.

Me: See ya later, Alligator.

It's impulsive. I don't know what possesses me to send that text or the smiley face emoji after it.

I don't have to worry Chomp won't like it. His response is quick. A laugh emoji first, then his comment.

Chomp: In a while, Crocodile.

I'm grinning so damn wide, and it's silly, but I love it. I turn off the TV and shut off the lights, and when I close my eyes, there aren't any nightmares to greet me.

Chapter Nine

CHOMP

Ariel messaged me. More than that, she shared a joke. I took a chance texting her after our initial exchange of numbers, and it paid off.

I'm ridiculously giddy this morning, despite spending most of the night awake, guarding Ariel's house, and peeking in her window. No, it's not stalking.

Not stalking if it's our mate, my gator chimes in, fully in agreement. Of course, he's not going to think so. He's ecstatic. Half the reason I'm so jovial is because he's ridiculously confident we can win our mate over after last night.

I'm nearly bouncing on my feet as I shower and dress, drinking practically the whole pot of coffee before I leave the house. I'm jittery, but it's nothing I can't handle. I just need to see Ariel. The entire night was torture, watching her from a distance, and being unable to touch or hold her.

But if she had a nightmare, I might have texted.

Or knocked down the door, my gator interjects.

No violence. He chumpfs in response. As far as he's concerned right now, since she now knows about shifters, as well as the fact that we're her mate, it should be a done deal. What he fails to realize is her treatment by that fucker, whose name I refuse to utter, stunted her in a lot of ways. She was dealing with her mother's illness then her

death, so she failed to see any of the warning signs that he wasn't who he proclaimed he was until it was too late.

She's our mate, my gator argues. We will help her heal.

"She has to find who she is, gator," I mutter out loud. Sometimes, when he won't listen to me, I opt to talk to him verbally instead of in my head. It seems he understands better or something. "We will protect her and watch over her, though, while she heals. I know you think she's perfect just the way she is, and I agree, but humans can be weird sometimes. Ariel needs to think she's okay, and in order for her to get to that point, she needs to try things on her own."

What if we're not there for her and she needs us?

"If we can't be there, I'll see if one of the brothers will keep an eye out."

It's not the same, he insists. It's our job, Chomp!

I shake my head because right now, he's just being obstinate. She'll be with us at the shop all day long, so it's only in the evenings and while she's sleeping that we'll need to guard her without anyone finding out. Hell, even if someone does find out, it won't stop me.

Us, my gator interjects with a growl.

"Us," I amend aloud, trying not to comment on the fact that he's gotten more stubborn and aggressive since we met Ariel. I know the reasons, but he still needs to chill out before we scare her. Because if he's like this now and we haven't even mated yet, how is he going to be when she's eventually carrying our child?

It's nearly time for Ariel's first shift to begin and I'm a fucking mess. Anxious.

Wound up. And truth be told, missing her like crazy. If even an hour goes by without seeing her, I want to give into my animal side and let the gator take over, ensuring she's safe even if I have to follow behind her and snap at anyone who comes close. How fucking insane is that? I need to rein my wayward thoughts in somehow before Spike and Kodiak lower the boom on me. But in my defense, I've never had a mate, and Kodiak's the only one who might even be able to relate to how I'm feeling. I don't wanna have to go to that fuzzy fucker for any advice because he'll lord it over me for the rest of our lives.

I'm so screwed. How will I make it through the day?

Thankfully, my gator stays quiet. I catch Ariel's scent and my shoulders relax. She's here.

When she walks through the door, I'm nearly tongue-tied. She's so beautiful. There are a dozen things I want to say to her, but I keep it all to myself. In time, she'll hear all the words stored up in my heart. For now, I greet her with a welcoming grin.

"Good morning, Ariel. Did you sleep well?"

"Hey, Chomp. Yeah, I did. The bed is so comfy, and that mattress is like sleeping on a cloud." She smiles and it lights up my whole fucking world. "Much better than I've rested since," she pauses and clears her throat, "since my mom passed."

I want to go to her, surround her with my arms, and block out the world from ever hurting her again. She's been beaten down and it never seems to stop trying to rear its ugly head in her life. But I won't let the past overtake her or drag her down. She's got a future now.

She's got ME.

And me, my gator adds. Yes, I know. Boy, do I know.

“What should we do first? What do you need from me?”

“Well,” I say as I rub the back of my neck and scramble for a response because I never got that far in my head, “We should go over the books and the program I use to input all the receipts.”

I’ve got to focus. Normally, I’m organized. Nothing much distracts me from my job or purpose. My gator is single-minded. I tackle one thing to the next, quickly completing tasks as I work through the day. That’s almost impossible now.

We can just go outside and float where she won’t see us , my gator offers.

I nearly sigh. He’s going to be the death of me.

“Sure. Show me. I’m a quick learner.”

I gesture for her to follow me behind the counter and the desk that’s set up. It’s a modest space and easy for her to fit. But with both of us there, it’s suddenly tiny. I have to resist the urge to lean over her as she sits on the office chair and scoots closer. Her lovely fresh linen and spring rain scent fills my nose. I want to sniff her, lick her, and find out if she’s as delicious as she smells.

Fuck. Focus!

We spend the next hour going over the filing system, the phone and messaging center, and everything else I can think of. It’s not complicated, and I know she’ll do fine. Ariel is intelligent and obviously, she’s resourceful too, given her past. I feel confident she can handle this job without issues. It should free me up to work without having to come into the store often.

Will that happen? Hell no. I have to be near her.

Every minute , my gator insists. Yep, definitely gonna be the death of me at this rate!

“So, when people come in and want to book a tour or a campsite, this is how I do it, right?” Ariel gestures to the two logs I keep on the counter.

“Yes. This one is for campsites.” I point to the brown volume. “And the other is for tours, guided fishing trips, etc. Each book has a tear-off receipt portion. Once you fill out all the information, give them the receipt. The number is printed on both portions so we each have a copy.”

“That sounds easy enough. What forms of payment do we accept?”

We. A ridiculous grin lifts the corners of my lips. “I’ve got a square reader and I take cash. No checks. Too many bounce.”

She nods. “Okay. I’ve got it.”

“I think that takes care of everything. Well, except one thing.”

“What’s that?”

“I insist on taking my new employee to lunch. My treat.”

She laughs and it’s sweet, sultry, and addicting. I need more of them. “I’d like that.”

We don’t get a chance to say more for several hours. The first customers enter the store and it’s steady until nearly twelve. I have an appointment in the afternoon, so I know it’ll be even busier later.

I walk to the front of the store once it's empty and flip the sign to closed. Most of the regulars know my schedule, but I post it on the clock that hangs on the door. I'll be back from lunch at two. "You ready?" I ask Ariel. "I'm starving."

Her smile lights up the room as she nods. "Absolutely. I was so nervous this morning, I didn't eat any breakfast."

That won't do, my gator hisses. We will stop by Beanie's every morning to get her a coffee and some pastries. Since I agree with him, I nod and hold out my hand. "Well, let's get you fed then."

While I wanted to put together a picnic, I thought it might be too much on her first day. So instead, we'll go to the diner that the club owns. We don't work it, we simply own it and once a week, Spike goes in and does the payroll for our employees. Most live in Yukon Bluff, but there are a few in Mercy Falls. Still, the food is good, and the portions are plentiful, which will sooth my gator's need to eat.

The diner's in walking distance and I silently cheer when she doesn't let go of my hand. It's a small thing, but huge in the big picture as far as I'm concerned. As we cross the threshold, Janie, one of the waitresses calls out, "Hey, Chomp! Your usual table is open."

"You must eat here a lot," Ariel murmurs as I walk us to the table in the back where most of the club prefers to sit. Unless the diner is packed out, it's typically left open in case one of us comes in for a meal.

I release Ariel's fingers and she slides into the booth while I sit across from her. My instinct is to slide in beside her, but I'm practicing restraint as much as possible, and I don't want to push it since she held my hand.

Janie takes our drink order but doesn't offer me a menu since it isn't necessary. She

gives Ariel a smile and hands her one. “Would you like a few minutes to decide?”

“Yes. Thank you.” Ariel begins scanning the contents as Janie says she’ll return in a bit.

“If you want a recommendation, you can’t go wrong with the buttered grits or biscuits and sausage gravy. There’s also the best club sandwich in the damn state.” I pause because I don’t know what foods she likes, or even her favorites. “What do you want? Breakfast foods or lunch items?”

She blinks up at me over the top of the menu. “Hmmm. I’m the kind of girl that can eat breakfast anytime of the day or night. But, you know, I think I want to try the best damn club sandwich in the state,” she says with a laugh.

My heart is so fucking full. It’s the second time she’s joked around with me, and I’m ravenous for more. I’m seeing a side of her that I don’t think she shows often. Maybe it’s her tragic past that’s dimmed her light and humor, but I’ll make it my mission to encourage her jokes as much as possible.

“Then you have to get the onion rings as a side. They’re wickedly good.”

“I’ll take your word for it.” She places the menu on the table. “What about you? What’re your favorite foods? I know you love meat and potatoes. I’m guessing breakfast foods are your thing too.”

“They are. To be honest, I don’t think I’ve come across a dish I don’t like.”

“Escargot? Caviar? Calamari?” She scrunches her nose and I laugh. “Sardines, too. All a hard pass for me.”

“I won’t get them on my pizza then,” I joke.

“But you better get ham and pineapple and cinnamon because I love Hawaiian pizza.”

Noted. “I think I can manage that for next time.” She probably thinks I’m kidding. I’m not. I’ll do it tomorrow.

Janie returns, takes our order, and sets down our drinks. After she leaves, Ariel sips on her sweet tea. I chug my Coke and reach for another. Janie knows I’ll drink at least three, so she brings multiple drinks at once.

Ariel smirks, but she doesn’t comment on it. Instead, she catches me by surprise with a question I don’t expect. “So, Chomp, am I your mate? And if so, how do you know?”

Chapter Ten

ARIEL

I see him nearly choke at my questions and briefly think maybe I should've waited to ask him. Instead, I watch worriedly as he coughs multiple times until he gasps out, "I'm okay, just wasn't expecting that."

"I like to keep you on your toes, I guess," I reply. Relief courses through me when he manages to swallow some more of his drink without any issue.

He smirks at me then shocks the hell out of me when he says, "I caught your scent a few months ago at the zoo. The club had given the foster kids from Mercy Falls Refuge a day at the zoo as a gift, and several of us went along to help keep the kids somewhat corralled. Callie is heavily involved with them as a volunteer, so since she's Kodiak's mate, the club now helps. We were in an exhibit when I smelled fresh linen, like when clothes are dried outside. It was mixed with how the air is after a hard, cleansing rain and I knew it was my mate's scent. While the majority of us are single, it's because we haven't found our mates yet. But I remembered when I was young, and my mother told me that each of our mates would have a scent that was unique to them."

"But before I could get through the throng of excited kids, you were gone. I drove myself crazy searching for you. So much so that Spike basically sent me 'home' to my cabin in the woods to try and reset myself, which is why I was in my gator form that night. I was checking out our campsites because when those two men checked in, I got a bad vibe from them. I never expected to find you there, and I'm sorry for any

trauma I caused with what I did, but I knew you were my mate as did my gator, and he kind of took over because you were being hurt.”

Despite the flashback his words evoke, I reach over and place my hand on his “Yes, it scared me half to death, but I need to thank you for saving me. I probably wouldn't have survived that night if you hadn't come by, Chomp. For that alone, you have my undying gratitude. Callie explained to me that when a shifter finds their mate, they become somewhat single-minded in their pursuit. I'm not denying what you say, I'm just asking for some time and for you to be patient with me. Please?”

Before he can answer, Janie is back with a huge tray covered with plates. I raise my brow at Chomp who just grins and shrugs. Janie, seeing my look says, “For Chomp, the sandwich is more of an appetizer, so the chef went ahead and made him a meal as well.”

Since I saw how much he ate the morning he cooked all the breakfast foods, I feel as though she's correct. Still, I can't help giggling when I look at my one lone plate then over to his side of the booth and see multiple plates piled around him.

“You're welcome to some if you'd like,” he says, waving his hand over all the plates.

“I suspect this club sandwich and the onion rings will be more than enough for me, Chomp,” I reply. “What's this?” I ask, pointing to a small cup filled with sauce.

“Try it, Ariel, it's for the onion rings.”

Cautiously, I dip one of them in the sauce and take a bite. It has a slight kick to it but definitely adds to the overall flavor. “It's pretty good,” I muse as I finish my first onion ring, uncaring that I'm double dipping, since Chomp has his own cup of sauce. If he doesn't start eating his, though, it could be in danger because this sauce is freaking addictive!

“You should watch out,” I tease after swallowing my bite. “I might snag yours.”

He curls his fingers around his food with mock horror. “You wouldn’t!”

“I can, and I just might,” I joke as I dunk another onion ring and pop it in my mouth. I’m making yummy noises and I don’t care. This food is delicious.

“It’s a good thing we can come here every day for lunch. I suspect you’re gonna want these onion rings often.”

“You know, I think I might.”

When we’re done eating, I push my plate toward Chomp. There’s half a sandwich but none of the onion rings left. I know he’ll finish my sandwich. He still looks hungry as he finishes off a third Coke.

“Here. Eat this. I’m full.”

I don’t have to ask him twice. Chomp picks up the sandwich and chows it down within four bites. I giggle as I shake my head. He’s insatiable.

“What?” He stacks his plates and I note he’s careful to clean up after himself. Something I never saw Perry do. It’s refreshing to see a man who’s confident and mannered. “I gotta feed my gator.”

“Yes, I see that.”

“You ready to head back?”

“Sure.”

Chomp catches Janie and waves her over, telling her we'll take dessert to go, and he needs the check. While she's bagging up the sweets he ordered, he pulls out his wallet and reaches for a twenty and a ten, placing them on the table. It's his tip, I realize. A generous one.

Janie returns and Chomp gives her cash, telling her to keep the change. I slide from the booth and Chomp joins me, his palm resting against my lower back as he leads us from the diner. The heat of his touch sinks through the material of my shirt. It's soothing in a way I can't explain.

He carries the to-go bag in one hand and reaches for me with the other. I almost debate refusing him and decide I don't want to. I've enjoyed his company today. I tighten my grip around his fingers and feel his glance in response, but don't say a word.

When we arrive at the shop, I release his hand after a gentle squeeze. "Do you think it'll be busy?"

"Probably. People usually book the campsites in advance of the upcoming weekend. I've got a tour this afternoon, so I'll be leaving soon." Chomp places the bag from the diner beside me as I take a seat behind the counter. "I figured you might like to try Maggie's brownies and chocolate chip cookies, so they're here when you want them." He winks at me. "If you eat them all, I won't judge."

"That good?" I ask, amused.

"Best in the state," he quips, before lowering his chin and dropping a kiss on my head. "See you in a few hours."

I blink, somewhat shocked that he made such an intimate gesture, but I like it too. It's innocent, I know. The kiss to him is an endearment for his mate. For me? It's

affection and the confirmation that he's trying to protect and understand my boundaries. We might not have finished our discussion at the diner, but it's obvious that he heard me, and I wasn't treated as though my thoughts weren't important. He makes me feel as though I'm important and it heals a tiny part inside of me.

Chomp is sure making it hard for me to dismiss the whole mate idea. In fact, his sweet treatment, affection, concern, and need to protect me are part of the reason I feel safe in Yukon Bluff. He's replacing all those horrid months and memories with new ones, making it hard not to like that gator shifter a little too much.

After he leaves, I go over everything I learned earlier today since I won't have him readily available to ask questions. Thank goodness, I took good notes and I decide to create a manual to make it easier for anyone who might have to step in and help. It also dawns on me that I didn't turn in my employment application or the banking information he's going to need to set up direct deposit for my paycheck, so I pull it out of the crossbody bag I bought the day before and put it in his mailbox to handle.

Customers come in steadily all afternoon and before I know it, Chomp is walking back into the store with a grin on his face. "Are you ready to go?" he asks, glancing over the two books that have seen a lot of action today. "Holy shit," he murmurs when he sees that tours are booked solid for the next two weeks, and every campsite has been rented as well. "I think you're good luck, Ariel. This is the busiest we've been since opening up, I think."

"Hopefully, I didn't screw anything up," I reply. "I put my application and the bank information in your inbox since I forgot to do that this morning."

"I'll take care of it in the morning. Let's shut the computer down for the day and I'll work up the deposit. We can drop it in the bank's overnight box before I walk you home."

“You don’t need to do that, it’s still light outside.” His eyes briefly glow, and I realize his gator’s letting me know he’s listening in. Finally, I shrug and say, “Okay, you can walk me home.”

He chuckles as he counts the money from the old-fashioned cash register then fills out a deposit slip before putting all of it in the bank bag then sealing it with a tiny zip tie. “I would’ve done it anyhow.”

Rolling my eyes I sass, “So, you’re willingly admitting that you’re stalking me?”

“Not stalking, protecting,” he advises. I watch him check the windows and the back door that leads to a small porch which is only accessible to employees. It has a small table and a couple of chairs and I smile thinking of taking a break out there and breathing in the fresh air.

Once the laptop shuts down, I close it, grab my bag then stand up. “I’m officially ready,” I tease.

“That’s a new purse,” he remarks as he guides me out the front door, switching the open sign to closed, and adjusting the clock to show when we’ll reopen before he sets the alarm and locks the door behind him.

“Yeah, I didn’t really like the other one,” I reply.

Actually, I pretty much replaced the clothes they brought from the house, as well as most of the other personal belongings. I don’t want anything from before to touch the new life I’m building. Callie understood, but I know whenever I bring up the past, it makes Chomp as well as his gator very angry.

“Well, I like it. It suits you, Ariel,” he says, taking my hand as we walk toward town.

He entertains me with what happened while he was out on his tour. Seems the man had never really been out on the water before, so when he saw some of the wildlife that Yukon Bluff has, he kind of freaked out a little bit. Chomp starts laughing and says, “Shoulda known he was a city slicker by the way he was dressed.”

I grin while nodding. “Yeah, I saw him arrive and he was wearing fancy shoes for someone who was going to be out on a fishing boat.”

“You hungry?” he asks. “I ordered a couple of pizzas. We can take them to your place and eat before I take off for the night so you can chill.”

“I think I’d like that,” I say, “but only if you included pineapple.”

Part of me wonders if it’s his gator side that is constantly wanting to feed me, but I don’t want to hurt his feelings by asking. Since I went so long with little to nothing to eat, I can definitely afford to gain some weight, that’s for sure.

“It’s not as good as mine,” he warns, “but it’ll do in a pinch.” He taps his temple. “And I didn’t forget. Ham, pineapple, and cinnamon per your request.”

Chomp just might become one of my favorite people. Err, shifter.

Chapter Eleven

CHOMP

The house is empty when we arrive at Ariel's new place. It's still bright out considering the time of year, so no worries about anyone hiding in the shadows to spook her. I still notice her gaze dart around the property before she pushes the key in the lock and opens the door.

I shuffle in behind her, balancing the pizza boxes. I've also got a bag of drinks slung over one of my wrists. There's not a free hand to shut the door so I use my boot, careful not to scuff the wood.

Ariel laughs as she sees my nonexistent struggle. "Why don't I help you out with those drinks?"

"Just tell me where you want the pizzas and then I'll take care of the rest."

And her, my gator adds. We need to feed her often, he says. Mate is too thin. I shake my head at his antics, but he's right, which is why I'm constantly offering her food. I know if she's full, she'll stop eating.

Ariel beams a smile and leads the way into the kitchen, slapping her palm on the counter. "Right here. We can fix our plates and then head into my room to watch a movie or something if you feel up to it. I know you've had a long day."

I'm a bit shocked. I didn't think she'd want me here for that long. After all, she left

my house as soon as she could. But I know the reasons and accept them. “Sounds good to me,” I respond, probably a little too enthusiastic. Normally, I consider myself the type of guy not to get hung up on a woman or tongue-tied, but this is my mate . She’s got me all twisted in the best of ways and I don’t even care.

Ariel pulls plates from a cupboard and hands one over. “I’m starving. It must be the fresh air and work giving me an appetite.”

“Probably,” I agree, but know it’s the freedom and feeling she’s safe that’s added to it.

Trying not to hover and watch how much she puts on her plate, I stack slices on mine, add cheesy garlic bread, and a couple of cookies too. I’m a big guy and I can eat which I know she’s figured out, so why bother hiding it?

Ariel gestures to the 2-Liters I picked up. I brought three because I wasn’t sure if she wanted water or something else with her pizza. “Which one do you want?”

“Root beer. It’s one of my favorites.”

She pops a few cubes of ice in a big glass and sets it aside, then twists the cap on the 2-Liter. Neither of us expect it to hiss and then pop, spraying sugary soda on her, the counter, and the floor. Shit!

I drop my food on the counter and rush toward her, snatching the bottle before it can do more damage. “Well, fuck. You okay?”

She’s not looking at me and I think she’s upset until Ariel’s shoulders start shaking and finally a loud laugh bubbles up her throat and out of her mouth. It’s not just a little chuckle. No, she’s nearly hysterical, chortling to the point that tears are leaking from her eyes.

It's too adorable.

I can't hold back my humor either, shaking my head as I pour my drink, twist on the cap, and set it aside. Then I reach for a few paper towels and wet them, handing them over with a smirk. I've got more in my hand in case she needs help. It appears she does. "You're sticky, baby."

The endearment slipped out faster than I can think about it, but Ariel just smiles. Her lips twitch like she's holding back more laughter as I dab at her arms and mop up some of the root beer. Her shirt is soaked and clinging to her chest and stomach. It's fucking amazing that I don't stare for long at the cleavage I can see underneath. Is she wearing a pushup bra?

Fuck.

"Chomp."

"Yeah?"

"I can handle the rest on my own."

I nod, realizing that I'm brushing her cheek with a wet paper towel and it's leaving residue on her skin. Oops. "Right." I drop my hand and toss the soaked paper in the trash. "Why don't you clean up and I'll bring the food into your room?"

"Good idea. Thanks."

"Sure. What do you want to drink?"

"I like Sprite. I'll have that."

Noted. My gator is mentally adding all her preferences and assuring we won't ever forget.

When she walks away, I don't watch. Okay, not for long. I definitely don't think about those wide, childbearing hips and her sexy walk. Or that luscious ass. Or . . .okay, I watched until she left my sight. I blame my gator. He's a fucking pain in the ass.

As soon as I'm alone, I clean up the mess and pour her drink before bringing it all into her room. I note the plants from her old place, the new bed and all the things she's arranged to make it her own. It's warm and inviting and I feel peaceful as I enter her space. This is where my mate will heal, and I'll support her during every step of the process until she's ready and we can continue our story.

But we stay close, my gator insists like I don't know how obsessive he's become with her.

When Ariel walks out of the connected bathroom, I feel my jaw drop. She's wearing a thin white shirt and pajama shorts. The first thing I notice is that she's cold. Her nipples are poking through the material, and I force my gaze away, sliding lower until I stiffen. It's not the arousing tease of her breasts this time, but rather the scars I can see on her legs. Long marks that look like someone cut her and they didn't heal right. Right now, I'm wishing I didn't kill that fucker so quickly because he deserved to be treated the way that he treated her.

Fuck. I'm going to lose it.

We can't do that to our mate, my gator hisses. She survived what was meant to end her, Chomp!

My head snaps up and we lock eyes. I'm breathing fast, awaiting her reaction because

she's staring at me, assessing what I'll say and do. I can't fuck this up. The rage simmering in my body is almost impossible to master, but I do it for her. She's testing me. It's not for malicious reasons. I think it's because she wants to know that she can share anything with me, and I won't react like a fucking madman. Or a monster.

I blow out a breath and hold her gaze, then nod. "Got you all set up. What movie genre do you want to watch? Anything specific in mind?"

She smiles. It's sad around the edges because of what she endured, but it's also hopeful. That little bit of light in her eyes brightens. It's not intense. It doesn't have to be for me to know that I gave her something she needed. Acceptance.

"Action and adventure. Something fun and not too serious."

I got you, baby. I want to tell her that aloud, but I think she gets it.

We pick a film and then settle on her bed. We're both leaning against the headboard, munching on our food. She's so close I can feel the heat of her skin ghosting my arm every time she takes a bite or drink from her Sprite. It's a torture I never experienced before now. Denial can be a powerful aphrodisiac.

We finish our food and I take the plates to the kitchen, placing them in the sink before I return. Somewhere around an hour in, her eyelids begin to droop. She's slowly growing sleepy. I don't say anything and instead, watch over her, content to ensure she's getting the rest she needs.

It's when her body connects with mine that I say fuck it and slip my arm around her, holding her close against me because I don't know when I'll get another chance. I didn't think I was the affectionate type. Before Ariel, I didn't linger with a woman in my bed. There was only one purpose. Afterward, we parted ways.

But with my mate? I find that every little touch, every exhale of her sweet breath, and each whisper of her skin that connects with mine is intoxicating and I want more.

She sighs in her sleep and her palm slides across my stomach. Her cheek rests close to my heart. If there was ever a moment I wanted to remember forever, this is it.

Wow. I've fallen hard for Ariel. Within days of meeting, I'm all fucking in.

Even if we never sleep together and she tells me she only wants to be friends, I'll be content. She's my heartbeat, my mate, and holy shit, I'm getting sappy as fuck right now. My gator chumpfs. He thinks it's hilarious but he's just as smitten. We can't get enough of our Ariel.

We make her want us, Chomp, my gator insists. More than friends, even! He's a pushy fucker, that's for sure. She's comfortable with us, he brags.

I don't know how long she rests on me. Hours. I don't check my phone even when I hear it vibrate. It's probably Spike or Kodiak. My pres will wait because he knows I'm with Ariel. Kodiak can fuck off. I'll get back to him later.

The caller is persistent. I finally decide it must be important because whoever it is isn't giving up. I'm aggravated as I slip from the bed and lower my mate gently onto the mattress, ensuring her head is comfortably resting on a pillow. I cover her with a blanket and hate to leave her side. When I glance at my screen, I mumble a curse.

Fucking Kodiak. I don't remember being such a cockblocker toward him when it came to him being with his mate. Not that Ariel and I are anywhere near that kind of a relationship whatsoever.

Yet, my gator whispers as I glance around her room once again. I don't want to leave her but he's my VP, so I need to see what's going on. Leaning down, I ghost a kiss

across her forehead, grinning when I hear her mumble something as she snuggles closer into the bed. I don't know if she sleeps with the television on or not, so I set the timer for several hours just in case she wakes up, then I check the windows in her room to make sure they're locked. Finding a piece of paper, I write her a quick note, place it where she'll find it, then leave her room.

My phone vibrates again but Kodiak needs to fucking wait. I have to check the rest of the house before I leave her alone. Once I'm positive all the windows and doors are secure, I step outside then head into the woods which will allow me to watch over her until morning. Before I shift, of course, I decide to see what the nosey fucker wants.

Me: You rang?

Kodiak: Did you read any of my texts?

Me: No, I was making sure Ariel was safe and secure. Hold on.

He's been blowing me up, but now that I'm reading them, I see why. At Ariel's old place, there were a few scents we noticed. Not neighbors but people who frequently came into that house. They were males. I remember every one of them. Kodiak picked up one of the odors in town.

Me: How fresh?

Kodiak: No more than a day old if that.

Fuck. Me. My mate is still in danger, then.

Me: Which scent?

There was one that smelled a lot like Perry, but not exactly, then the other asshole I

ripped to pieces, plus two more, but those last two scents were a lot fainter than the other three. Since two of the three are now fish food, I can only presume that it's someone related to Perry.

Kodiak: Smelled like the fucker you demolished.

My gator immediately pushes to the surface. He wants to hunt this threat down and eliminate it as quickly as possible. There can't be any chance that Perry's relation will show up and try to harm or threaten my mate.

Let's go! Now! He bellows in my head.

I send one more text and then I'm running into the woods, already letting my gator have his way.

Me: Hunting season is open.

Chapter Twelve

ARIEL

I startle awake and immediately realize I'm alone. My head rests on my pillow and I'm hugging another one, not the big gator shifter. He's gone.

Blinking, I sit up, and rub the sleep from my eyes. I feel groggy and judging by the darkness beyond my window, I haven't been asleep for long. I'm tired, but not exhausted. It's too early to rise for the day so I decide to lay back against the sheets and just relax.

That's what I intend, but it doesn't happen. For one, I wonder where Chomp went and why he left. It seemed out of character for him to scamper off after how often he finds a way to integrate himself into my life since he's found me. Maybe I'm overthinking this and I need more rest.

The truth? I thought he'd stay with me.

I slide from the bed and make a quick detour into the bathroom before I walk back into my room and find his note, detailing the reason he left. A smile quirks the corners of my lips. He had to go because of his club, not because he wanted to rush from my side. I'm not sure when my thoughts and feelings toward Chomp began to change. They've gradually shifted to friendlier terms, and I've become comfortable around him. More than that, I can laugh and enjoy myself.

Am I ready to move back in with him? Start a relationship? Think of anything more

than friends?

No to all three. And I'm okay with that. I believe Chomp is too.

We need time, and every day spent together is helping me learn more about the man, biker, and his animal side. I'm intrigued by him. Even with all I've been through, he's starting to become someone I trust. I obviously feel comfortable with him, considering the fact that I curled around him.

He won't hurt you, my brain whispers. He's a safe place for you, Ariel. I like that thought, actually, because I lost that safety net the day my mom drew her last breath. Perry acted like he was that to me, but he quickly let his mask slip, showing me the monster beneath.

Chomp's not like that, I think. Yes, he has an animal side, one who has the ability to eliminate any threat against those he cares about, but his actions since the day we met have been consistent. He's kind, thoughtful, and generous with his time and attention. Plus, he's being considerate where I'm concerned. I know he's physically attracted to me, especially since Callie explained about mates, yet he isn't pushing for anything more than holding my hand.

My TV is still on, and I notice the low volume, catching the app it's stuck on. Teasers for other movies are slowly scrolling through a list I can't begin to pinpoint. The light brightens the room and I climb underneath the covers, hoping to return to the peaceful slumber I enjoyed earlier. I don't mind having the television on since the house is so quiet otherwise. Normally, I put it on the ID channel, but I don't have the energy to do that right now.

I'm just drifting off, lingering in the ghostly realm where dreams and reality intertwine when I hear a sound that yanks me back into the present. I'm groggy, and it takes a few seconds to notice what's causing my body to waken. A slight scraping

sound drags across the pane of glass, causing a shudder to run through me.

I wonder if it's a tree branch brushing the window's surface. It has to be.

For some reason, I decide to investigate. Maybe I just want to be sure there's no monsters outside like a little child who's got to make sure there's nothing hiding under the bed. It's probably foolish. I know I'm alone in my room and there's no one outside waiting to terrorize me.

Perry is gone. Ricky too, I remind myself. Chomp took care of them.

So why do I still want to look over my shoulder? Why does it feel like something sinister is lurking outside this very minute?

That's when my TV shuts off. I'm plunged into darkness, and I jolt, caught by surprise. I never saw a countdown or any indication it would power off, but it makes sense. It's been hours since the movie ended, and I fell asleep beside Chomp. Knowing him, he set my television's sleep option.

Outside, I hear a loud crack of thunder followed by a flash of lightning in the distance. The jagged bolt frames the mountain and seems to touch down on its peak. I can close my eyes and feel the zip of energy across my skin. The air is supercharged, and it reminds me of how everything goes silent and still right before the earth shakes and the ground rumbles with an earthquake. It's been years since I visited California, but I still remember waking up to one and how the walls shook with the force of the shifting plates on the fault line.

That's how it is now, besides the occasional crack of thunder. Silent. Waiting. Anticipation zings across my skin as I walk to my window, hoping to catch the first few drops of rain as they fall. I've always enjoyed watching storms. There's something soothing in the water falling and cleansing the ground, washing everything

clean. Maybe it's the fact that it soothes parched soil and restores life. Rain is so much more than hydrogen and oxygen. It's a life-giving force. My mother used to say that whenever a storm hit.

I'm almost close enough to pull the curtain open wider and view the spectacle from bed, but I hear it again. A slight scraping across the window. It's got to be the wind.

I shove the curtains wide and stare out into the night. At least, that's what I think I'm doing until I see a figure. It's dark out and the moon is covered by thick clouds. The stars are muted by the rain that's already steadily falling. Heavy drops plop onto the grass, sidewalk, driveway, and road but I don't focus on them. All I see is broad shoulders and a man's stocky frame. His face is obscured by a black mask that I notice as soon as lightning strikes above us.

A desperate, terrified scream builds in my throat before it finally releases and populates goosebumps along my arms. Someone is outside my window!

I know it's not Chomp. He would never scare me like this. Neither would any of his biker buddies. The man takes a step toward me, and I back up, whimpering as I see him stalking forward. Once he reaches the glass, his gloved hands slam against it, eliciting another strangled scream as I bump into my bed frame.

I have to get out of here!

My reaction isn't logical, but I choose flight over fight. There's no internal threat. Yet. But if that man decides to break the window, I don't want to be standing there vulnerable. I grab a hoodie and pull it over my nightshirt, then pull on a pair of sweatpants before I slide my sneakers on my feet. I won't worry about socks right now since my safety is paramount. With my phone in the pouch on my hoodie, I take one last look around me then leave my bedroom door.

“Should I try to call Chomp?” I wonder out loud as I silently move through Michelle’s house. “Or maybe Callie who can let Kodiak know?”

You’re safer inside the house, my mom whispers. He’s right outside, the doors are all locked. Call your friends, baby.

After finding out there are shifters and other things that go bump in the night, I no longer question the fact that my mother is talking to me right now. She’s right, though, while he might break in, I’m still safer inside the house than I am outside in the storm. I need a weapon to protect myself, so I head to the kitchen where I know Chelle has a huge knife block. I don’t know if I can use it, but I hope that if it’s my life or theirs, I can do it.

With a knife now in my hand, I pull my phone out of the pouch and hit Callie’s contact. When she answers, I say, “There’s someone outside, Callie. Chomp left a few hours ago, I think, and I’m by myself.”

“Shit, Let me text Kodiak.” She’s silent for a minute. “Okay, Kodiak’s on his way, and he’ll let the other brothers know. Can you lock yourself in a bathroom or something? I’ll call back when they’re physically there.”

“Yeah, Michelle has an ensuite in her room. I think under the circumstances, she’ll be okay if I go in her room, lock that door then hide in the bathroom. What do you think?”

“Go, Ariel. Help is on the way,” she encourages. “Chomp and Kodiak are close.”

“Don’t hang up yet,” I plead, unable to keep the fear from my voice. She may only be on the phone, but at least I’m not truly alone. It might not make sense to anyone else, but it does to me.

“I’m right here. Promise.”

I head for Chelle’s room as she stays on the line, gripping the phone like my life depends on it. I’ve got just as tight a hold on the knife. If I get attacked, at least someone will know. Kodiak and Chomp will hurry. I know my gator man will rush to my side.

I’m almost to the room when I hear a crash. It combines with a loud boom as thunder rumbles overhead. I screech as I spin, catching the front door as it splinters open. Terrified, I lift my knife and scream Callie’s name.

It’s chaos. Wood pieces fly outward as they’re crushed beneath the body of an enormous alligator. The beast charges toward me and for a split second, I forget it’s not a normal gator. All I see is a monster intent to eat me. Flashbacks of that night assail my thoughts as I crumple to the floor, tears now streaming down my face.

As the gator approaches, I see the mouth open, and a hiss escapes. I’m so traumatized that I plunge the knife into the air, indicating that I’ll use it if I need to. The gator’s body begins to shudder and then it’s changing in front of me, body parts shifting into the familiar form of Chomp. I’m shocked for multiple reasons, but the two that stick out the most are witnessing the transformation and finding it’s real while also unable to look away from the virile, muscled, attractive man in front of me. He’s naked .

I see all of him. And I mean, all of Chomp. Every long, thick inch.

Jesus. I can’t stop staring. Who knew a guy could look that girthy and endowed when he wasn’t uh, hard?

Chomp doesn’t seem to notice my perusal. He drops to my side and scoops me into his embrace. I’m lifted off the floor as he cradles me against his chest and a deep chumpf leaves his throat. He’s still a bit more beast than man, but he wants me to

know he's here.

"Chomp," I whisper, hugging him around the neck. "There's a man outside my window. He was watching me." I shudder. "He banged his fists on the glass."

"Fuck," he curses. "I'm sorry. I should have been here."

"It's not your fault."

"No, but we caught a scent that we detected when we went to that house to pick up your things." He frowns as I lift my head.

"What do you mean?"

"We noticed several scents. Human males. Two of them smelled like the ones that," he pauses, and I understand. "This scent is like one of them. Close, but not the same."

He seems like he doesn't want me to know but also needs to keep our communication open and build our trust. Chomp shakes his head.

"I don't know if that means anything important," I admit, still struggling with the fact that someone is watching or stalking me.

"I saw boot prints outside your window." Chomp tucks my head under his chin and holds me so tightly that I know he's scared for me. "I'll figure this out. I promise, Ariel."

"I know."

"That means I'm staying with you at night. I need to know you're safe if he comes back."

I open my mouth to argue but decide against it. The truth is, I don't want to be alone if the stranger returns. "Okay, on one condition."

"Anything."

"You can't let your gator bust down another door."

It's almost funny. I can hear the wind and rain sweeping through the foyer. Michelle won't be happy. She stayed with her boyfriend overnight. It'll be a shock once she returns.

"I'll fix it." His lips press a kiss on my head. "And no more busted doors."

"Unless a psycho stalker is after me," I amend.

He snorts. "Got it."

It's somewhat ironic that when I first saw the gator storming through the broken door, I was terrified, but when I realized it was Chomp, my fear dissipated. While I'm not sure how it's going to work with him being around at night, I know with him nearby, I'll be able to rest.

Chapter Thirteen

CHOMP

Mate is safe now, my gator whispers as we hold Ariel close.

I can still feel her heart racing and it bothers me that I wasn't here watching over her, but after Kodiak's texts, I had to check it out. What I didn't tell Ariel is that the scent at her old place is now stronger, and it's practically saturated in the ground outside. Whoever is watching her is living in that fucker's house, so I'm going to need one of my brothers to stake it out because I need to keep Ariel safe. I'm worried about the fact that my gator splintered the front door to get to our mate, but I've come to realize that when it involves Ariel, he simply doesn't care who he has to mow down or what he has to destroy in order to get to her.

I do find it intriguing that she wasn't as afraid of him as she was the night we met. Granted, I wasn't ripping limbs off some stupid fuckers, but still, I'm pretty sure she has PTSD from that event alone. I wish he wouldn't go overboard the way he does, but sometimes, he takes over and I'm just a bystander. He stubborn as fuck and I know it won't change.

"So, about the front door," she starts, "where on earth will you find the supplies to fix it tonight?"

"The club owns a construction company. I'm pretty sure, since this is a basic door, that we have some on hand. I'll call Spike and check with him as soon as you're settled," I assure her.

“Um, Chomp? You realize you’re naked, right?” she asks, a pink flush staining her cheeks.

Reaching up, I swipe away the tears still clinging to the soft skin of her cheeks and smirk. “Yeah, baby, I know. That’s one of the downsides of being a shifter. When we come back to our human form, we’re naked.”

She snickers then says, “Guess you need to start leaving clothes strategically placed. Not sure the local law would appreciate any of y’all running around in the nude.”

Before I can reply I hear, “Knock, knock” and Kodiak walks through the door, a bag in his hand. “Here, fucker, cover that up. Nobody wants to see your junk,” he taunts, tossing the bag in my direction.

I don’t remind him that his fucking bear enjoys being out in the nude, especially in the cold, and that his junk shrivels up when he shifts back. It’s one of his biggest complaints.

“We knew your gator would overreact,” Spike adds, walking through what’s left of the front door. “So, we stopped by the warehouse and picked up a new door. Why don’t you go get dressed? Ariel, can you make a pot of coffee?”

She nods, sliding off my lap, which causes me to grimace since it feels too good. Standing, I put the bag in front of me, causing Kodiak to snicker. “Be right back and I’ll help.”

“We got it,” Kodiak replies, “but we do need to talk.”

I head to the bathroom, uncaring that I’m unclothed for my brothers as well as my mate. At this point, we’ve all seen one another in various stages of undress, so if my bare ass or swinging dick is an issue, it’s theirs, not mine.

We don't want her seeing the others, my gator hisses as I enter the bathroom. Rolling my eyes, I quickly dress then head out to where my brothers are finishing putting the new door up.

"We lost his scent thanks to the fucking rain," Spike rumbles, smoke puffing from his nostrils.

Fuck. I was afraid of that.

"But we've got Fang and Phoenix watching Perry's house since the scent is now fresh versus how it was when we were there getting Ariel's things. We will find this douche canoe and then interrogate him to find out why the hell he's stalking her," Spike decrees, then huffs. "Dammit, because of the rain, I can't just take this shit outside and burn it like I want to do."

"We brought the work truck," Kodiak reminds him. "We'll just stack what's left in the back and you can have a bonfire once it dries out."

"I'm staying with Ariel," I tell them as we carry the remnants of the first door out to the truck. "I don't trust whoever it is not to show up again. I never want to hear her scream that way ever again."

Except in pleasure, my gator says with confidence, and she will.

Ariel pokes her head out of the kitchen. "Coffee is ready. I've set out mugs and creamer for everyone."

Spike nods. "Thanks, Ariel. Appreciate it."

Spike and Kodiak go claim their cups as I stand still, opening my arms as an indication that she can come to me, run toward me, walk, or shake her head. The

choice is up to her. Always.

She doesn't hesitate to rush into my embrace, sliding her arms around my waist as I fold around her. "He won't come back if he sees you, right?"

God, I want to let my gator rip apart this man for scaring her. "I don't think so, baby." I won't promise her he won't. I can't do that. "I won't leave your side. Not for a minute."

She snickers. "There's some things I have to do alone, ya know."

Oh. Right. "I suppose so," I agree with humor.

Her amusement fades. "I don't know what he wants."

"Motivation doesn't matter. He won't get close enough to spook you again."

She snuggles into my chest and rubs her cheek over my heart. My gator's contentment matches mine. This is what we've been waiting for. Even if Ariel's affection comes from our protection, it still means she trusts and needs us. That's enough to build a solid foundation.

"Do you feel up to working today?" I ask, wondering if she's too afraid to leave the house.

"I'm good. I want to work."

"My schedule is booked. I'll have to rearrange some things." I frown, wondering who I can get to replace me for some of the tours and field trips I've got going on. I don't want to leave Ariel without protection and there's no one who's better equipped to keep my mate safe than me.

Spike joins us, sipping on his coffee. I can smell the vanilla creamer. He usually drinks it black but maybe he wants to be nice since Ariel went out of her way. “I’m available.”

I give him a look. “To do tours?”

He smirks. “To stay with Ariel.”

Uh. “Spike.”

“Don’t get your gator in a tizzy. I’m offering to help.”

He knows I can’t refuse. He’s the president of the club. Sure, we’re shifters. But we all came here because for one reason or another, we had to find a new place to live. Some of us left our old homes because we were kicked out or run off. Others left because of personal reasons I had yet to learn. Most of us yearned for connection and a place to call home, apart from the strife or cruelty we experienced.

We found Spike and formed our motorcycle club. For me, it’s bittersweet. I left my congregation and the cruel alpha who harmed the females, including my mother. I missed her and my siblings, but my defiance and confronting the alpha, Grinder, only earned punishment dealt to my mother. It’s the reason I had to leave because I had to keep my mother safe from his temper. But I finally found a place where I fit in, and I’ve been accepted for who I am.

Now I’ve found my mate too. With her and the club, I finally have my own family, which is why I agree to let Spike stay with Ariel at the shop while I work. Mates are precious to all of us, especially since we’re beginning to find them. It’s not just a wish or a hope. It’s a certainty now.

We should make him do the tours, my gator grumbles. He’s not happy about this. I

suspect he won't be happy about anyone ever being close to our mate other than us. He's far too protective and possessive. Of course, while Spike is usually laid back and even-tempered, I don't want him dealing with customers since some of them are city slickers with no clue how to act in the wilderness; he's liable to open his mouth and burn them to ashes. Ariel's already been traumatized enough; I don't want her to see the dragon come out to play.

"We should get some rest first," I say, glancing at the dark circles that have formed beneath Ariel's eyes. She didn't get much sleep before all this happened. "We have a few hours before we need to open the shop."

"Go," Spike orders. "I'll meet you at the shop at nine. Kong is coming over to watch the place for the day."

Kodiak leaves the kitchen and I see he's stuffing a pastry into his mouth and licking his fingers. "What?" he asks when he sees we're all staring.

"How many did you eat?" Spike asks, folding his arms over his chest. Smoke curls from his nostrils so I know he's mildly irritated.

Kodiak looks away, a guilty expression on his face. "All of them?"

"You ate all the fucking pastries? The donuts and the danish?"

Kodiak swallows like he still has food in his mouth. "My bear is hungry."

Spike pinches the bridge of his nose and sighs. "Go to your mate. Callie will feed you."

Kodiak grins and waves before he rushes out the door. I glare at his back since I was looking forward to some of Beanie's apple fritters. They're my favorite and that

asshole knows it. I start thinking of ways I can get him back, which soon has me grinning.

Ariel giggles. "It's sort of funny."

"Not when he does it all the time," Spike deadpans, shaking his head. "I'm going to call Beanie's Brew and have her make a delivery. The club will cover the cost of the coffee and treats."

"Thanks." Ariel yawns. "I think I need that nap."

I scoop her into my arms and tick my chin at Spike, carrying her into her room. "We'll see ya at the shop." Once I hear the front door shut, I know we're alone. "I'm gonna go lock that door. I'll be right back."

Ariel mumbles a response as I lay her on the bed. She immediately settles beneath the covers, her eyes already fluttering. "Mmhmm."

It only takes me a minute to check all the locks on the doors and windows, including her room. I know I did it when I left earlier, but neither me nor my gator will rest easy until we check them all again. She's asleep as I sense Kong outside. He's circling the perimeter, familiarizing himself with the scents, including the creeper that hung outside Ariel's window. I draw the drapes closed, noting that the window is intact, and the asshole did nothing more than bang on the glass. There's no damage.

He's going to pay for scaring our mate, my gator hisses. Since I agree with him one hundred percent, I nod.

I'm exhausted as I slide beside my mate, drawing her close as I close my eyes. I've set an alarm on my phone, giving us a couple of hours before we need to get up and moving. My gator settles as her scent and warmth mingle with ours. Knowing she's

also being smothered with our scent is soothing.

The last thought in my head is how I'll hunt this fucker down and eliminate him for daring to frighten my mate.

Chapter Fourteen

ARIEL

I t's been three days since that creepy stranger showed up outside my bedroom window and Chomp busted down the door to save me. Every night since he's been sleeping in my bed with me, holding me close, and I've never felt safer. But still, lingering in the back of my mind, is the thought that this man will show up again. Maybe he's waiting for me to be alone, or he's looking for the right moment to terrorize me again. I keep looking over my shoulder, and I know it worries my gator protector.

Since Chomp had a tour this morning, I stayed at Chelle's so I could get my laundry done and clean my room. Peanut and Kong, two of the club's enforcers, are outside keeping watch over the house. I giggle because when Peanut introduced himself, he had a huge five-pound bag of peanuts cradled in his arms. Kong yelled at him because he said that anyone with a lick of sense in their head would know the house was being watched since Peanut tends to toss the shells wherever he wants. So now, he has a plastic bag around his wrist, and he's been throwing the trash in the bag.

"They're so silly," I mutter as I put on a clean fitted sheet. I'm glad Callie talked me into buying two sets of sheets. While one is washing, I can make the bed and take care of one of the chores on my list. "Who makes this shit?" I ask out loud when I realize the sheet isn't correct; I have the short sides on the long end. Sighing, I fix it then quickly put it on, grab the flat sheet and get it just so, before I add the blanket and the comforter. "Hmm, maybe no blanket this time."

Chomp's animal may be a gator, but he's remarkably hot-blooded, and I typically wake up sweaty. Tossing the blanket to the side, I arrange the comforter then add the shams and the pillows. Satisfied that the bed is now done, I fold the blanket and put it in the bottom drawer of the hutch.

"Now the plants." I nod to myself as I grab the watering can that the guys remembered to bring, head to the bathroom and fill it up with water before I start that task. As I fill the planters, I remove any dead leaves. "Hmm, looks like you're going to be blooming soon," I tell the spider plant that hangs in the corner.

While I'm not a fan of living spiders, I love the plant. Seeing all the blooms that pop up makes me happy; it was one of my mom's favorite plants which is why I have several of them. I notice that Chomp put up one of those hooks that don't leave marks when they're removed from surfaces so that my ivy can start trailing up the wall. He's so considerate toward me and I find myself falling a little more in like with him every day.

I refuse to even think about the other 'L' word right now. Yep. Not happening. Once all the plants have been taken care of, I look at my phone and see I've only got an hour or so before Chomp gets here. Our plans today include eating, which has me snickering out loud because it feels like we're always eating, then going to the grocery store to 'restock' as Chomp says since he has a high metabolism. I have noticed that I've started to gain some of the weight that I lost due to Perry's mistreatment of me, so I'm not going to complain too much.

Not only is Chomp easy on the eyes, but he's a dream in the kitchen. He takes ordinary meals and makes them extraordinary. I wish he was able to have his dream of owning a restaurant come to fruition. Or at least being a part of it in some way. I'll have to think on it since I want to repay him for his kindness.

"I'll just swap the laundry really quick, then grab a shower so I'm ready to go when

he gets here.” Since Chelle is working, I’m by myself so talking out loud keeps me from freaking out too much. It’s an old habit I developed after my mom’s passing since it makes me feel less alone. Although, lately, I don’t do it as often. That has everything to do with a certain gator shifter. “Chomp is so sweet and cuddly for a toothy beast.”

I finish my chores and once everything is just how I like it, I go take a shower. For some reason, I debate what I’m going to wear and nervous butterflies flutter in my belly. I don’t linger on the reason, but stand in my bra and panties, sifting through my closet. My hair and makeup are all done, and I smile, hoping Chomp appreciates my effort.

Choosing a long maxi style dress in a pale green with a light pattern of ivy in the background, I slip on a pair of sandals and glance at my reflection. There’s just something about the color green. “Trees. Plants. Nature,” I whisper. Alligators , I mentally add. They’re all reasons I love it.

You’d think the scary, scaly chomper would make me afraid, but not for a long time now. Not since the night when Chomp’s gator rescued me. Now, I’ve become used to the creature and the man, and I’m growing fond of my protectors.

I’m just fluffing my hair and applying lip gloss when I hear the doorbell ring. A bright smile curls my lips because Chomp insists on being a gentleman, even if he’s sleeping here every night. I nearly skip to the door, unable to hold back my grin when I open it.

Chomp’s eyes widen as he takes me in, dragging his gaze from my feet, slowly upward, caressing every inch of my body before they finally settle on my face. There’s a sweet smile but no denying the hunger he’s trying to hold back. We might never be more than anything besides friends, and since I don’t want to entertain taking things to the next level yet, it’s still undetermined, but I like knowing that he’s

attracted to me. If nothing else, it makes me feel good since compliments are something I never heard from Perry.

“Wow,” Chomp finally gushes, “You look beautiful, Ariel.”

“Thanks.” I pause, taking in his clean clothes and damp hair. He went home and showered first before meeting up with me. It looks like I’m not the only one entertaining the idea of a real date.

Chomp holds out his arm. “Ready? It’s a lovely walk to the restaurant.”

I step outside and lock up the house, tossing the key inside the little cross body purse I’m wearing before I slip my hand around Chomp’s bicep. He’s right. It’s a gorgeous evening and the fading sunlight is the perfect backdrop to the mountains in the distance.

“You feel like anything in particular for dinner?”

“Not really. I’m just hungry,” I admit. I should have eaten something, but I was too busy with picking up the house and keeping it clean while I had the time. Plus, I feel obligated to show I’m a good roommate to Chelle, so she’ll want to keep me around. Not that she’s really home all that much; she spends most of her time either at work or with her boyfriend. It’s almost like I live alone, and the occasional solitude is helping me to slowly heal.

“Want to go to the diner then?” he asks. “The club just became silent partners with Maggie in order to keep it open.”

I’m not sure if he should be telling me something that sounds like club business. Callie told me that stuff like that is usually only known to the brothers. Still, she did admit that Kodiak shares a lot with her, so I suspect it might be a mate thing.

“Really? I can’t believe they almost closed down. The food is really good and plentiful,” I reply.

“Apparently, some of Maggie’s suppliers were raking her over the coals with their prices,” he tells me, a snarl on his handsome face. That’s something I’ve noticed about all of the brothers I’ve met so far. They are very protective of females, even if they’re not their mates. It makes me feel cared for and included, something I haven’t experienced since my mom died. “We’ve found new suppliers for her fresh produce and vegetables, as well as the meats.”

“I’m sure that’ll help.”

“We believe so. Maggie’s place has been around since her grandmother opened it nearly sixty years ago. We’re not going to let it close down. Spike says we just need to think of new ways to get customers inside besides the dinner and breakfast rushes. Lunch is somewhat steady but it’s the weekends things are a little slow.”

“What if you did something special on the weekends? Like a Saturday buffet and Sunday brunch? Draw in those customers with the idea of a theme like down home cookin’?” I ask, remembering how my mom used to say that comfort food is the way to anyone’s heart, not just men. Everyone likes a good hearty meal.

Chomp blinks in surprise. “Wow, that’s an amazing idea. I’ll run it by Spike and see if he wants to speak to Maggie about it.”

We arrive at the diner, and we’re seated, soon eating those comfort foods I thought about earlier. The waitress sets down a plate of country fried steak, gravy, and mashed potatoes in front of me in addition to the salad I ordered. All that’s missing is my mother’s homemade green beans with bacon and onions. She used to cook them in the crockpot for hours in chicken broth and seasonings until they were tender and full of flavor. I still miss them. Luckily, I have her recipe. Actually, I’ve got her

cookbook. She jotted down every recipe she loved by hand and added pictures, so it was more like a photo album than a cookbook. It's one of the things Chomp brought back. They managed to find it on a shelf in an old closet. Perry took it away six months ago when we had a fight. I thought he burned or threw it away. I'm so happy to be wrong.

Chomp is chowing on meatloaf, macaroni and cheese, warm rolls with butter, and corn on the cob. He seems to enjoy every bite. I'm still amazed at how much he can eat. Heck, how much all of his brothers eat! Callie and I eat normal portions while the men pile on the protein then eat the sides, almost as an afterthought.

I dab at my mouth with a napkin, pushing the plate toward him. "I'm full. Want the rest?"

He grins at me then pulls my plate closer before he finishes what I didn't eat. When he raises his hand for the waitress, I assume he's wanting our check. Nope. He proceeds to order dessert as I roll my eyes, which causes him to laugh.

"I'm a growing boy, what can I say?" he teases, smirking at me. "Besides, whatever we can't eat, we'll run by the house because we're going to need the truck to get groceries."

He's not wrong about that one at all. The waitress grins as she takes his dessert order to the kitchen. I know there's absolutely no way I'll be able to eat any of it, but when she comes out with the tray, and I see there's a piece of chocolate cake I look at him and grin. "There's always room for chocolate, Chomp."

"I'll keep that in mind." We eat what we can then he looks at me and says, "I'll be right back. I'll get our server to bring over some to-go boxes."

"Okay," I reply, stacking the empty plates by size, then putting what's left of the

desserts on one plate. I'm not so picky that my food can't touch, and so far, I haven't seen Chomp push any food away, so it really doesn't matter that the pie is touching the cake.

While he's gone, I feel the hair on the nape of my neck stand up straight, as if someone's watching me. Carefully, I turn my head like I used to do when I lived with Perry and glance around the room with my peripheral vision. Seeing someone glaring at me through the window of the diner who is a dead ringer for Perry has sweat breaking out all over my body as my breath stutters in my chest.

How is this possible?

Chapter Fifteen

ARIEL

I shudder as I suck in another breath. I'm afraid I'll start hyperventilating. The shock of seeing Perry again is wreaking havoc on my body and brain. Terror is overtaking common sense. I want to scream.

Who is this man? Why does he look just like Perry? I know Perry's dead, but the logical side of my brain isn't in control. All the trauma rushes into the present and I don't know what to do.

Chomp. I need Chomp and I need him now. As my hands start to tremble, I nearly drop the plate of desserts as I slide them into the box the waitress dropped off. She says something about Chomp joining me soon, but it doesn't seem to click.

Outside, I still see the Perry look alike and it becomes a hundred times more hellacious when he grins. He knows what his presence is doing to me and he's enjoying it.

I can't stay here. But I can't leave by myself, either. I'm wrestling with my fight or flight instinct when Chomp comes back to the table. I know I probably look half-crazy as I stare at him, unable to speak, just point.

"Ariel, what's wrong?" For just a moment, I see his eyes flash as his gator peers at me, worry evident.

“H-h-he’s out there,” I whisper, as I continue to point out the window. “B-b-but it’s not possible,” I whisper, willing Chomp to understand what I’m unable to put into words.

He throws a bunch of cash on top of the receipt that’s on the table and I instinctively know he’s given the waitress one helluva tip. “Come on, we’re going,” he decrees, taking my hand in his. I don’t want to go near the door and almost drag my feet.

This is crazy. I have to be seeing things. Perry and Ricky are dead. I saw them torn apart by Chomp’s gator. For some reason, all the shit I’ve gone through must be surfacing just when I think I’m healing. Maybe I’m going crazy, or I’m depressed, but that doesn’t make sense. A few hours ago, I was singing in the shower!

Chomp’s head swings both ways as we exit, looking for any threat. And to make matters worse, I don’t see the Perry look alike. He’s vanished.

“Ariel, do you still see him?”

He believes me, I realize. As insane as it sounds, Chomp believes my fearful response is driven by reality and not something I conjured from a trauma response. “No.” I’m shaking so hard that Chomp tugs me close.

“Baby. I need you to breathe. Can you do that for me?”

“Y-yes,” I stammer.

He leads me away from the diner and into the street, walking beside me as he keeps scanning the road, storefronts, and businesses in the central part of town. “We’re going to walk toward my house. If you feel unsafe or afraid at any time, you let me know. Okay?”

I nod, still trying to breathe without freaking out.

“Once we get to my house, you can tell me what you saw. Until then, I want you to focus on breathing. I’m right here. You’re safe. We won’t let anything happen to you, I promise. We’re going to get through this.”

It’s his confidence that helps me. That deep voice, his warmth, the comfort of his touch, they all combine to help me gain control. By the time we reach his place, I’m no longer trembling.

Chomp unlocks the door, and we enter the cabin. It looks the same as when I last set foot in it, only now I notice how it lacks a woman’s touch. He needs plants, and a blanket by the fireplace, and candles to burn in the kitchen and living room.

“Have a seat, baby. We’re gonna talk about this. I want to help.”

I park my bottom on his comfy sofa while he joins me. “I saw Perry.”

Chomp arches a brow. “Your ex? The one my gator ate?”

Okay, odd phrasing, but yes. “Um, yeah. He was staring at me through the diner’s window.”

Chomp scratches the back of his neck. “This doesn’t make sense. First, the increased odor that smells like him around that old house, and now you see someone who resembles him.” He shakes his head. “I think it’s a family member.”

“I don’t know. This looked like an exact copy, Chomp. Not a brother or uncle or something.”

A frown draws his brows together. “Okay, we’re missing something. Until I put this

together and figure it out, I won't be working. I need you to be safe, and if that means I hunt until I find this man, so be it."

"I'm not asking you to do that."

"You're right. I'm telling you that I am, Ariel. I won't let whoever this is traumatize you further. He wants to fuck with you, and I'm gonna stop him."

I glance around his cabin and finally nod. "Okay."

"So, here's what we're gonna do: stick to our evening plans. I'll text Spike, and we'll be sure to have everyone following us. If this stupid fucker tries to get close again, he'll be surrounded."

I can't help but shudder. "Are you going to leave me alone so he'll try?"

"Is that what you want? Because I don't want to use you as bait. That's not acceptable to me."

"Me either," I agree, mostly because I think I might actually faint or something if this guy gets close enough.

"Then I stay with you. Let me send a few texts. Plus, I'm gonna call Sly. He's our IT guy and I wanna see if Perry had any family members you're not aware of, okay?"

"Okay," I mumble. Standing, I go to the refrigerator and grab two bottles of water, one for each of us. I see the bag Chomp carried from the diner, so I make myself useful while he's on the phone talking to Sly as his fingers fly over what I presume is a club chat thread.

"Son of a bitch!" he bellows. I turn toward him and see his arms doing that thing

where his gator is trying to take over, scales rippling along to erupt on his skin, but then he takes a few deep breaths before turning in my direction. With his gaze locked on mine, he says, “Get me whatever else you can find, Sly.” After disconnecting, he strides toward me. I can still see his gator peeking out at me, but I’m no longer afraid.

Reaching out, I lightly touch his forearm, then say, “Hey, Gator, I need to talk to Chomp right now.”

Chomp grins but I watch in utter fascination as the rippling scales go back to his normal skin, complete with the intriguing tattoos he has. “Come here, baby. I need to tell you something, but I have to hold you while I tell you, okay?”

The butterflies now swarming in my belly have nothing to do with desire or fascination. No, these are the ones that come from the pits of Hell since immediately, I feel nauseous. Considering the food we ate was so delicious, I swallow the bile back down and follow Chomp to his couch. In spite of the circumstances and the dread surrounding me right now, I realize that the sectional he has must’ve been custom-made for him. It’s deep yet, the cushions are comfortable enough I can see myself napping in front of the fire.

Shaking my head, I turn my gaze to Chomp's face and ask, “What got you so upset?”

“Like I said, Sly is our IT guy, and the minute he input Perry’s name into his computer, information came pouring out. Were you aware that Perry has an identical twin named Jerry?”

“Um, no, I didn’t know that,” I reply, my body starting to tremble again at the news. “Why wouldn’t he have introduced me to his brother?”

Granted, if Jerry is anything like Perry was, maybe it was a good thing.

“Because he was in prison, baby. He apparently used to live with Perry but was arrested about eight or so years ago. He just got out and went home, only to find no sign of his brother,” Chomp replies.

“But why come after me?” I ask. “That makes no sense at all.”

“Perry told him about you. Sly was able to hack into something, don’t ask me what exactly because I don’t understand that shit at all, and listened to some of their phone calls. Ariel, it’s a damn good thing I found you when I did, because the plans they had for you weren’t pleasant at all.”

Tears start slithering down my face as I curl closer to Chomp. “Worse than what you saw?” I whisper, once again embarrassed and ashamed of the way the two of us met.

He shudders but nods. “Way worse.” His voice is gritty sounding, and I know he must be struggling to keep his gator in check again. “We’re going to find him and talk to him.”

“Will there be anything left when y’all are finished?” I ask, swiping away the tears.

He shrugs but I see the smirk he’s trying to hide and suspect his gator is behind the expression. “Can’t really say for sure. Depends on whether or not he pisses Spike off. Since my mate’s being terrorized, he may end up a pile of ash after Gator and I are through. Who knows?”

I don’t condone violence in most cases, but this is an instance where it’s warranted. “I can live with it.”

Chomp lowers his head and kisses my cheek. “Let’s go. The others are on their way.”

It’s odd given all that’s happened, but I sort of wish he kissed my lips instead. It’s the

first time I've had that thought and now it's lingering as we stand and Chomp interlaces our fingers, leading me toward his truck. The ride is mostly quiet because we enjoy the fading sunlight and watch the first few stars populate the sky. It's pretty and serene and such a contradiction to what we're experiencing, but I know we have to get through this and take care of Perry's brother. Jerry won't stop coming after me, especially if he suspects that Chomp or I had anything to do with Perry's death.

Chomp drives to the store and we park low in the row, farther from the exit than I anticipate. I wonder if it's because he hopes that Jerry will try to confront us. He can't have more than suspicion about his brother's death since there's no body.

My breath comes a little easier when I see that Kodiak and Callie are pulling in next to us in Kodiak's truck. As we all get out, Callie says, "I figured we could get groceries for the clubhouse too."

Gotta love a friend who seems to know what someone else might need. She exudes a calming presence which is a good thing since Kodiak and Chomp both look ready to shift into their animals. That probably wouldn't be a good thing since Callie stressed that no humans are aware of shifters unless they are a shifter's fated mate. Then they're told.

"Looks like you're putting on some weight there, Kodiak," Spike says when he joins our group at the front of the trucks.

Callie begins snickering while cupping her baby bump, which looks like it's grown since I last saw her. "Um, he's experiencing cravings," she finally says. "But y'all know that his portions are far bigger than mine."

Kodiak growls while Chomp and Spike chuckle. "It's pregnancy weight, alright?" he snarls.

“Um, it’s been a bit since I went to school, but I seem to recall that the female gains the weight since she’s the one growing the baby,” Chomp adds.

“Shut it, fucker. Wait until your mate is carrying your child, and let’s see how you do,” Kodiak rumbles.

Chomp looks positively gleeful at the idea.

Spike huffs, and I swear I see a bit of smoke leave his nostrils. “I think I see your baby bump, Kodiak.”

I start giggling, shaking my head, and soon Callie joins me. It’s not long before everyone is laughing, even Kodiak.

He flips off Spike, but it’s more of a joke than serious.

“Well,” I say, sobering, “We should get inside and grab what we need.”

Chomp slides his arm around my shoulders and tucks me into his side as we all head toward the store. His words are whispered as we approach the entrance. “Remember, Ariel. I’m here. No matter what happens, I’m not leaving your side.”

His words are ominous, and I nod, hoping we get through this without anyone getting hurt.

Chapter Sixteen

CHOMP

I see customers' eyes widen when each of my brothers grabs a buggy and heads toward a different aisle. We're on a mission, and since none of us enjoys lingering in stores, we complete it as efficiently and quickly as possible. Spike handed out lists to all of us, so Kodiak and I, along with our mates, head toward the meat department. Both Ariel and Callie have a buggy as well because we'll need all four of them for the order we're picking up.

Most people just select from the display cases, but Spike always calls an order in for us since we go through so much meat. Seeing the expression on Callie's and Ariel's faces as one of the workers brings out a mini pallet full of wrapped meats is absolutely priceless.

Leaning in, I whisper, "We've got more, but they'll deliver it to the clubhouse later."

"That's a lot of meat, Chomp," Ariel states.

"We eat a lot, remember?" I tease. When Spike walks over, pushing two buggies, her eyes widen further.

He murmurs low so Ariel doesn't hear him, "He's in the store. Fang and Peanut are slowly boxing him in, brother. Keep the girls safe."

I fucking smell him, my gator bellows. He stinks. Not quite as bad as Perry did, but

that rancid essence is still there.

“Always,” I hiss out loud to Spike, my gator dancing in my eyes. We both agree on the stench. I hear Kodiak’s rumble and realize that this Perry look-alike must be nearby. “How about Kodiak and Spike finish here, and we’ll go get another two buggies so we can grab the chips and stuff?” I ask, looking at Ariel, and hoping I don’t betray the anger I’m feeling. This Jerry is too close.

“Um, sure, but how are we getting all of this back to the clubhouse? Most of y’all rode your bikes,” she reminds me.

Spike smirks and says, “Not to worry, Sly is coming with a club truck. This isn’t our first rodeo, Ariel. It’ll all make it back to the clubhouse with no problem.”

“Don’t forget our order at Beanie’s,” Kodiak adds. “She put together stuff that all we have to do is pop it in the oven!”

Uh-huh. That’s half his weight gain issue. He’s eating up carbs like he’s heading into hibernation. I bet his bear will want to keep his mate and new baby confined to their home for a long time. It’s his natural instinct to protect, but also hide them away in his den.

I barely hold my snicker in when Spike gives him a pointed glance where it’s obvious he’s putting on weight. “Seems you might wanna lay off those danishes, Kodiak. Otherwise, we’ll have to roll your ass around.”

I duck my head to hide my snicker and scan the store, keeping my senses alert. It’s not hard to locate where everyone is inside the store. I know exactly where my club brothers are at every moment, and thanks to Jerry’s scent, I know where he is, too. He’s trying to move closer to Ariel, but it won’t happen.

Fang and Peanut have nearly cornered Jerry. I sense his panic as he realizes we finally know who he is, and we aren't letting him get anywhere near Ariel. Peanut bumps him over the head with his fist, dazing Jerry before saying his friend isn't feeling well. I can hear the noise, and since I work out with Peanut, I know what it sounds like when he swings those meaty fists. Jerry leans against Peanut, and I see them as they exit the store. My lips twitch because Peanut is three times wider than Jerry, and it's comical seeing the size difference. Even if Jerry puts up a fight, he won't move an inch without Peanut knocking him unconscious.

Ariel doesn't notice. She's busy picking out chips and dip, engaged in a discussion with Callie about which types of chip flavors go best with each dip. Fucking adorable. I don't tell her that none of the guys care. When we're hungry, we eat. I doubt it registers much to our animals if we've got a specific flavor mixed with another or if there are ridges or not.

I sense when Peanut, Fang, and Jerry leave the lot. It's all a little too anticlimactic as Spike rounds the corner and gives me a chin lift. Jerry is secure. Peanut and Fang will take him to the clubhouse and into the basement, where he'll be thrown into a room and locked in until we arrive.

"We probably should get some vegetables," Ariel muses, which causes Callie to burst out laughing. "What's so funny?"

"Most of the guys don't really care about produce, Ariel. So, we can get stuff, but maybe portions that are more for what you and I would eat, not them. Otherwise, we'll have a lot of wasted food."

"Good point. But I know they do like potatoes," Ariel replies. "And corn on the cob."

"Yeah, but salads and stuff like that are more our thing," Callie says. "Oh, and I guess I should make sure we have plenty of hot chocolate because Kodiak's been craving

it.”

I can’t help it, when she says that I lose control of myself, and as I’m laughing with tears pouring down my face, I continue to point at Kodiak while shaking my head. “You can’t eat like your mate,” I manage to stammer. “Between you and Peanut, we’re going to have to reinforce the clubhouse floors.”

“Shut it, fucker, you’re not exactly a lightweight and neither is Spike. Hell, none of us are, and the clubhouse is stable enough to hold all of us. You just wait, Chomp,” Kodiak grumbles.

I can’t wait, my gator hisses. But we will until our mate is healed.

We finish the shopping and lead the women from the store, catching the truck one of the prospects brought and is already loading. I can see the stacks of paper sacks and bags, filling the interior. I steer our cart toward the truck and unload the club’s portion of the groceries, then head toward mine to unload the rest. Ariel helps me with the lighter bags before I push the cart into the corral.

“Wait,” I order as I rush toward her side. “Don’t touch that door handle, beautiful. Wait for me.”

She looks up at me and smiles. “I’m still getting used to that.”

I pull open the door and hold out my hand, pleased when she uses it as a springboard to help her climb inside. “Hopefully soon,” I tease.

We wave to Kodiak and Callie, striking up a conversation on the way back to my cabin. The whole ride I try not to focus on Jerry at the clubhouse or how my gator wants to chomp on him until there’s not even little pieces left to throw into the lake. He’s rattling off all his aggression in my head, and I ignore it, focusing on our mate

instead.

Once we're home, I help Ariel out of my truck, then let her carry a few of the lighter bags before I grab the rest of them in one trip. "Really? I take it you being a shifter means you've got super strength or something," she muses as I set all the bags on the table, then prepare to go out and get the boxes.

"When it's bags, I can usually get them all. Boxes are a bit tougher, but only because I can't see over them to watch where I'm going if I get them all at once. And yes, all of my brothers and myself have enhanced abilities even in our human form. We're stronger, our vision is superior especially at night, and we're able to identify others by their scent. It's how we know someone is our mate."

"That part is what confuses me," she admits.

"How so? I'll give you a good example, and maybe you'll understand better. While I know you're near when I catch the citrusy outdoorsy scent, Spike and Kodiak only know you're a female. Now, once we've mated, our scents will mix, and they'll be able to identify who you are. I don't know how else to explain it, Ariel. It's just part of the instincts we're born with."

"But I don't smell anything different if that makes sense. I mean, you give off an earthy yet watery smell that I'm attracted to. Kind of like being at the beach and smelling the water. But it's mixed with the leather of your cut and something that's uniquely you. Once... when we mate, will that change?"

I sit down with a thump because this is the first time she's actually said something that alludes to us actually completing the mate bond. "I don't know if it's like this with all shifters since Kodiak's the first one who found his mate, but she'll be able to shift and has enhanced senses now as well."

“How does it work? I saw the mark on Callie’s shoulder at the base of her neck, but Chomp, your teeth are huge! I think you’d practically decapitate me and sorry to say, but I didn’t survive Perry’s bullshit to lose my head.”

A snicker escapes until my gator and I realize she’s serious. “Ariel, alligator shifters are different. I’ll actually use one of my claws to mark you when we’re uh... having sex, and that’ll complete our bond. You’ll have a mark that’ll form afterward, and I’ll end up with one over my heart. I don’t know if we’ll be able to speak telepathically or anything like that, because I was too young when I left my original congregation to learn that part.”

She stares at me with curiosity that burns in her pretty eyes. “Why did you leave?”

I pause, it’s not because I don’t want to answer, I do. It’s got everything to do with Jerry at the clubhouse. She needs to know. I’m torn between answering her question and confiding about my past.

“If you don’t want to share about it,” she says as she swallows loudly, “I understand.”

“It’s not that.” I sit her down and take her hands into mine, holding them in my warmth. “I want to answer your questions. You should know all about me, but there’s something else you need to know first.”

She blinks, and I watch her pink tongue lick along her bottom lip. “Is it bad?”

I shake my head. “I don’t think so.”

“Okay. Tell me.”

“We have Jerry.”

She tilts her head to the side, studying me. “When you say you have him, does that mean he’s in some dark jail cell in your clubhouse or he’s being tortured like a mafia movie or what?”

I snort at her question. “He’s in our clubhouse,” I confirm. She nods. “Waiting on me,” I add.

“What are you going to do?”

“I want to find out why he’s been stalking you,” I admit. “After that, depending on his answer will dictate his final fate.”

“I didn’t even know Perry had a brother,” she replies. “I don’t think he’ll stop trying to get at me so he can get answers about what happened to Perry, do you?”

No, I don’t. “He’ll want answers.”

“And what will you tell him? The truth?”

We should feast on his flesh , my gator insists, leave nothing for the scavengers to find.

It’s tempting. But I suspect as foul and rancid as he is, I’d end up with indigestion and that would just piss me off. I already had that issue after Perry and Ricky. The bastards.

“I think it depends on his reaction and how the discussion goes,” I reply honestly. “Hard to tell. It’s not just me that’ll be in the room. I answer to my Pres, Ariel. It’s how our club works.”

She seems to accept it. “To tell you the truth, I don’t think I’ll ever feel comfortable

knowing Jerry is out there, possibly watching and waiting for the right time to get vengeance.”

Shit. I was afraid of that. “Let’s see how this goes. You’re my priority,” I assure her. “Your safety and well-being above everything, even my club.” I never thought I’d feel that way. It almost feels like a betrayal to the family I’ve found, but my mate is first. I can’t change that. It’s rooted deep in my DNA.

“Chomp? Why did you leave your family of origin?” she asks. It seems as though she’s okay with whatever the club decides Jerry’s fate is going to be, since she’s asking this question. Of course, it’s much harder to answer, but I want my mate to know all of me; the good, the bad, the ugly.

Taking a deep breath, I say, “In most congregations, which is what a group of alligators are called, there’s one bull gator who’s what other shifters would call an alpha. He’s the only male allowed to impregnate the females. When we’re younger, we’re not a threat to him because he’s bigger and of course, not afraid to throw his weight around. For me, I didn’t like how he treated my mother, to be honest, and when I was little more than a teenager, I rebelled against his authority. I wasn’t old enough to be out on my own, but after he started taking his anger out on my mother, I chose to leave. It was the hardest thing I’ve ever done, Ariel, and I wandered around the country until I found Yukon Bluff.”

“What happened then?” Her hand covers mine and squeezes.

“Well, by the time I got here, I was pretty sick, to be honest. There weren’t a lot of safe places that I could shift, which every shifter needs on a regular basis. Spike found me half dead out by the lake and threw me in. I shifted, of course, and came out hissing, but stopped when he said that he and a few others were putting together a motorcycle club that was made up of others like me who had to leave their homes. We’re a bunch of misfits, to be sure, but we’ve built a found family based on love,

loyalty, and integrity. But it's been difficult for all of us because a shifter inherently wants a mate. Their other half, so to speak. We've been in Yukon Bluff for quite a long time now, and until Callie came along, we thought that we were going to be alone for the rest of our lives."

"You mentioned love first. Why?"

Her questions are killing me, but again, I answer as honestly as possible. "Because all I've ever wanted was a family of my own. I love my brothers, don't get me wrong, but until you came along, I've never really shared about my past. Spike knows, of course, because he's our president, but outside of him, no one else. Even Kodiak, who's pretty much my best friend, only knows bits and pieces."

"So, you're sharing this with me, opening yourself up, because I'm your mate?"

"And because I already care about you and I don't want any secrets, nothing hidden from our past, not a single thing that can ruin what we're building together."

I don't expect her response. I never anticipated it. But Ariel leans forward, smiles, and then presses her lips to mine.

Chapter Seventeen

CHOMP

H oly fuck! Ariel's pillow soft, sweet tasting lips are pressing to mine, and I'm so fucking shocked it takes a second for my brain to catch up.

It's happening! It. Is. Happening! She's kissing us! This is not a drill! my gator bellows.

He's so dramatic. But I can feel his elation, and it matches mine. Since it's all about her and what she's comfortable with, I let Ariel set the pace of our kiss, instead of wrapping my arms around her and molding her into my body.

"Is this okay?" she whispers, her lips still against mine. "I... I know I'm not ready for anything sexual yet, but spending this time with you has shown me what it means to be treasured and cherished, Chomp."

Those words whispered on her delicious lips are perfection and stir my heart.

She will definitely love us, my gator smugly reminds me.

"I find myself thinking about you when you're not around, and I know it's not been that often lately, but it's still the truth."

She has no idea how she occupies my thoughts every minute of the day. How she fucking consumes me. It's like she's already a part of me, and we haven't mated yet.

My fingers twitch as my claws yearn to mark her as mine.

“I wonder if you’d enjoy me cooking some of my mom’s favorite recipes for you, or whether or not you prefer distance without me constantly around.”

“There’s no need for distance,” I reply firmly. “Cook for me.”

Her lips curl, and I can tell my answer pleases her. “You’ve shown me that even though you’ve always been respectful of me, you’re still nearby and within touching distance. Patient. Kind. And I’ve found out you like to cuddle.”

With her? Yes. My gator won’t be able to handle cuddling with anyone else. He chumpfs at the mention of it.

“It’s whatever you want, Ariel,” I confess. “We can take things as slow as you need to, and in fact, I asked Callie to check with her friend for a list of trauma therapists because I think that will help you move past what was done to you. I know you’ll never truly forget, but me and my gator will do everything in our power to make sure that only good memories are made from now on, okay?”

She’s suddenly glassy eyed with tears and I wonder if I fucked up.

“I want a home, Chomp. One where I can love someone and be loved in return. Where I can have children... wait, will I give birth to live babies or eggs?” she suddenly asks, switching gears.

“How do you feel about eggs?” I tease, knowing the type of reaction she’ll have.

Her gasp is adorable. “Chomp, you better be messing with me.” She swats at my arm, and this time, I’m the one who moves in for a gentle brush across her lips.

“I am.” I bite back my chuckle when I see the relief cross her face. I know that with her being a human, all of this is new to her. Still, her expression was absolutely priceless.

I don’t think she’d care, my gator states. She likes us! She really, really likes us!

She slides her fingers up my shoulder and around my neck, lightly scratching my skin, and my gator nearly has a stroke he’s so turned on by it. Behind the neck and shoulders is an erogenous zone for us. Not that Ariel knows that. Yet.

I shudder as I claim her mouth again, pressing a little firmer, letting her dictate how long it lasts. To my surprise, she deepens the kiss. When we separate, I’m on cloud fucking nine. This is far better than I ever could have hoped. She’s tethering herself to me, growing fonder of me and my gator, accepting us both, and I hope it continues.

I’ve already fallen hard for my mate.

“You have to go, don’t you?”

She’s interpreting my silence to mean I’m concentrating on Jerry and the clubhouse instead of her. I’m not. “I do,” I answer, “but I wasn’t thinking of anything other than you just now.”

“Good.” She tucks a stray strand of hair behind her ear. “I want to come with you.”

“To the clubhouse?”

“Yes.”

“Tell me why.”

“I know this probably comes under club business, which Callie explained to me, but he was following me around, and I think I deserve to know why,” she replies.

I decide I need to give her a little bit of the information we found out. She needs to know that Jerry is just as bad as Perry was, apparently. “While I’m not one hundred percent sure why he was stalking you, I do know from what Sly was able to find out that when he was released from prison, he and Perry had plans for you, and they were not good, Ariel.”

I’ve said this already once, and I hope she doesn’t want me to elaborate because just thinking about how they wanted to put her on camera and sell her online, hoping to make money from her on a regular basis, both sickens and enrages me. And not just Ariel either.

She gulps and her face pales, so I pull her closer to me in an effort to comfort her. Right now, my gator is clamoring to help her, but in his shifted form, he can’t speak, so he’s just going to have to be patient. “What... what do you mean?” she hesitantly asks.

“They planned to pimp you out to their friends. No holds barred, Ariel, so whoever paid their price could do whatever they wanted to you. They were going to get a few more girls, as well, and they were going to get all of you hooked on drugs, so you’d be compliant.”

My gator hisses inside of me, disgusted at the mere thought of any female being used in that manner, let alone his mate. Should have killed him twice, Gator bellows. He’s furious, and I can’t blame him, since Ariel is ours.

“Plus, they planned to film it so they could sell it online.”

“People watch that kind of thing?” she asks, her lower lip trembling. “That’s sick. I

mean, I get people watch porn, but I always thought people in those movies were there willingly.”

“For the most part, I think they are, but Perry and Jerry were going to post it on the dark web, and that’s a completely different world, according to Sly. Pretty much anything goes, and there are monsters who enjoy watching snuff films as well.”

“I suspect I know what that means, Chomp,” she states, “they end up killing the person, right?”

“Yeah, sweetheart, they do. But not before they horrifically abuse them in every way possible.”

“People are sick,” she mutters. “But I still want to talk to Jerry, Chomp. Do you think Spike and Kodiak will let me?”

I’m struggling with this. I don’t want him near her, not after learning of those plans. It’s not just my call, though. She’s right to include Spike and Kodiak.

Since they’re the President and VP of the club, it’ll ultimately be their decision, but I hope that I can convince them to let her be there, at least for a little bit. She won’t be around when we decide to kill the fucker.

Because he will die.

We can’t be the one to do it, Gator states. We want to for our mate, but we already scared her when we killed Perry and Ricky in front of her. Maybe we can bite off a body part, but we aren’t eating him.

Somehow, I don’t think Ariel will like that.

“It’s probably a good idea to head over there now,” I concede. “The sooner we deal with Jerry, the faster we can move on.” And focus on us.

“Then let’s go.” Her hands cradle my face, fingers caressing my short beard. “Thank you.”

“Anything,” I reply, and mean it.

One of her palms lowers, resting over my heart. “I see you, Chomp. All of you. Not just the gator or the man who loves nature and his Harley. Or even the caretaker and protector. I see the good man inside. The one who killed to protect me. You know what? I don’t fear him.”

That’s a relief.

“I don’t fear anything other than the broken shards of my past, and I want to sweep them up, dump them in the trash, and walk away without looking back. Do you think you can help me with that?”

I grin. “With pleasure.” Taking out the Jerry trash sounds fucking perfect.

“And then I can focus on my present and future. One that involves you.”

My gator goes off in my head, and I refuse to listen because I want her to have all of me in this moment. “Then that’s what we do. Together.”

She gives me one of those megawatt smiles. “You’re kinda perfect, you know that?”

I don’t hesitate to answer. “That’s why we’re mates.”

She doesn’t argue or deny it. “I think I’m seeing that.”

I slide my hands around her curvy waist and lift her as I stand, stealing a kiss because I can, and slipping my hand through hers while we walk toward my truck. While I'd prefer to have her wrapped around me on my bike, as hyped up as my gator is, I don't think it's a good idea today. It's a short drive, and we ride in companionable silence, our fingers laced together. At this point, most of the words that need to be said between us have been said. We don't have to add more until we're ready.

* * *

Leaving Ariel with Callie at the bar under the watchful eyes of one of the prospects, I follow the rest of the guys into the room we use for Church. No one wastes time getting into their seats. Spike lifts a gavel and slams it onto the table, officiating the start of our meeting.

"Chomp, you got something to say?"

"I got a lot to fucking say about that piece of shit downstairs. We all know what Sly found. Black market human trafficking, the sex video operation, and stealing girls. They planned a whole fucking operation, and we need to learn more about it."

"We won't let that slide," Peanut snarls.

"Ariel wants to confront him. She wants to look him in the eye." I sigh. "I think she needs it. It's a way for her to slay her demons and gain control back in her life. After what Perry did, this is her closure."

We still want to bite him, my gator hisses.

Spike nods. "Fine. She gets her closure, but only after we interrogate that son of a bitch and find out who the rest of these men are who want to kidnap and rape girls." Smoke puffs from his nostrils. "Not in our fucking town or anywhere else if I can

help it.”

Fists bang on the table in agreement. None of us condone that shit.

Church doesn't last long after that, and we head into the basement. I don't stop, but I do catch Ariel's eye, and I wink at her, letting her know her time is coming.

She blows me a kiss, and I catch it, curling my fist around that sweetness because I'm about to let my darker side take control. Our feral natures will kick in, and there's no stopping our animals once that happens. We'll maintain control, but Jerry's hours are numbered. He won't survive the night.

My boots pound the stairs as I descend into darkness and I take Ariel's kiss, pressing my palm over my heart to push it inside my chest. That light and her strength in the face of suffering give me an extra boost. She's the strongest woman I've ever met, other than my mother. Ariel reminds me so much of her. Abused and broken down yet still fighting, breathing, and smiling.

Fuck. I love my mate.

I find Jerry chained to a wooden beam in the center of the room, anchored by concrete in the smooth slab we poured across the floor. No human can ever conjure enough strength to pull it free. He's bloody, beaten, and wears only a pair of pants. His bare feet and upper body are exposed as he bleeds from multiple wounds. My gator hisses in elation seeing the bastard in his current condition.

“Who are you working with?” Spike asks, standing in front of our prisoner. “Tell me. Now.”

Jerry laughs.

I think of Ariel, my mother's beatings, and the women Jerry plans to harm. My gator decides enough is enough. He shifts before I can stop him, and I lunge at the bastard, baring my teeth.

Peanut and Kodiak chuckle. Fang grins with his wolfish smile.

Spike glares at Jerry. "I'll let the gator fucking eat you. Tell me what I want to know."

Jerry's eyes are wide as he stares at me, trying to back away as I hiss and move closer. My gator is loving this shit. He doesn't see why I can't rip Jerry apart. I'm barely hanging on to my humanity. If I slip, Jerry is dead.

Crush, kill, destroy! my gator bellows.

"There's a list." Jerry's voice is trembling as he tries to escape. The problem is, he's tied down so well, he's unable to move.

"What fucking list?" Spike asks with a growl.

"T-the girls we planned to take. Names. Addresses. Places of employment."

Reactions around the room terrify Jerry as he cowers, folding his body inward to avoid the snarls, hisses, and growls.

"I can give you the names of all the men involved."

"Yeah, you will," Spike agrees.

"I just want one thing," he says in a rush as I swipe at him with my claws and miss. Intentionally.

He just pissed himself, my gator chortles.

“M-my brother. I want to see where it happened.”

Spike frowns. “Why?”

“Because I need to know before I die. Okay?”

Spike folds his arms over his chest. “Fine.” He ticks his head at Peanut. “Do it.”

Peanut forms a fist and slams it over the top of Jerry’s head. He crumbles to the floor as I shift from my gator, pissed at the delay. Ariel won’t be able to speak to him yet. We need that info to help save the other women and ensure those involved don’t harm anyone else.

Spike turns to the room. “We take him to the campsite, but he doesn’t get out of the van until we have what we need.”

No one disagrees. It’s time to serve justice.

Chapter Eighteen

ARIEL

Chomp seems on edge as do all of the other shifters. The club took Jerry to the campsite where Chomp's gator rescued me from my living nightmare and tore Ricky and Perry apart. It's surreal being here. I don't know how this is going to affect me to return to a place where I was so violated. I find my body at war with my mind. I want to be strong, but I'm shaking, and I don't know if I can get out of the truck. Bile crawls up my esophagus, and I quickly swallow it back down. I know that if I vomit, Chomp will demand I go back to the clubhouse. But I can't. I need this for some reason. I need to at least show myself that I'm strong enough to face my past.

I insisted on coming as soon as Chomp filled me in. He's concerned. I know he's worried this could cause me to spiral, and it's a terrifying thought. But I can't miss my only opportunity to find closure and move on from what happened. I'm still struggling every day to let it go and be free. I need this, even if it's painful. I make a mental note to ask Callie if her friend ever got her the information for a trauma therapist. If nothing else, it'll help me sort through everything, even the grief from losing my mom.

I open the door and slide from the seat, following behind Chomp, Spike, and Kodiak. Fang and Peanut are dragging Jerry toward the tents, and I pause to breathe, taking time to settle my nerves. Anxiety has a chokehold over me. I want to run and never look back, but it's cowardly, and I know it'll only hold me back. Thank goodness it's rained since that awful night, because I think if I saw all the blood that was literally everywhere, especially the ground itself, I'd probably lose it and not be able to face

my demons.

Surprisingly, it's not as haunting as I expect. The tents are still there, blowing in the breeze, and rocks form a semicircle where sticks and logs are thrown into the pit to burn. Whatever personal items had once been here, they're gone now. It just looks like someone packed up and left a few things. I breathe as my chest relaxes. I can do this. Chomp and his brothers won't allow anything to happen to me, of that I'm confident. Hell, Chomp's eyes have been his gator's most of the day, so I know this is impacting him as well.

Jerry stands by the firepit, taking it all in. For some reason, no one holds onto him or binds his wrists. He's walking like he's a free man and I frown. Don't they think he's going to run?

And then it occurs to me, maybe they want him to run. I shiver at the thought. As much as I've enjoyed getting to know Spike, Chomp, Kodiak, and the rest of the club, I don't ever want to be hunted by one of them.

Scratch that. Maybe by the gator. I know he won't hurt me. And I just might like it. Startled by that realization, I flush at the idea. Chomp sniffs the air and I see his gaze lock onto me.

Wait. Is that arousal I just felt? The feeling is so foreign, I push it to the back of my mind.

This is so new. I think I need to focus on the present. I might just bring this up to Chomp later if he doesn't ask me about it. His arms look a little scaly from here. I wonder if he knows I'm thinking about him like this.

Jerry starts talking, and the moment he does, all I hear is Perry's voice. They're too much alike in pitch and timbre, down to the phrases he uses. Anything I feel about

Chomp fades. The past tries to shove its way forward, and I clench my fists. This isn't Perry, I remind myself. I'm safe.

It's this moment that chaos explodes. Two things happen that collide and startle me. One, Jerry rushes me. It catches everyone by surprise. His hands wrap around my neck as he slams into me, knocking us both to the ground. Second, I hear my mother's voice. It's clear and sweet, and it cuts right through all the suffering of my past with its hopeful tone.

Just breathe, Ariel, you're going to be fine, my mom whispers in my head. You found a good one this time, I just wish I had known the other was a waste of space.

Despite the dire situation I find myself in, I smile because that is something my mom would've said. She was a nice and kind person, but she didn't put up with bullshit and called a spade a spade. I think it's only because of the medication she was on for her cancer that she missed the warning signs that Perry definitely exuded. I may not have seen a therapist yet, but I've been picking apart our relationship from the beginning and he was definitely the winner of the red flag award.

"What the fuck are you smiling about, bitch? You're the reason he's dead!" Jerry snarls as his hands tighten around my throat. I kick and thrash, trying to knock him off of me, but I'm still not very strong. Chomp and Peanut have been working on self-defense moves as well as building my muscles, but it hasn't been all that long.

Kick his knee now , Ariel, Mom says. Without any hesitation, I slam my foot into his knee and hear his wail of pain. I must've hit something that one of the guys did earlier. Not that I care at all because his hands loosen slightly and I'm able to draw in a deep breath.

Just when I think I'm free, he reaches for me again. His fingers don't find traction because he's yanked from my body as I hear a deadly hiss.

“Get him, Gator,” I whisper. I must be loud enough because I briefly see Chomp peering at me from his gator form and he grins, I think, because all his teeth are now showing as Jerry screams in terror.

I manage to sit up, gulping in fresh air as Chomp drags him backward, toying with him as he slowly dips into the lake. Jerry claws at the dirt of the embankment but he isn’t a match for a pissed off gator shifter. I can’t help smiling as I see Chomp begin to do the death roll that gators are known for. He won’t show any mercy.

Suddenly, Spike yells, “Chomp! Stop!”

Hissing and bellowing, Chomp drags Jerry back onto the grass. He looks worse for the wear, with large tears from Chomp’s teeth covering his legs. Blood is freely flowing, and I suspect that Chomp probably hit something vital. I can see muscle and bone, but it doesn’t terrify me like it did before. The gator’s teeth drip with Jerry’s blood and I have no sympathy for a man who wants to terrorize women. He deserves this as equally as Perry and Ricky did.

Jerry is screaming as Chomp holds him in place, refusing to give up his prey completely.

Spike kneels in front of Jerry. His words aren’t for Chomp. I don’t think he cares that the gator is biting into one of Jerry’s ankles. “You’re going to die now, but you should know, the gator got your brother too.”

“And Ricky,” I rasp.

“We’ll get every man you named,” Spike promises before he opens his mouth and a stream of fire erupts, coating Jerry’s body in a thick wave of scorching flames.

His agonized cries echo throughout the forest as we all watch him burn until nothing

remains but soot and paper-thin pieces of ash. Dragon fire must be different than normal flames because it consumed all of Jerry, even the bones. There's nothing left to identify him. No DNA at all as the wind picks up and blows the dusty remains into a swirl, lifting them away from us until they merge with the lake.

Jerry is gone. And with him, so is Perry, Ricky, and the horror I suffered. It's been burned away with Jerry.

My chest releases a pent-up breath and I feel a weight slide from my shoulders that's as physical as it is metaphorical. And in that moment, I smile. I'm truly free.

My gaze instantly locks on Chomp. He's already watching me, a look of pride on his handsome, whiskered face. He's completely nude, covered in tattoos and splatters of blood, and he's never looked more wonderful. I want this man in my life. He needs to know.

"Chomp."

I don't get out more than that word before he's rushing to me, picking me up, and our lips meet. It's the best kiss I've ever had in my life. I'm almost sad as my feet touch the ground. "We should go home."

He arches a brow, wondering which location I mean. "Home?"

"Our home." I gesture to the forest. "Your house is mine, right?" I scratch my nails along the back of his neck as he shivers. "I want to go to our home, Chomp. Right now."

The desire I felt before comes flooding back and I see his nostrils flare and his eyes widen before he catches me in his arms and holding me close, he states to Spike, "We'll be back later so we can figure that other shit out and formulate a plan, Pres."

Spike smirks at him but waves us off as I grin, my arms now wrapped around his neck. I've never had this sort of reaction to anyone in my life and while I'm excited about what's hopefully going to happen, I'm also nervous. What if I disappoint him? What if I'm no good in bed like Perry always told me?

Chomp claims I'm his mate; I feel a strong attraction to him and his gator. I can't let them down like that. As my heart rate increases, Chomp must notice because he looks down at me and asks, "What's wrong?"

I hesitate to answer.

His knuckles brush my cheek. "My gator says you have nothing to worry about. We accept and care for you just as you are." His mouth captures mine. "You are loved, my enchantress. My perfect mate. There is nothing about you that I don't want, need, or desire. Whatever is holding you back, let it go, my dove."

Love? "You love me?" I ask, sounding as shocked as I feel.

"Little dove, I've loved you almost from the day we met."

"Because I'm your mate?" Is what he feels real or because of what I mean to him? How do I know?

"Here." He takes my hand and places it over his heart. "It beats differently since I met you. It's sped up to match yours. Strange, but true."

"It's a heartbeat," I whisper. His palm rests over my chest and I jolt because I can suddenly feel how our hearts are connected. They beat almost in sync. His cold-blooded reptilian heart shouldn't be able to match mine. "Wow."

"That's how I know this is real, that what I feel is real."

He knows what I'm asking and wondering without me putting it into words.
"Chomp."

"This is real, Ariel."

"That means I love you back, right? If I can feel our heartbeats match?" A silly question, but it's all gotten so convoluted in my head. The past made me doubt myself and my ability to sort through my feelings. Not anymore.

"Dove, it's not just the matching heartbeats, it's the warmth inside and the glow in your eyes."

Glow? I have a glow? Like his gator?

Chomps laughs. "You'll figure it out. Take your time. Give yourself grace and we'll find our way."

God. This man. He knows exactly what to say, how to make me fall even harder for him without even trying. "Okay."

He's been carrying me to his place during our conversation, but I didn't notice before now. Chomp pushes the door wide and carries me bridal style over it. "Welcome home, Ariel."

Chapter Nineteen

CHOMP

We have to be clean for our mate, my gator bellows. I will jump in the lake before we ask her to bathe with us! She doesn't need to see bloody water, Chomp.

His antics have me grinning so when Ariel looks up at me, she asks, "What has you smiling, Chomp?"

"My gator. He wants to spoil you and bathe with you, but with me being a bit... bloody, he's worried it'll bother you. He thinks he should jump in the lake first. Quite honestly, he's besotted with you, my mate," I reply.

She giggles then reaches up and cups my face in her hands. "Gator? I think you're the handsomest, strongest alligator I've ever seen. You're an amazing protector, and I want you to know I appreciate your efforts to show me how much you care. I see you, Gator."

Oh my God! She's talking to me ! Gator's voice is almost high-pitched in my head. His excitement adds to mine.

"Ariel," I groan out, my heart overflowing with emotions I've long ago pushed deep inside. "Let me clean off in the lake so he doesn't have a heart attack, then I'd like to bathe with you. It's something I need, and it doesn't have to go any further if you're not ready."

“Chomp, I want to be yours in all ways. I don’t know how I’ll react, but as long as you’re patient with me, I think I’ll be just fine,” she assures me, easing some of my worry.

I don’t have time to dwell on her words because I back up, shifting at Gator’s insistence. He does a couple of spins and a flip before making a beeline for the shore, submerging as fast as he can. I feel his urgency as we dive deep, slicing through the water and rolling once we’re deep enough. Gator is feeling a bit excited, so we continue to roll along the bottom of the lake, stirring up the sediment until the water is cloudy and hard to see.

When I remind him our mate is waiting, he shoots through the murky depths and pops the surface, immediately checking the shore. And there she is, our beautiful Ariel, waiting with a humored smile that shows a dimple in one cheek.

I’m on the shore, shifting back, and nearly running to her as water drips from my skin. I’m naked, but it doesn’t faze me. Ariel? She gets an eye full of my package before I scoop her up and dash inside the house. Her giggle feels light and unencumbered, confirming the worst of the past is behind her.

Now, if I can just make her come, maybe I can begin to erase all the horror and pain she’s suffered. I know just how to get her to relax, too. After all, this isn’t my first time giving her a bath. I just plan to join my mate and make her feel good in the process.

Not a drill, not a drill, not a drill , my gator chants as we head to the bathroom.

I gently set her on her feet then turn to start the water in the tub. Once I’m sure that it’s not too hot, I push the stopper in so it can fill. “I have a bath bomb I bought for you,” I admit as I turn to the linen closet. “I also got you your own loofah brush, as well as the shampoo and conditioner you prefer.”

“Chomp, you didn’t have to go to so much trouble,” she says. I notice her skin is flushed and she’s avoiding looking at my dick, which is fully erect and bouncing against my lower abdomen.

Hiding my smile, I put the bath bomb in the tub, then grab two fluffy towels to put on the towel warmer that Kodiak came over and installed for me. He said something about mates liking their towels toasty. Since I agree that her comfort is paramount, I let him come over and put it up.

We play her game for now, avoiding direct eye contact, but as soon as we’re both in the water, I’ll snag her gaze. I ensure there’s plenty of bubbles before I turn and find her already naked. She’s been sneaky, slowly dropping her clothes so I didn’t notice. Now that I do, I seem to grow harder, anticipating my mate’s desires and needs. I see the old scars her body bears, and it breaks my heart that she endured that pain. Once again, I vow to make her remaining time on this earth a beautiful one.

No more pain. No more scars. Just beauty and happiness. One day, I’ll ask if she wants to cover them with tattoos, but not today. Today is for us; Ariel and Chomp.

And children , my gator adds. And if she has boys, we will not fight them.

Ariel swallows loudly as I reach for her hand. “This is just us, my mate. Me and you. No need to be nervous. We go at your pace.”

I see her teeth nibbling on her bottom lip. “Okay.”

She steps into the water with a soft sigh, submerging to her breasts as she rests against the tub. For a few seconds, I take my fill, staring at this gorgeous woman who owns my heart and tamed a wild gator. My heart speeds up, and I know it’s because she’s nervous and excited, which affects my own heart rate. I take a mental picture, storing it in my mind because it’s one I never want to forget.

“May I wash you?” I ask, trying not to growl the words.

She smells ready, my gator informs me. Yes!

She does. I sense and scent her arousal and willingness. It’s almost too much for me and my gator. We’re holding back, and it’s for her, but it’s also agony.

Ariel lifts her hand, inviting me closer. “Join me.”

I never had to ask. My chest puffs with pride at the progress she’s made, and step into the tub. Water sloshes over the side, but I placed extra towels to catch the overflow, so I’m not worried about a mess. I’d gladly clean for days if it meant enjoying this moment with Ariel.

I don’t hesitate to sit with my back against the tub’s edge and pull her between my legs. She rests against me, facing outward, and the wicked thoughts that enter my head are carnal and lust-filled. “Rest your head back. Relax.”

She listens. Her obedience and trust fill my heart to overflowing.

I pick up the loofah and pour soap into it, reaching for her arm. With care, I begin to wash her, going slow, but also making it clear that I plan to do her entire body.

“That feels nice,” she murmurs. Hearing the breathiness of her voice tells me I’m doing it right.

I finish both arms and move to her neck, dragging the loofah over her shoulders and neck, then move to her breasts, taking care to cleanse them before I massage the globes, teasing her as I hold the sponge in one hand and play with her nipples with the other.

Gyrating, she begins to make breathy noises that only encourage me further. I pull the loofah below the water's surface and brush it across her belly before dipping between her silky thighs. When I touch her center, she jolts. That's when I pause because I know it's a big adjustment.

"Breathe," I remind her. "It's you and me. Just us, my mate."

She reaches for the loofah and takes it from me, flinging it to the corner as I chuckle. "I want you to touch me. Right here. Show me what tenderness feels like, Chomp."

My heart nearly stutters. I want to give her everything. Be all that she'll ever desire or need.

Don't screw this up, Chomp, my gator hisses.

My fingers gently part her folds, sliding through the slick arousal I can tell apart from the bath water. She wants me, and it's all the encouragement I need apart from her permission. I touch her clit first, gliding over the sensitive bundle of nerves as her breath catches. "How does that feel?" I ask, slowly rubbing in a circle.

"Good."

"And this?" I slide a finger down until I'm at the entrance to her pussy, pushing the single digit inside.

"Oh," she gasps.

I begin to glide in and out, adding another finger. If I had her on the bed, I'd be feasting on her pussy at the same time, licking and sucking her clit until she came on my lips. And it'll happen soon, whether it's tonight or not.

I know she's enjoying it when her hips begin to move, pumping into my fingers as I continue filling her. I angle my hand so that I can thrust into her while I use the other to strum her sweet spot. I'm agonizingly hard, like fucking granite, and my control is being tested. Fuck. Every little breath and sigh, each moan is etching itself into my brain. I want to memorize every fucking sound she makes when she's turned on and coming. I need to be inside her and feel the silken walls of her pussy clench around me.

We need to mate her! Now! My gator insists.

Lust is fogging my brain, but it's the urgency I feel to complete my bond with Ariel that's driving me the hardest. I can feel my fingers twitching and my claws fighting to come out. The feral need to give her my mark and my cum is pressing on me hard. My gator is about to lose this battle, and we both know it has to be consensual to mate.

Ariel's hands grip my arms as water sluices over the edge of the tub. Our bodies are moving in tandem as my fingers plunge and her cry of ecstasy fills the room. I feel her clamp down on my fingers, and I'm not the least bit ashamed when I release a little of my seed into the tub with her. It's nothing compared to how much I'll fill her with soon, but it takes off the edge, helping me focus on her and her pleasure again.

I've never wanted a woman as badly as I want Ariel right now.

She trembles in my arms and then turns as I slide my fingers from her, ready for whatever she needs. It's her kiss that surprises me as her arms wrap around my shoulders, sliding upward to bury in my hair. The feel of her soft breasts pressing to my chest is euphoric. We kiss for long minutes, tasting one another, tangling our tongues, and feeling a connection that solidifies our bond.

Her legs straddle my waist. One thigh rests over each side of my hips. When her hot

core and warm lips are both connecting with me, I groan. This is fucking heaven.

Mate her! Gator bellows.

“Chomp?”

“Yes, my mate?” I answer without hesitation as our lips remain close, brushing together as she speaks.

“I want to go all the way. Right now.”

“You’re sure?”

She nods.

“But I think I want to stay like this. Right here in the water.”

“Where you’re in control and on top,” I guess.

“Yes.”

“Then take my cock, mate. Fuck me. Use me. I’m all yours.”

Yes! Yes! Finally! My gator’s voice is so loud in my head I almost miss Ariel’s smile.

“You’re so big. I hope you fit.” She nibbles on her bottom lip, and I swear that little gesture drives me wild every time she does it. “I really want this.”

Good. She keeps saying it, and I hope she’s not trying to convince herself. I want her to be willing and ready in every way. It must show on my face because she cups my

whiskered cheeks.

“There’s no hesitation. Being with you feels right.”

“Then sink down on my cock, mate. Let’s end the wait.”

Ariel nods and then rises up, lining herself up over the tip of my dick as she grasps my erection. It’s enough to make me jizz right there, but I fight for control, groaning when she lowers and begins feeding my cock inside her. She’s tight, warm, and soft. I can feel how I stretch her as she hisses. By the time I’m fully seated, she’s panting.

I’m having a heart attack, my gator whispers. She feels so good, my heart is going to beat out of my chest.

Despite the seriousness of the situation, I can’t help but smirk at his antics. We’ve both been waiting forever it seems for just this moment and now that it’s happening, it’s not like I can exclude him, but damn, I wish he’d just luxuriate in how fantastic we feel with her wrapped around our cock.

I think it can’t get better, and then she begins to move. With her hands on my shoulders, she bounces and rolls her hips. Until this moment, I didn’t think it was possible to die from pleasure. But now, with my heart racing, I think it’s fucking probable. But I will never leave my mate. She needs me, and we have a life together that’s already becoming more than I ever dreamed.

Ariel moans as I grasp her hips and move her in time with my thrusts. Leaning forward, my tongue laves at each of her breasts, flicking her nipples into hard peaks. We’re grinding into one another; lost in the sensations we’re sharing. Our bodies are in perfect sync, and I’ve never felt anything as incredible as this woman and her love.

She’s so fucking tight and her walls flutter around my cock. I know she’s getting

close. Her chest flushes, and her eyes nearly roll back in her head. Ariel's full, sensual lips part and I can see her pulse beating hard as I glimpse the artery in her neck. She's delicate, but also so fucking fierce. The perfect mate for a gator.

She IS perfect! he agrees. She'll give us offspring. We'll finally have our own hatchlings!

Not quite. Ariel won't be laying eggs. But still, having our young will mean fatherhood and completeness. Our mate is a miracle.

Mark her! My gator insists. We need to do it. Now!

He's right. There's no better moment than right now. I feel my claws begin to grow, lengthening, and cutting through my skin to wrap around Ariel's hips. Her thighs shake as her orgasm approaches. I time it, knowing the perfect moment I'll mark her wrist.

Water sloshes around us, and I know we've soaked the floor as well as the towels. I don't care. If it means being buried deep in my woman, I'll deal with a ruined floor later.

When Ariel's pussy contracts and begins milking my cock, that's when my claws bury deep in her wrist. My mouth covers hers and swallows her scream, which terrifies me because I don't know if I hurt her. I'm torn between the best orgasm I've ever had as I shudder, pumping my cock and filling her as I feel jets of my cum enter her sweet cunt, and worrying it's too much. She greedily takes it, writhing against me as she accepts all I have to give her.

When I finally feel my claws recede, I dare to look at her wrist. A part of me feared I'd see blood in the water and her lacerated wrist. I'd have lost my shit if I drew blood. I didn't. There's a triple slash mark on her wrist, and it's already fading from

an angry red to a silvery white on her fair skin. Wow.

It's beautiful, my gator sniffles. She's ours forever now.

That's the last thought in my head before I begin to shake, my cock sliding free from Ariel as I groan. My wrist is burning, and I lift it to stare at the mating mark that's a perfect replica of the one on Ariel's wrist. Three slashes. The gator's claws.

Ariel stares at me with wonder as she sees it. "You're mine too."

That's the sweetest three words she's ever said. Only 'I love you' will ever mean as much.

"We're mated," I reveal, pulling her closer so I can possess her mouth. And if I have anything to do with it, we're not gonna be done in this tub for a long while.

Chapter Twenty

ARIEL

I have no words to describe what just happened between me and Chomp. I feel as though I've had an out-of-body experience. Every touch, every caress, was designed to show me just how much I mean to him. While I don't want to think about him, especially right now, making love with Chomp was light years away from what I experienced before. Even seeing Gator peering out at me, eyes hooded at half-mast, has me so full of emotion that I'm not sure whether I want to cry or laugh. I've never felt so cared for and cherished in my life.

"Are you okay?" Chomp asks as he glides his fingers over my back, holding me against his chest as we lay in bed.

It's been hours since we left the tub and the bubble bath he drew for us. In all fairness, there wasn't much water left by the time we exited. I don't think Chomp minded the mess. He was beaming a wide grin as he picked me up, wrapped a towel around my wet body, and carried me into the bedroom. We've made love three more times since then and fell asleep, waking to birds chirping outside the windows.

It's perfect. I'm so happy I feel like I'm floating on the clouds. "I'm wonderful. Better than wonderful," I admit as I lift my head, staring into the warm brown eyes that I adore. For a brief second, he blinks, and I see the gator's eyes. He never lets me forget that he's there too. To protect, defend, and ensure I'm safe.

"We should eat something," Chomp murmurs as his stomach rumbles. "We've

burned a lot of calories.”

I feel my cheeks heat. “Yeah, I guess we did.”

Not that I’m complaining one single bit. Never in the history of ever did I think that sex would be that magical or explosive between two people. It doesn’t hurt that in addition to being sexy as hell, Chomp is a kind and considerate lover.

“I’ll cook anything you want,” he offers, and I know he will.

This time, I want to cook for him again. “You should know I make the best baked spaghetti and homemade garlic bread.”

His lips curl as I see the hunger enter his eyes. It’s for more than food. “My dove, you can make anything you want. I’ll just sit back and watch that sexy ass as you cook.” He gives my bottom a slap to prove his point. “I’m addicted to having you in my bed.”

“It’s a good thing I never plan to leave it.” Well, for sleeping anyhow.

“Keep talkin’ like that and we’re not going anywhere,” he whispers huskily as his tongue licks up the side of my neck, causing a shiver to ghost along my spine.

I push him away as he pouts. His stomach growls a second time. “See? You need to feed that gator.”

He doesn’t argue. “Fine, but you should know Gator says he’s wasting away, and you should be impressed with our prowess.”

I snort. That gator.

Shaking my head with humor, I scramble from bed and pull on one of his shirts and a pair of my shorts. On the way out the door, I spot a hair tie and throw my long locks into a bun. When my gaze lands on my wrist, I feel tingly all over, and warmth spreads through me. My heart is so full.

I'm mated. To a gator . A biker. And an intense, muscled, and inked hunk of man. Wow.

I sure won the lottery when it came to Chomp.

* * *

Chomp let me cook for him, but he definitely assisted as well. He makes a good sous chef as I put my sauce on a low simmer after tossing everything into a huge pot. I'm actually impressed at the size of this thing; I feel like we'll be eating pasta of some sort for days with how much I made. Now, Chomp is dicing up onions so I can cook some meatballs to add protein to the meal. I've come to learn that he needs a lot of it to sustain himself since his metabolism is so high.

"Chomp?" I ask as I brown more meat to add directly to the sauce.

"Yes, Dove?" he replies, busy wiping down the countertops since everything's waiting for me to create the meatballs. The spaghetti is already cooked and waiting for me to finish with the sauce, so I can put it all together, then bake it. I'm still going to have more than enough sauce left for us to freeze, I suspect.

He cooks like I do; he cleans as he goes, which makes it far more enjoyable in my opinion. "With us being mated now, will I shift? Callie says that she does since she and Kodiak mated."

"Gator says you're going to be absolutely beautiful, and I agree, and that he's

planning to teach you everything you need to know about shifting and frolicking in the lake,” he says, chuckling while shaking his head.

“Will my gator talk to me, do you think?” I muse as I start smushing up the concoction and quickly put meatballs on a tray to slide into the oven. I’ll get them browned on all sides, then they’ll finish cooking as the meal itself bakes. I still need to make the cream cheese mixture that’ll have seasonings and add a creamy layer to the baked dish.

“I imagine so, but hopefully, yours doesn’t become so overly dramatic as mine,” he replies.

I giggle because even though I can’t hear his gator, I can only imagine, based on how he reacts sometimes, that he’s getting an earful.

We finish the meal and clean up, and sit down to eat, scooping the first few flavorful bites into our mouths. It’s nearly heaven with the homemade garlic bread and tossed salads we made. We’re both so hungry that we clean our plates. I almost contemplate licking mine.

Chomp adds a generous second helping as I pick up my glass and sip on sparkling strawberry-flavored water. It’s the most I’ve eaten in a long time, and I have to wonder if being a shifter’s mate means I’m going to have a healthy appetite like Chomp.

“I have so many questions,” I murmur as I watch him eat his second helping.

“Ask away, Ariel,” he says between bites. “If I don’t know the answer, I’ll figure out who we can talk to, okay?”

“It’s a lot to take in, Chomp, but I honestly couldn’t ask for anyone better to help me

navigate all of this than you and Gator, of course.”

While I can admit that Gator is sometimes extreme in his behavior, what I know about mates, which could admittedly fit in a thimble, is that males are always zeroed in on their female. They worry about them, and with how Chomp and I met, I understand why he’s almost overzealous with my protection and safety. That thought brings up another question that I blurt out. “I’m a little nervous about going to see a therapist, Chomp. I mean, I know I need to do it to get past all the crap that was shoveled down my throat that I believed as though it was gospel, but I’m not having nightmares any longer. Do you think it’s really necessary?”

His voice is gentle as he gives me a small nod. “Yes. I think you could use someone to talk to who isn’t quite so invested in every word you speak.” He sets down his fork and reaches for my hand, covering it with his much larger one. “I want you to feel open to say whatever you’re feeling with me, but I suspect there may be some things, female-oriented maybe, that I might not be able to understand as fully.”

He’s right. I know I can talk to Callie, and she’s there for me, but a professional won’t judge me for the things I’m afraid to admit or remember out loud. If those things linger, they might cause friction with Chomp, and I would never want that. “I don’t know who to go to. You know anyone?”

“Callie helps Cheryl at Mercy Falls Refuge with the foster kids. I’m pretty sure she’s got contacts who are therapists, since many of the kids likely need help processing what’s happened in their lives. I’m positive she can put you in touch with Cheryl.”

“Then I’ll ask for Cheryl’s number the next time I see Callie,” I promise.

I watch him shake his head, then he admits, “Gator says he’s willing to bite anyone else who’s ever hurt you, but he won’t scare you by eating them.”

I can't help it, I start giggling. The topic may be a bit unconventional, but my life has been ever since Chomp came roaring into my life. "He probably shouldn't go around biting those who've hurt me in the past, Chomp. We can't have everyone knowing I've got a strong, handsome shifter with an enormous, obsessive, overzealous gator who protects me so well."

I'm flirting a little, not just with Chomp, but with Gator too.

He's about to reply when his phone rings. Pulling it out of his pocket, he smirks when he sees who's calling and says, "Pres."

Since he put the call on speaker, I hear Spike's voice thundering down the line as he says, "Don't wanna know what you're up to, just need you to get to the clubhouse, Chomp. Bring Ariel."

Before Chomp can say anything at all, the line disconnects, leaving us staring at each other. There's a bewildered expression on his face and something I can't place in his chocolatey brown eyes. I see a hint of the gator as he wrestles with what Spike didn't say, which is a lot.

"Let me get this cleaned up," I state, standing and gathering dishes. I'm pretty sure Spike wants us there as quickly as possible, but I will take a few minutes to wrap up the minimal leftovers. The dishes, however, can wait, so I stack them in the sink and run water over them before I pull out some aluminum foil and wrap the baking dish, then slide it into the refrigerator.

"Need you to put on some clothes, Ariel. Preferably jeans," Chomp announces, giving me a once over.

"Okay. Any reason why?"

He grins and wiggles his eyebrows. "I'm taking you for a ride."

I squeal with excitement because I've been looking forward to this and scamper up the stairs, rushing around to find jeans, socks, and a long-sleeved top. Once I'm dressed, I dart into the bathroom and begin braiding my hair, searching for a hair tie as Chomp appears in the doorway. He watches me with an unhurried gaze, raking it down my body and up again as if he can't get enough of me. When I pause to wink at him, I see the gator flash in his eyes.

Wow. I don't think I'll ever get enough of how they both seem to devour my presence and salivate for it. I've never known anything like this. It's intoxicating and makes me clench my thighs together. There's no denying I feel arousal after what we've experienced together, and I'm eager to return to bed and continue our exploration, but it'll have to wait.

Chomp groans. "Stop looking at me like that, dove. I'm gonna strip those jeans off, feast on your pretty pussy, and then Spike will kick my ass for showing up late."

I can't help grinning at the thought. "You sure we can't take ten minutes?"

He pushes off the doorway where he's been leaning against it and stalks toward me, sliding his large hands around my waist and lower, to cup my backside. "Don't tempt me, my gorgeous mate." His lips brush mine and I know if we linger, he'll lose the fight and give in.

Still, I tease him. "Hmmm, and I wanted to taste you this time."

His body goes still, and I hear the gator make a noise in his throat. "Bike. Now." He swats my bottom. "And you're gonna be sorry later when I won't let you come up for air without coming at least three times."

I don't think I will be, but I don't say it. Where this brazen, sexually driven desire has come from, I'm not sure, but I like it. It feels freeing and wonderful. It's definitely a far cry from who I was mere months ago, that's for sure.

Outside, Chomp throws a leg over his bike and begins giving me instructions. I'm not even allowed to climb on behind him until I can repeat every one of his safety rules. It's cute, overbearing, and humorous. He's too much, and just enough at the same time.

But it's when my arms are wrapped around him, and we roll forward, the wind sweeping over our skin, that's when I know I want to be with Chomp and ride his Harley for the rest of my life. Sure, I knew in the bathtub I'm his mate, especially after his claws marked me. But now, feeling this freedom, protected, safe, and with his love, it's healing me in ways I never could have dreamed.

The ride isn't long, and I find that I wish we could have stayed on the road, but when I see the clubhouse, and take in the enormity of the old ski lodge, I begin to feel nervous. The building is huge and it's full of people. The long glass panes reveal some of the club members and other shifters I've met along with ones I haven't. I spot Kodiak and Callie and remind myself that these are my people, err family, now too. We share a bond because I'm mated to Chomp.

I relax my shoulders as we glide into a parking spot. Chomp rises off his seat and removes my helmet, reaching for my hand as we approach the steps leading up to the heavy wooden double doors. They fling open and I see a woman standing there. She gasps as she spots Chomp.

His hand releases mine and he's so still, I wonder who she is to him. I'm about to ask when he utters a single word. One that's so full of emotion and longing that my knees almost buckle. I can feel the ache in his chest.

“Mom.”

Chapter Twenty-One

CHOMP

She looks just as I remember with the same long, golden brown hair and eyes the identical shade as mine. She's lost a little weight since we've last met but doesn't appear unhealthy. It's her eyes that snare my attention, along with the quiver in her chin. When those brown pools fill with tears, I can't stand another second of silence.

"Mom." Her name leaves my lips like a long-awaited, answered prayer. I'm vaguely aware that I drop Ariel's hand and then I'm rushing up the stairs, scooping up my mother in a tight hug as she begins to wail, clutching at me like she never believed we'd have this moment together the same as I did.

I have so many questions. "How? Why are you here?"

"He's dead," my mother whispers with a snuffle.

The bull who mistreated my mother. The gator I've hated for what he's done to my family and congregation. I don't have it in me to feel sorry.

No! He forced us to leave, Gator bellows. We do not mourn him.

"I'm not sorry he's gone." I know I sound belligerent, but his treatment toward me, as well as other male gators in our congregation was horrific, and one of the reasons I tried to hold myself aloof from others. I couldn't handle losing others I'd grown to care about again; it devastated me.

Club brothers and our mate are different, Gator hisses. They will never leave us.

“Neither am I,” she admits, finally pulling away but keeping her hands on my shoulders. “We’ve all missed you, Chomp.” Her head turns toward the door, and I spot my youngest sibling, no more than fifteen years.

When I see Chewy, I almost lose it. He was a little hatchling when I left, stuck to my mother’s side often, and always chewing on shit because he was teething. The young man before me has the same brown eyes, my mother’s hair color, and my build. He’s smaller, but in a few years, he’ll fill out once he’s grown. “Chewy.”

He makes a youthful bellow and hurtles his way toward me, shifting in his excitement. My mother easily sidesteps the smaller, overexcited gator and I shift to join him, immediately locked in a tussle as we wrestle. I flip him over a few times before we shift back, and I pull him into a hug.

“You’ve gotten fat,” he jokes as I squeeze him.

“Funny,” I laugh.

Behind us, I hear chuckles from Spike, Kodiak, Peanut, and a few of my brothers. They’re happy for me. I can see it in their expressions when I turn to face them. I’ve gotten some of my family back, and it fills that last little empty hole in my heart.

“Your other brothers are mated now and have set up their families in lakes that apparently filter into the one here in Yukon Bluff,” my mom says.

My jaw drops at her words; I was close to my siblings, but as the oldest, the bull’s attention was on me since I was nearly old enough to challenge him. While I did, it wasn’t to take over the congregation, it was to keep him from hurting all the females who were there. To say that his death couldn’t have happened to a nicer male is an

understatement. For years I've mourned losing my biological family, even though my life here in Yukon Bluff is more than satisfactory. I have a lake that sprawls endlessly, found brothers with the club, and now the most beautiful mate ever.

We need them to stay, Gator bellows. We aren't like him, we won't kick our brother out. He needs to learn how to be a good male. Our brothers plus me will help teach him.

"Are you here to stay?" I ask, turning my hopeful gaze to my mother.

"If you'll have us."

If ? I drag Chewy toward my mother and hug them both against me. "Ariel?" I ask, noting her wide smile. She's brushing tears from her cheeks, but her joy is unmistakable. She's thrilled for me. I can feel it.

"Of course! Our home is open to you all."

My mother blinks before her gaze rests on Ariel's wrist. "You're my son's mate."

Ariel nods. "Yes."

Before anyone can react, my mother is rushing toward Ariel, hugging her close as she weeps. "I've waited so long for my Chomp to find you."

Her words bring on fresh tears as they slip down Ariel's face, but I know it's because of the acceptance and love she feels. "He saved me when I needed him the most. More than once," Ariel confides.

"Because you're true mates. I can see the bond. It's quite strong already."

My mother's words fill me and Gator with pride and exhilaration. "Mother, meet my Ariel. Ariel, this is my mother."

"And that's what you call me," she insists, kissing my cheek. "You call me Mom."

Ariel begins to sob as my mother holds her tighter. "I lost my mom."

"Now you have a new one," my mom tells her. "Not to replace her, but to hopefully help you navigate being the mate to an obstinate gator."

"Mom!" I exclaim. "I'm not that bad."

Maybe you aren't, my gator whispers, but I can be.

Well, he's certainly right about that fact! Still, seeing my mate's brilliant smile at my mom's words has me shrugging in acceptance. "We want you to stay," I affirm.

"We'll get out to your cabin and figure out what we need to do to expand it so all of y'all have privacy," Spike decrees. Then he stops and says, "Maybe, since you and Ariel are newly mated, we should just build your mom and brother their own place out by the lake. Especially if there's a chance your other family might visit."

That's fucking perfect. "Mom?"

She releases Ariel and dashes the wetness from her cheeks. "It's everything I hoped for."

"Then it's settled."

And not a single one among us rejects the idea.

* * *

“So,” Kodiak drawls as he joins me, watching our mates talking to my mother in the clubhouse. “I see your mark.”

It’s been hours and now that everyone is fed and enjoying drinks, we’ve finally settled. Chewy seems to be fascinated with Spike and I see a bit of smoke curl from his nostrils. He’ll have to get used to it if he wants a mate. Younger siblings and children are sure to follow.

“Yeah. I didn’t expect that,” I confide. “It sort of shocked me in the moment.”

He snorts. “Yeah. Same with me. Mine showed up a few hours later.” He lifts the collar of his shirt and shows me the silvery skin and the scar that proves he’s mated. “I’m proud of it.”

“I wonder if that’ll happen to everyone who mates?” I question. “I mean, we’re kind of in uncharted territory at this point. The way my former congregation was run is not what I want for my family.”

“What do you mean?” he asks.

“Once a male gator reaches puberty, they either have to fight the bull or alpha to use words you’ll better understand to take over the congregation. Most will just leave and find their own lakes to live in, which can get lonely. I wanted to stay because my mom and siblings were there, but I would rebel against him because of how he treated not only my mom, but the other females. I wasn’t strong enough to defeat him then, so I left to keep my mom safe. But my gator and I have already determined that if Ariel and I have boys, they can stay as long as they want until they’re ready to strike out on their own.”

He chuckles and says, "Somehow, I suspect their mother will want them around."

I nod because I feel like Ariel will be the same way. "How much longer before you and Callie welcome your bundle of joy?"

"A few months, I think. I'm not really sure about the actual time frame since she was turned into a shifter. I don't know if she's going to follow what a human gestation period is, or if she'll be like most shifters. So, I've been getting our den ready for hibernation. I want to be ready."

"I bet you do. Is that why you're fattening up?" I joke, poking him in the belly.

He blinks like it hasn't occurred to him until now. "Shit. Yeah, I think so. I won't be able to leave them and hunt, not at first. My protective instinct is gonna kick in strong. It already is. My bear is fucking impossible right now."

I snort. "So is my gator and Ariel isn't even pregnant."

Kodiak grins. "I bet it won't be long."

"I hope so. It's the one thing that hasn't happened yet. I'll be so fucking happy, Kodiak."

"Yeah. It's awesome," he agrees. "Until you feel the need to wrangle your bear because he's trying to prevent everyone from going near your mate."

I laugh because I know Gator will be ridiculous. He already is.

I resemble that remark, he snarks. Our mate will be safe and so will any offspring.

He's so certain it makes me antsy. I want to tell him to chill but there's no point. He

does whatever the fuck he wants anyway. Just wait until we have hatchlings and I have to make him listen.

Not happening, he chumpfs.

We'll see. Ariel walks over and plops onto my lap, wrapping her arms around my neck. Leaning in, she whispers, "Callie is going to call Cheryl and get me a list of names for a trauma therapist."

"That's good news, my dove," I reply. "Today's been a great day, hasn't it?"

"Definitely. I can't wait to see what your brothers build for your mom and Chewy," she says.

"We're going to add on to the cabin as well," I tell her.

"Why?"

"Because eventually we'll have hatchlings and they'll need to be by the water once they begin shifting," I reply.

Her eyes widen. "How soon does that happen?"

"When they're able to walk to the lake," I admit. "So, relatively quickly."

"Guess I better learn how to be a gator mama then," she teases.

We're gonna teach her! my gator bellows. As if I'd forget he's already told me that very thing.

I open my mouth to assure Ariel she has nothing to worry about when Callie gasps.

Kodiak shoots to his feet and runs toward her, hovering his hands around her body. He's gotten so wide from all his extra snacks, I can't see her anymore.

Ariel jumps from my lap. "Callie?"

"My water just broke!"

Kodiak, my usually in control brother, sways on his feet. "There's water gushing out of my mate!"

I don't know whether to laugh or smack him so he focuses on his mate as I rush over, joining Ariel as she helps Callie to her feet. We're all staring at the big bear who looks pale. He's nearly catatonic.

"Kodiak!" Spike shouts, using his presidential influence. "Snap the fuck out of it!"

Kodiak blinks and reaches down to scoop Callie into his arms. He takes three steps before she lets out a shrill cry, clutching at her stomach. "Mate!" he roars and spins in a circle like he can't decide which way to go or what the fuck to do.

Somebody needs to smack him. I can't. Callie and Ariel won't like it.

But I will, the gator chortles.

I ignore him as Callie groans. She's obviously in pain. Kodiak looks ready to pass out.

It's my mother who intervenes. Bless her. "Everyone stop."

I didn't notice before now that all the club members looked panicked. All but Spike.

“Giving birth is natural. There is nothing wrong with Callie.”

No one looks convinced.

“Kodiak, carry your mate to an empty bedroom. We’re going to prepare for the arrival of your cub.”

Something seems to click inside his head, and he nods, rushing toward the stairs to climb them quickly, careful not to jostle Callie.

I reach for Ariel’s hand, and we follow as my mother begins giving orders. Soon there’s water boiling, fresh towels gathered, and supplies being brought to my mom as she assists with Kodiak and Callie’s birth. It’s hours before any progress is made.

Ariel is with Callie as I pass a drink to Kodiak. He nearly lost it a few minutes earlier. I had to shove him from the room.

“My mate needs me,” he argues, his voice hoarse.

I can’t imagine what he’s going through. “You need to calm the fuck down for your mate. She can feel your distress,” I remind him.

“Fuck.” He buries his head in his hands. “I need a drink.”

Spike shoves a bottle of Jack in front of him. “Drink it. All of it,” he orders.

Kodiak arches a brow. “But,” he argues.

“No. You’ve got plenty of padding. Drink. Now.”

Thirty minutes later, Kodiak’s words are slurring, and he’s pacing the floor, sending

agonized glances at the bedroom where the women are gathered. He's not drunk enough to be a concern. It's just taken the edge off, which has probably helped Callie.

My mom has promised to get him as soon as it's time, so until then, we've made it our mission to keep Kodiak occupied. The liquor has helped, but I can see it's already wearing off. Damn shifter metabolism!

Just when I think Kodiak might actually shift in the clubhouse, my mother pokes her head out the door. "It's time."

Kodiak is sober in an instant, rushing to his mate. Spike, Peanut, and Fang begin to pace, and I join them, knowing this moment is private and I need to wait to enter the room. When the door finally opens, it's not my mom. Kodiak takes small, measured steps as he walks into the main hall where we've been waiting, holding a swaddled bundle.

"My son." He swallows hard. "My first cub."

Cheers erupt in the room, and there isn't a male in sight who isn't both envious and thrilled for Kodiak. This is what we've all wanted, and what we've hoped for. Mates. Offspring. Peace.

"I've got a son!" Kodiak kisses the sweet, soft cheek of his newborn, and I can tell he's in love in an instant.

Later that night, I sit on one of the couches with my mother and Ariel, enjoying the celebration going on around us. The clubhouse is full of life, cheer, and hope. It's fucking powerful.

My mother's head droops, and she rests against the cushions, asleep in an instant. I'm still in awe that she's here. We've decided not to leave the clubhouse so I can stay

close to Mom and Chewy for a few days. I feel the need to remain by their side, and Ariel understands. It's not like there aren't plenty of rooms and suites available, and Ariel has already gotten one ready for them to use until their cabin is built.

"You know," she whispers, "I think I know just what you need right now."

"Oh?"

"Practice," she answers simply.

For once, I don't catch her meaning right away. "Huh, dove?"

"Practicing for our own." She wiggles her eyebrows, and it's the cutest thing. Wait. Is she saying . . .?

Yes! We need hatchlings! my gator bellows, nearly deafening me with his roar.

I shoot to my feet, pick up Ariel, and stride with purpose toward my room.

We're making our own little bundle of joy. Tonight. And every night until it happens.

Ariel's lips hover at my ear. "I want a baby of our own, Chomp. Give me one."

I shiver. "Mate, I will give you so much of me, it's dripping out."

She giggles. "Good."

I know when we enter that room, we're not coming out for hours. Gator's thoughts sum it up for both of us.

Let's get it on!

CHOMP

Two months later

“A re you ready, Chomp?” Mom asks as we put the finishing touches on the brunch. Once she and Chewy got settled, she went to work at the diner, and after she heard Ariel’s idea about how to increase business and sales, she and I put our heads together to create a brunch menu for Sundays. Just like the ones she used to make growing up.

Being in a large industrial kitchen allows me to pander to my desire to cook for others without intruding on everything else I do for the club’s businesses. Plus, as an added bonus, I get to spend time with my mom. I have the best of both worlds, in all honesty. I get to work alongside my mate at the club business and cook with my mom once again.

“I think so,” I mutter, suddenly nervous about everyone sampling the food I’ve cooked. Mom acted as my sous chef, while Ariel and Callie helped get everything ready since this is the first one. We’ve been busy since word spread, and the restaurant is full. There’s a lot of hungry people to feed.

“It’s going to be just fine,” Ariel says, leaning up on her tiptoes to kiss my bristly jaw. She dances away before I can claim her for a kiss, her giggles floating behind her.

My mother smiles, giving me a pat on the arm. “They’re going to love every dish.” Her confidence and calm smile ground me.

“We’re unlocking the door,” Spike says, walking into the kitchen. The first dishes are already in the chafing dishes, but both my mom and I are ready to make more if they’re eaten. I’ve cooked enough to feed an army. Or a bunch of shifters. Maybe both.

I swallow back the nerves and nod. “Let’s do this,” I whisper to my mom.

* * *

“Come on, Chomp, your mom has everything covered. I want you to sit down and eat,” Ariel says as she walks into the kitchen. She’s glowing right now, and I worry about whether or not it’s too hot in the diner, which has been slammed ever since Spike turned the sign to open and unlocked the door.

We need to check the thermostat, Gator hisses. Mate looks flushed.

If nothing else, brunch was a hit, so we’ll now open on Sundays for about four or five hours, right in the heart of the day. Folks who don’t go to church can come in early, while those who attend services with their families can come in and enjoy some well-cooked food after they leave church.

“Okay, okay,” I reply, taking off my apron and hanging it on a hook in the kitchen. After washing my hands, I follow my mate through the swinging doors and into the diner, amazed at the support from not only my brothers but also the townspeople. There are even folks from Mercy Falls, and I smile when I see Cheryl grinning at my mate.

Ariel’s therapy is going so well, and I’ve even gone to a few of her sessions when she has something she wants to share from before that she knows might upset me. Because I’m around a human, I’m able to (barely) control my gator, but it’s helped me understand some of her idiosyncrasies better, so I don’t accidentally trigger her. She’s so much more open, as if her experiences had muted who she was as a person.

Regardless, I'm going to love her until the end of time.

She walks beside me, filling up a plate and occasionally adding things to mine. I smirk because as we sit down, she adds a huge bespeckled egg to the center of my overflowing plate. "What's that?" I ask, lightly tapping it with my fork.

"Open it, Chomp," she encourages. I'm so focused on this item that was definitely not on the menu that I don't notice my mom or brother coming to stand near us, nor do I see my club brothers circling around me, until I hear a coo and look up.

Kodiak has his son strapped to his chest with one of those sling things. While he's only two months old, he's already alert, which is typical for shifters. I smirk because unless Callie has Teddy to feed him, my brother has possession of his son. Hell, he even willingly changes diapers, something I don't particularly relish doing since a few of the ones he's changed have been foul. Still, he's very content with his little family, and I won't begrudge him that because at the end of the day, that's what all of us want.

I pick up the egg and gently crack it against the side of my plate. A small black and white picture flutters out, and I pick it up. When I see Ariel's name at the top, I glance at her in surprise. When did she go to the doctor? And furthermore, why didn't she say anything to me?

Look at the picture, Chomp, my gator huffs out.

I stare at the picture, confusion marring my features as I see three circles along with "A", "B", and "C" above them. "Ariel?"

"You're going to be a daddy, Chomp," she whispers, touching the picture. "We're going to have triplets."

Oh my God! We did it! We're going to have hatchlings! My gator is chortling so

hard, he falls down inside of me with a loud oomph. Silly bastard.

I stand and pick her up, swinging her around while yelling, “I’m going to be a dad! This is the second-best day of my life!”

She grins down at me since I have her lifted so high and asks, “What was the first best day?”

“Finding you,” I admit, sniffing.

We have a mate! We have triplets! My gator continues to bellow. This is not a drill!

A large meaty hand clamps onto my shoulder, and I turn to see Kodiak standing there with an idiotic grin on his face. “Congrats, brother. Best fucking thing in the world,” he says.

We’re soon inundated with the rest of my brothers, who are already taking bets about what we’re going to have. I honestly don’t care, as long as Ariel and the babies are healthy and safe. What I really want to do is snatch her away to our cabin so we can celebrate in private. I’m already looking forward to watching her belly swell.

We need snacks! Supplies! Baby stuff! We have to add onto our cabin! Gator hisses. Must go shopping now.

“Gator’s being a bit ridiculous,” I murmur so only she can hear me.

“He probably wants to set up the nursery already,” she replies, smiling at me. “Right, Gator?”

I love when she talks to me, my gator hums.

We love everything about Ariel. And now she’s giving us three more reasons to love

her.

“Are you happy?” she asks, like it isn’t obvious.

“Mate, my heart is so full, I fear it might burst.”

A tender smile curls her lips. “Enjoy it. I know I am.”

Oh, we will. Me, Gator, and my pregnant mate. After all, our forever begins now.

My gaze collides with my mother’s, and the happy tears I see are all I need to feel complete.

Peanut

The hardest part of today is watching my brother celebrate his upcoming bundles of joy. It’s already hard enough with Kodiak having a son, but now Chomp and his mate are adding three babies to the mix. My heart stutters in my chest, nearly bringing me to my knees. I am happy for both of my brothers and their mates, but there’s an ache in my soul because of my past.

It’s not one that any of the brothers know since Spike never insisted that we share why we came to Yukon Bluff. Still, for all the years that I’ve been a member, with all the single brothers around, that ache was more like a dull throbbing. But now, with three more babies on the horizon, it’s as painful as it was the day it happened.

I can’t. I just... can’t. I walk toward Spike, words forming and rearranging themselves in my head as I try to figure out how to tell my president that I need to leave. I don’t know if I’ll ever come back, either, because I’m too broken to be able to keep up my facade of being happy for the little families. What if more brothers end up finding their mates? What then? Maybe it’s better if I just go off on my own and live a life of solitude. It’s not what I really want since the Shifted Misfits MC took me

in and gave me a new family, but having to watch the kids grow up? It's not something I can deal with now, if ever again.

"Spike? I need to go," I state once we walk off to the side, away from the celebration.

"Why, Peanut? What's going on?" he asks with concern.

As a dragon shifter, he's prone to wanting to hoard things, and I feel as though the club gives him immense satisfaction since he's brought together a group of misfit shifters who don't belong anywhere else and created a family. He's done the same with our businesses, constantly adding more to what we're already handling, which, of course, increases our coffers.

None of us are hurting for money whatsoever. I can easily take what I've saved and quietly live off the grid for the rest of my life. While I'd miss my brothers and the friendships I've built, it's probably safer for everyone.

"I just need to leave," I insist, unwilling to share my private pain.

You're going to have to let him in some time, my elephant whispers. Maybe he can help us.

"What if I send you out to start looking into that list we got from Jerry?" he asks.

"We'll cover the gym for you, so you won't have to worry about that. It might be a long shot, but it would be great if we were able to help those women reclaim their lives, wouldn't it?"

"Like a nomad?" I question.

"Yeah, although it won't be a permanent thing, Peanut," he warns. "And at some point, I'm going to want to know what's going on with you."

“I understand.”

Maybe I’ll just drive my bike over a cliff because exposing all the raw parts of my life that I’ve pushed down for so long isn’t something I want to do at all.

“And I think Sly needs to go with you,” he muses, stroking his beard. “He’s got the IT skills to help you track some of these people down so you’re able to formulate a plan.”

I shrug. As long as I have my bike and the open road, I’m fine with having someone along for the ride. At least if something happens to me, he can get word back to the club. With my decision made, I ask, “When can we leave?”

“As soon as you’re packed,” Spike replies. Reaching out, he places his hand on my shoulder and squeezes. “Just remember, we’re here for you, Peanut. No matter what.”

I wish it was enough. Some pain just runs so deep, and it eats at you until it nearly consumes you.

I’m not sure there’s anything that will ever change that.