



Claimed by the Grumpy Shifter (Curvy Wives of Cedar Falls #5)

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Category: Fantasy

Description: My sexy new neighbor is a bear shifter with one obsession: claiming me as his mate.

All I wanted was to run my flower shop in peace, maybe find a nice guy who wouldn't mind my curves, and eventually get that white picket fence I've dreamed about.

Then Marc Steel moves in across the street, all brooding intensity and smoldering amber eyes that follow my every move. He's dangerous in a way I can't explain. Massive, scarred, with a darkness lurking beneath his surface.

When he walks into my shop and buys my favorite flowers just to give them back to me, I know I'm in trouble. The way he looks at me like I'm something precious he wants to both protect and devour makes my heart race and my common sense fly out the window. But there's something wild about him, something not entirely human that both terrifies and thrills me.

What will happen when I discover what he really is, and why he seems so obsessed with making me his?

Claimed by the Grumpy Shifter is a short, sweet, and steamy small town instalove romance with a happy-ever-after. It can be read as a standalone or together with the rest of the books in the Curvy Wives of Cedar Falls series.

Total Pages (Source): 12

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Source Creation Date: July 26, 2025, 4:54 am

The house smells like someone else's life.

I stand in the center of what the landlord generously called a "living room," though it's barely large enough for the secondhand couch I bought yesterday.

The walls are thin enough that I can hear Mrs. Chelsea next door humming something tuneless while she waters her plants.

Everything about this place screams temporary, which suits me fine.

I don't plan on staying long enough to make it feel like home.

Home. The word sits bitter on my tongue. I haven't had one of those since before my first deployment, back when Jake and I still talked, back when I thought the military would give me purpose instead of just more ways to fuck up my life.

The bear paces restlessly beneath my skin, agitated by the confined space and the lingering scent of previous tenants. I press my palms against the window frame and breathe deep, trying to center myself the way the therapist taught me before I stopped going to those sessions.

The view helps—nothing but trees and the small-town charm of Cedar Falls stretching out below. This is what I came here for. Space. Silence. A place where I can't hurt anyone.

The incidents... That's what they called them in my file.

Incidents. As if losing control of a six-hundred-pound grizzly bear in the middle of a firefight was just an administrative hiccup.

As if the fear in my commanding officer's eyes when he signed my discharge papers was just professional concern.

I flex my fingers, watching the tendons move under scarred skin.

The bear wants out. It's been cooped up for three days of driving, three days of truck stops and gas station coffee and forcing myself to stay human when every instinct screams at me to shift and run.

But I can't. Not here, not around people who might see.

The moving truck pulls away with a diesel rumble, leaving me alone with my sparse belongings and the weight of starting over. Again.

That's when I see her.

She's across the street, unlocking the door to a shop I hadn't noticed before.

The sign reads "Blooming Wonders" in script that looks hand-painted, surrounded by painted flowers that seem to spill off the wood and onto the sidewalk.

She's struggling with an armload of supplies, ribbon, it looks like, in every color imaginable, while trying to balance a coffee cup and fish her keys from what appears to be the world's largest purse.

I should look away. Mind my own business. Focus on unpacking the boxes that contain what's left of my life.

Instead, I find myself pressed against the glass, watching her with an intensity that should alarm me.

She's beautiful. Soft curves that her loose sweater can't quite hide, honey-blond hair that catches the morning light, and when she laughs at something, probably her own clumsiness as she nearly drops everything, the sound carries across the street and straight into my chest.

The bear goes completely still.

Then it roars.

The sound is internal, thank God, but it reverberates through every cell in my body.

My hands flatten against the window hard enough to leave prints, and I have to lock my knees to keep from falling.

Because I know what this is. I've heard the stories, dismissed them as folklore, but there's no mistaking the recognition that slams into me like a freight train.

Mate.

"No." I say it out loud, my voice rough from disuse. "No, no, no."

But the bear doesn't listen. It never does. It fills my head with images. Her beneath me, around me, carrying my cubs. The possessiveness is instant and absolute, a claiming that goes bone-deep before I even know her name.

She finally gets the door open and disappears inside, leaving me staring at empty sidewalk.

The scent of her lingers in the air, vanilla and roses, even though she's too far away for human senses to detect.

But I'm not entirely human, and my bear has already catalogued everything about her.

The way she moves, the pitch of her laugh, the exact shade of her hair in sunlight.

Mine.

The thought is primitive, undeniable. She belongs to me. I belong to her. It's as simple and terrifying as that.

I stumble backward from the window, running both hands through my hair. This is exactly what I came here to avoid. Complications. Connections. The risk of losing control and hurting someone who matters.

But she already matters. After thirty seconds of watching her struggle with ribbon and coffee, she matters more than anything else in my fucked-up life.

I pace the small room like the caged animal I am, my bear pushing against the edges of my control.

It wants to go to her, to introduce itself, to start the claiming process that's been hardwired into my DNA since birth.

The logical part of my brain—the part that got me through two tours in Afghanistan—knows this is insane.

You can't just walk up to a woman and announce she's your fated mate. That's not how the human world works.

But I'm not entirely human.

The war between instinct and logic rages for exactly three minutes before instinct wins. I grab my jacket and head for the door, my bear practically purring with satisfaction.

The October air is crisp, carrying the scent of dying leaves and wood smoke.

Cedar Falls is exactly the kind of small town I'd normally avoid.

Everyone knows each other, too many opportunities for things to go wrong.

But as I cross the street toward Blooming Wonders, I can't bring myself to care about anything except the woman behind that glass door.

The shop is warm and bright, filled with the most incredible array of flowers I've ever seen. Roses in every color climb the walls, baby's breath spills from vintage buckets, and the air is thick with perfume that makes my head spin. It's overwhelming in the best possible way.

She's behind the counter, arranging what looks like a wedding bouquet. Her tongue darts out to wet her lips as she concentrates, and the bear goes absolutely feral.

Want. Need. Claim.

I must make some kind of sound because she looks up, and those blue eyes... Christ, they're even more beautiful up close, widen in surprise.

"Oh! Hi!" Her voice is slightly breathless, and there's a flush creeping up her neck that makes me want to trace it with my tongue. "I didn't hear you come in. Can I help you with something?"

I stand there like an idiot, drinking in the sight of her. She's even more perfect up close. Soft skin that looks like it would bruise easily under my hands, curves that my palms ache to explore, and a mouth that was made for kissing.

And other things.

"I..." My voice comes out as a growl, and I have to clear my throat and try again. "I just moved in. Across the street."

Her face lights up with genuine pleasure, and it's like watching the sun rise. "Oh, you're the new neighbor! I'm Christine. Christine Parker." She extends her hand, and when I take it, the contact sends electricity shooting up my arm.

The bear rumbles its approval. She's warm and soft and smells even better up close.

"Marc," I manage, probably holding her hand longer than socially acceptable. "Marc Steel."

"Well, welcome to Cedar Falls, Marc Steel." She says my name like she's tasting it, and I have to fight the urge to lean across the counter and taste her back. "I hope you'll like it here. It's a pretty quiet place, but the people are nice."

"I'm counting on quiet," I say, and she laughs.

"Then you definitely came to the right place. The most exciting thing that's happened around here lately is that Josh, one of our local lumberjacks, is dating Elisa, my employee. We're all still recovering from the drama."

Something dark and possessive flares in my chest at the mention of another man, even though I know she's just making conversation. The bear doesn't like hearing about other males, period.

"Drama?" I ask, because I need to keep her talking. Her voice is like honey, and I'm already addicted.

"Oh, you know how it is. Small town, everyone's invested in everyone else's love life.

" She waves her left hand, but there's something wistful in her expression.

"Elisa's a single mom, and Josh has always lived alone in the mountains until she arrived.

He's so in love with her. You can see it in his eyes.

He's like a lovesick puppy. It's actually pretty sweet to watch. "

"What about you?" The question is out before I can stop it, too direct, too personal for someone I just met. But I need to know. "Anyone circling around you?"

The flush on her neck deepens, and she ducks her head, suddenly very interested in the bouquet she's arranging. "Me? Oh, no. I'm... I'm not really the type guys circle around."

She's wrong. So completely, utterly wrong that it takes every ounce of self-control I have not to tell her exactly how wrong she is. Not to explain that I'll be circling her for the rest of my life, that I'm already planning ways to make her mine.

"Their loss," I say instead, and her head snaps up, eyes wide with surprise.

I can hear her heartbeat, can smell the spike of arousal that makes my own pulse race. She feels it too, this pull between us, even if she doesn't understand what it means.

The bell above the door chimes, and a woman with a toddler on her hip bustles in,

breaking the spell.

"Christine! Thank God you're here. I need flowers for my mother-in-law's birthday, and I have no idea what to get her. She hates everything."

Christine tears her gaze away from mine, and I immediately miss the connection. "Of course, Mrs. Williams. Let me show you some options."

I should leave. I should go back to my empty house and start unpacking, try to build some kind of normal life that doesn't revolve around the woman across the street.

But I can't make myself move. Instead, I watch her work, mesmerized by the way her hands move among the flowers, the gentle way she speaks to the fussy toddler, the patience she shows with the indecisive customer.

She's everything I never knew I wanted. Everything I definitely don't deserve.

But she's mine anyway.

The bear has decided, and when a bear decides something, that's the end of the discussion. I just have to figure out how to make her understand that she belongs to me without scaring her away.

Or worse, without losing control and showing her exactly what I really am.

Mrs. Williams finally settles on an arrangement of cheerful yellow roses, and Christine rings her up with a smile that makes my chest tight. After they leave, she turns back to me with an apologetic expression.

"Sorry about that. Where were we?"

"You were telling me about small-town drama," I say, though honestly, I don't care about anything except the way her lips curve when she smiles.

"Right." She tucks a strand of hair behind her ear, and I want to be the one doing that, want to feel the silk of it between my fingers. "Well, anyway, like I said, it's pretty quiet around here. Perfect for someone looking for peace and quiet."

"What makes you think that's what I'm looking for?"

She looks at my face with those incredible blue eyes, and I have the unsettling feeling that she sees more than I'm comfortable with. "Just a guess. You have that look about you. Like you've seen enough excitement for one lifetime."

She's not wrong. I have seen enough excitement, enough violence, enough of the worst humanity has to offer. But looking at her, surrounded by flowers and light and everything good in the world, I think maybe I'm ready for a different kind of excitement.

The kind that involves making her mine.

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The way he looks at me makes my skin feel too hot.

I've never experienced anything like it. I'm conscious of every breath, every heartbeat, every tiny movement. Marc Steel stands in my flower shop like he owns it, like he owns everything in it, including me, and the strangest part is that some primitive part of my brain wants to let him.

Which is absolutely ridiculous. I don't even know this man.

But God, he's beautiful in the most dangerous way possible.

Tall enough that I have to tilt my head back to meet his eyes, broad enough that he makes my cozy shop feel cramped, and there's something wild about him that makes me think of storms and forests and things that would swallow me whole if I let them.

His amber eyes haven't left my face since Mrs. Williams left, and the intensity of his stare is doing things to my nervous system that should probably require a medical consultation.

"You're staring," I say, then immediately want to crawl under the counter.

Did I just say that out loud? To a customer? To my gorgeous new neighbor who probably thinks I'm a complete lunatic?

But instead of looking offended, his mouth curves into something that might charitably be called a smile. It's more like a predator baring its teeth, but somehow that makes my pulse race instead of making me run.

"Sorry." His voice is pure gravel, like he doesn't use it often. "It's just... you're not what I expected to find in Cedar Falls."

"What did you expect?" I ask, genuinely curious.

I fidget with the ribbon scraps on my counter, needing something to do with my hands because they keep wanting to reach for him, which is insane. I don't reach for men. I barely make eye contact with them.

"Quiet. Simple. Forgettable." His gaze travels over my face like he's memorizing it. "You're none of those things."

Heat floods my cheeks so fast I'm probably glowing like a neon sign. Men don't say things like that to me. Men barely notice me, period. I'm the girl they ask about my prettier friends, the one they pat on the head and call "sweet" before moving on to someone more interesting.

But Marc is looking at me like I'm the most fascinating thing he's ever seen, and I have no idea what to do with that.

"I should probably warn you," I say, desperate to fill the silence before I do something embarrassing like swoon, "Cedar Falls has a way of surprising people. Nothing ever turns out quite like you expect it to."

"I'm starting to figure that out." He takes a step closer to the counter, and I catch a hint of his odor, something woodsy and masculine. "What about you? Have you always lived here?"

"Born and raised." I gesture around the shop, trying to ignore the way his presence seems to fill every corner of it. "Took over this place from Mrs. Chelsea when she retired. She taught me everything I know about flowers."

"Must be nice, having roots like that."

There's something wistful in his tone, something that speaks to the romantic in me.

"What about you? Where are you from?"

His expression shutters so quickly I almost miss it. "Nowhere special. I've moved around a lot."

Military, I think. Something about his posture, the way he holds himself, screams discipline and training. And those scars I glimpsed on his hands—there's a story there, probably not a happy one.

"Well, you picked a good place to land," I say softly. "Cedar Falls grows on you."

"I'm counting on it."

The way he says it, like he's talking about more than just the town, makes my stomach flutter with something I don't quite recognize. Want, maybe. The kind of want I've only read about in romance novels, the kind that makes heroines do stupid, wonderful things.

The bell chimes again, and I nearly jump out of my skin. Elisa pushes through the door with baby Emma on her hip, looking harried and beautiful in that effortless way that makes me simultaneously adore her and hate my own genetics.

"Chris, thank God you're here. Emma's teething and I couldn't find the—" She stops mid-sentence when she notices Marc, her eyebrows shooting up in surprise. "Oh. Hi."

Marc turns toward them, and something changes in his posture. He goes very still, very alert, like a wild animal scenting a threat. It's subtle, but I notice because I can't seem to stop noticing everything about him.

"Elisa, this is Marc Steel. He just moved in across the street." I gesture between them, trying to ignore the weird tension that's suddenly crackling in the air. "Marc, this is Elisa, my employee and friend. And this little angel is Emma."

Emma chooses that moment to let out a shriek that could shatter glass, and Elisa bounces her while giving Marc an apologetic smile. "Sorry, she's not usually this fussy. The teething is making her miserable."

"No problem," Marc says, but his voice is tight. He's looking at Emma like she might explode at any moment, and I realize he's probably one of those men who's terrified of babies. It's almost endearing, seeing this mountain of a man reduced to panic by a ten-month-old.

"Here, let me take her," I say, reaching for Emma. She comes to me willingly, her tiny fist immediately latching onto my hair. "There's my sweet girl. Are those teeth bothering you?"

I bounce her gently, making soft nonsense sounds that usually calm her down. It works. Her crying subsides to hiccupping whimpers, and she settles against my shoulder with a contented sigh.

When I look up, Marc is staring at me with an expression I can't read. His amber eyes are almost glowing, and there's something fierce and hungry in his face that makes me wonder what he's thinking.

"You're good with her," he says, his voice rougher than before.

"I love babies." The words slip out before I can censor them, along with a wistful sigh that probably broadcasts my deepest desires to everyone in the shop. "I mean, Emma's special. She's such a good baby."

Elisa snorts. "Tell that to Josh. He turned green the first time she spit up on him."

"How is Josh?" I ask, grateful for the distraction. Talking about other people's love lives is much safer than whatever was happening between Marc and me.

"Amazing. Wonderful. Still can't believe he's real sometimes." Elisa's face lights up in a way that makes my chest ache with envy. "He's taking us camping this weekend. Emma's first camping trip."

"That sounds perfect," I say, and I mean it.

I'm genuinely happy for Elisa. She deserves every bit of joy she's found with Josh. But there's a part of me that wonders if I'll ever have that, if I'll ever find someone who looks at me the way Josh looks at her.

My gaze slides to Marc, who's watching me hold Emma with that same intense stare. For a wild moment, I let myself imagine what it would be like if he were looking at me holding our baby, if those strong hands were reaching out to touch—

Stop. Just stop.

I hand Emma back to Elisa before my imagination can run any further away with itself. "Did you need something specific, or were you just escaping the teething drama?"

"I'm going to meet Josh for lunch, then have a dentist appointment for Emma, and I wanted to make sure you didn't need me here." Elisa shifts Emma to her other hip, completely oblivious to the undercurrents swirling around us. "But it looks like you have things well in hand."

She glances between Marc and me, and I feel heat rise in my cheeks again. Of course

she noticed. Elisa has an annoying talent for reading people, especially when it comes to romantic tension.

"Actually," Marc says, his voice cutting through my embarrassment, "I should probably get going. Let you ladies get back to work."

"Oh, you don't have to—" I start, but he's already moving toward the door.

"It was nice meeting you both." He pauses at the threshold, looking back at me. "Christine."

The way he says my name—like he's tasting it, savoring it—sends shivers down my spine. Then he's gone, leaving me staring at the empty doorway like an idiot.

"Holy shit," Elisa breathes.

"Language," I say, glancing at Emma.

"She's ten months old, Chris. And did you see the way he looked at you? Like he wanted to devour you whole."

My face is definitely on fire now. "He was just being friendly."

"Friendly?" Elisa laughs so hard that Emma starts giggling too. "Honey, that man looked at you like you were the last piece of chocolate cake at a weight loss meeting. There was nothing friendly about it."

I busy myself rearranging flowers that don't need rearranging, trying to ignore the way my heart is still racing. "You're imagining things."

"I'm really not. And the way you looked at him back? Girl, you were practically

purring."

"I don't purr," I protest, but even I can hear how weak it sounds.

"You should ask him out."

The suggestion hits me like cold water. "What? No. Absolutely not."

"Why not? He's gorgeous, he's obviously interested, and you've been single for way too long."

"He's my neighbor. What if it goes badly? I'd have to see him every day." I shake my head, panic rising in my chest. "Besides, men like that don't date women like me."

"Women like what?" Elisa's voice goes sharp with protectiveness. "Smart, beautiful, successful women who smell like flowers and make babies stop crying with one smile?"

"You know what I mean." I gesture vaguely at myself, at my soft curves hidden under my oversized sweater, at my complete lack of dating experience with men who look like fallen angels.

"I know you're an idiot if you think you're not good enough for him." Elisa's expression softens. "Chris, you're amazing. Any man would be lucky to have you. And from what I just witnessed, Marc Steel knows it."

I want to believe her. God, I want to believe that a man like Marc could be interested in someone like me. But hope is dangerous territory, and I've been burned before by my own romantic delusions.

"Even if he was interested," I say, "which I'm not saying he is, I wouldn't know what

to do about it. I'm not like you, Elisa. I don't know how to flirt or be sexy or... any of that stuff."

"I don't either. Besides, you don't have to be like me. You just have to be yourself." She reaches over and squeezes my hand. "Trust me on this one. That man is smitten, and if you don't do something about it, you're going to regret it for the rest of your life."

Before I can argue further, Emma starts fussing again, and Elisa has to leave to meet Josh for lunch. I spend the rest of the afternoon trying to focus on work, but my mind keeps drifting across the street to the small house where Marc Steel is probably unpacking his mysterious past.

Every time I glance out the window, I catch myself looking for him. And twice, I could swear I see movement behind his curtains, like he's looking back.

By closing time, I've convinced myself that Elisa was wrong, that I imagined the whole electric connection, that Marc was just being polite to his new neighbor. But as I lock up the shop and head upstairs to my apartment, I can feel eyes on me.

I turn around, and there he is. Silhouetted in his window, watching me with that same intense stare that makes me feel like prey and predator all at once.

Our eyes meet across the street, and even from this distance, I can feel the heat of his gaze. He doesn't look away, doesn't even pretend he wasn't watching me. He just stands there, bold as brass, claiming the right to stare.

I should be offended. I should march over there and tell him that watching me is creepy and inappropriate.

Instead, I lift my hand in a small wave, my heart hammering against my ribs.

He raises his hand in return, a gesture that somehow feels like a promise.

Then I escape upstairs before I can do something truly stupid, like go over there and demand to know what kind of game he's playing.

But as I make dinner in my empty kitchen, I can't shake the feeling that Marc Steel isn't playing any games at all.

He's hunting.

And somehow, I think I want to be caught.

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She waved at me.

I've been standing at this window for twenty minutes, replaying that simple gesture like it's the key to unlocking the universe.

The way her hand lifted hesitantly, the small smile that curved her lips before she disappeared into her building...

Everything it's burned into my retinas, a moment of connection that my bear has seized on like proof of mutual interest.

Which it probably isn't. She was probably just being polite to her weird new neighbor who has the subtlety of a stalker.

Damn it. I am stalking her, aren't I?

I drag both hands through my hair and force myself to step back from the window.

This is exactly the kind of behavior that got me in trouble before, the kind of obsessive focus that made my commanding officers nervous and my teammates give me a wide berth.

The bear doesn't understand boundaries, doesn't comprehend the delicate dance of human courtship. It sees what it wants and takes it.

But I can't take Christine. She's not a target or an objective or a problem to be solved with brute force.

She's a woman—a beautiful, innocent woman who smells like roses and handles crying babies like she was born to be a mother.

She deserves better than a broken-down soldier who can barely keep his animal under control.

The bear snarls at that thought, rejecting it completely.

In its primitive logic, she's ours regardless of what I think I deserve.

The mate bond doesn't care about my fucked-up psychology or my tendency to destroy everything I touch.

It just knows that she's the missing piece of our soul, and it will do whatever it takes to claim her.

But this isn't the wilderness. This is a small human town where supernatural creatures are the stuff of fairy tales, where a man can't just announce that he's found his fated mate without ending up in a padded room.

The irony isn't lost on me. I came to Cedar Falls to hide from what I am, to find a place where I could blend in and suppress the part of me that's caused nothing but trouble. Instead, I've found the one thing guaranteed to bring my bear roaring to the surface.

My mate.

The knowledge sits in my bones, undeniable and absolute. I've heard the stories, dismissed them as folklore, but there's no mistaking the recognition that slammed into me the moment I saw her. The instant certainty. The possessiveness that goes bone-deep and shows no signs of fading.

She's mine. Every cell in my body knows it, even if my rational mind keeps trying to argue.

I move back to the window, drawn by a compulsion I can't fight. Christine is in her apartment now, visible through the sheer curtains that cover her kitchen window. She's making dinner, moving around her small kitchen with an unconscious grace that makes my chest tight with longing.

She's changed clothes. Soft leggings that hug her curves and an oversized sweater that slides off one shoulder, revealing the elegant line of her collarbone. She's barefoot, her honey-blond hair pulled back in a messy bun that makes me want to tug it loose and run my fingers through the strands.

I want to be in that kitchen with her. I want to come home to her every night, want to wrap my arms around her from behind while she cooks, want to make her laugh and moan and sigh my name in the darkness.

I want everything I've never let myself want before.

She moves to the stove, stirring something in a pot, and I can almost smell whatever she's cooking from here. My enhanced senses pick up the faint aroma of garlic and herbs.

When she turns toward the window, our eyes meet across the distance. Even through the glass and the gathering twilight, I can see the flush that colors her cheeks. She doesn't look away, doesn't close the curtains or pretend she doesn't see me watching.

Instead, she lifts her hand to her throat, her fingers tracing the line of her collarbone in a gesture that's probably unconscious but makes my blood sing with want. The bear pushes against my control, demanding action. It wants to cross the street, break down her door, claim what belongs to us.

The urge is so strong that I have to brace my hands against the window frame to keep from moving. The wood groans under my grip, and I force myself to ease off before I leave finger-shaped dents that would be hard to explain to my landlord.

She's still watching me, her blue eyes wide and curious. There's no fear in her expression, no revulsion at being observed. If anything, she looks... intrigued. Like she's trying to solve a puzzle and I'm the missing piece.

That's closer to the truth than she knows.

I think about this afternoon, the way she lit up when I walked into her shop. The electricity that crackled between us when we shook hands. The way she blushed when I said she wasn't forgettable. She felt it too, this pull between us, even if she doesn't understand what it means.

Humans aren't supposed to feel the mate bond, but sometimes they do. Sometimes the connection is strong enough to transcend species, to make them recognize their other half even when logic says it's impossible.

The thought gives me hope, dangerous as it is.

My reflection stares back at me from the window glass—scarred, brooding, intense to the point of intimidation. I look like exactly what I am: a predator. A killer. Someone who's spent years learning how to hurt people in the most efficient ways possible.

What the hell am I thinking? Christine is sunshine and flowers and everything good in the world.

She deserves someone who can give her the white picket fence and babies and happily ever after she's probably dreaming of.

Not a broken soldier who turns into a six-hundred-pound killing machine when he loses control.

But even as I think it, I know I'm not walking away. Can't walk away. The bear has decided, and when a bear decides something, that's the end of the discussion. She's mine, and I'll spend the rest of my life proving I'm worthy of her if that's what it takes.

The question is how to approach this without terrifying her. How to court her properly instead of simply taking what I want.

Christine moves away from the window, disappearing deeper into her apartment, but her scent lingers in the air. I breathe it in like a drug, letting it calm the restless energy that's been building since I first saw her.

Tomorrow, I decide. Tomorrow I'll find a reason to see her again, to spend more time in her presence and let whatever's happening between us develop naturally. I'll be patient. Careful. I'll prove to both of us that I'm more than just an animal driven by instinct.

I'll figure out how to be the man she deserves.

But tonight, I'll stand guard at this window and watch over what's mine. Because that's what bears do. We protect what we love, even when they don't know they're loved yet.

The hours pass slowly. I see her moving around her apartment, a glimpse here and there through the windows.

She eats dinner alone at a small table, reads a book curled up on her couch, moves through her evening routine with the kind of solitary contentment that speaks to

someone who's used to being alone.

But she shouldn't be alone. She should have someone to cook for, someone to curl up with, someone to make her laugh and hold her when she's sad. She should have a family, babies to love and nurture with all that maternal instinct I saw when she held little Emma.

She should have me.

I don't know how this is going to work, don't know how I'm going to bridge the gap between what I am and what she needs. But I know I'm going to try.

Because for the first time in my life, I've found something worth fighting for that isn't about duty or orders or survival.

I've found home.

And I'm not letting it go.

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Source Creation Date: July 26, 2025, 4:54 am

I wake up thinking about amber eyes.

It's ridiculous. I barely know the man, but Marc Steel has somehow invaded my dreams, leaving me restless and aching in ways I don't quite understand.

I lie in bed for a long moment, watching the morning light filter through my bedroom curtains, and try to convince myself that yesterday was just my imagination running wild.

But then I remember the way he looked at me, like I was something precious he wanted to protect and devour all at once, and my pulse starts racing all over again.

I roll over and check my phone. Six-thirty.

I don't usually get up this early, but there's no point trying to go back to sleep when my mind is spinning like a hamster wheel.

Besides, if I'm being honest with myself, there's a tiny part of me that hopes Marc might be an early riser too.

That maybe I'll catch another glimpse of him through his window.

Which is pathetic. I'm pathetic.

But that doesn't stop me from taking extra care with my morning routine.

I actually blow-dry my hair instead of letting it air-dry into its usual messy waves.

I spend fifteen minutes debating between three different outfits before settling on a fitted blue sweater that brings out my eyes and jeans that make my legs look longer than they actually are.

I even put on mascara and lip gloss, telling myself it's just good business practice to look professional.

It has nothing to do with the possibility of seeing my mysterious neighbor again.

Nothing at all.

By the time I make it downstairs to open the shop, I'm second-guessing every choice I've made.

The sweater is too tight. It clings to my curves in a way that makes me self-conscious.

The jeans are too casual. The lip gloss is too much.

I look like I'm trying too hard, which I am, and Marc will probably take one look at me and realize I'm just another desperate small-town girl with unrealistic expectations.

I'm in the middle of this internal spiral when I unlock the front door and nearly walk straight into a wall of muscle.

"Oh!" I gasp, stumbling backward. "Marc! You scared me."

He's standing right outside my door, looking like he's been there for hours. He's wearing dark jeans and a charcoal henley that hugs his massive frame in ways that should be illegal, and his amber eyes are fixed on my face with that same intense stare that made me forget how to breathe yesterday.

"Sorry," he says, his voice still that rough gravel that does things to my nervous system. "I was hoping to catch you before you opened."

There's something almost predatory about the way he's positioned himself, blocking my exit, his broad shoulders filling the doorframe. Any other man and I might be nervous, but with Marc, I just feel... claimed. Like he has every right to be here, waiting for me.

Which is insane. He's my neighbor, not my boyfriend.

"You're up early," I manage, proud that my voice sounds mostly normal even though my heart is pounding faster.

"Couldn't sleep." His gaze travels over my face, taking in every detail with the kind of attention that makes me feel like the most fascinating person in the world. "You look beautiful this morning."

Heat floods my cheeks so fast I'm probably glowing. Men don't call me beautiful. Men barely notice me, period. But Marc says it like it's an undeniable fact, like the sky is blue and water is wet and Christine Parker is beautiful.

"Thank you," I whisper, then clear my throat and try again. "Thank you. Did you... did you need flowers for something?"

"Yeah." He steps aside so I can prop the door open. "I need to buy some flowers."

There's something odd about the way he says it, like he's not entirely sure what flowers are for. I glance at his hands. No wedding ring, no tan line where one used to be. Not flowers for a wife or girlfriend, then.

"What's the occasion?" I ask as I flip on the lights and start my opening routine.

He follows me into the shop, and immediately the space feels smaller. He's so big, so intensely male, that everything else seems to shrink in comparison. The delicate flowers look even more fragile next to his scarred hands, the pastel walls more feminine against his dark clothing.

"No occasion," he says, watching me move around the shop with that laser focus that should make me uncomfortable but somehow doesn't. "I just... like the way they smell."

I pause in the middle of adjusting a display of white roses, surprised by the unexpected answer. "You like the way flowers smell?"

"I like the way you smell when you're around them."

The confession is so blunt, so honest, that it steals the breath right out of my lungs. I turn to stare at him, and the heat in his amber eyes makes my knees weak.

"I..." I have no idea how to respond to that.

No one has ever said anything remotely like that to me before. It's intimate and strange and exactly the kind of thing that should send me running, but instead, it makes me want to step closer.

"Sorry," he says, though he doesn't look particularly sorry. "That was too direct."

"No, it's... it's fine." I tuck a strand of hair behind my ear, a nervous habit I've never been able to break. "What kind of flowers were you thinking?"

He moves closer. "What do you recommend?"

"Well," I say, trying to focus on business instead of the way his presence seems to fill

every corner of the shop, "it depends on what you want them for. Are they for your home? A gift?"

"A gift," he says immediately.

My heart sinks a little. Of course they're for a gift. A man like Marc probably has women throwing themselves at him left and right. I'm an idiot for thinking—

"For someone special?" I ask, proud that I manage to keep the disappointment out of my voice.

"Very special." His eyes never leave my face. "Someone I want to get to know better."

"Oh." I clear my throat, trying to ignore the way my pulse is racing. "Well, for someone you want to get to know better, I'd suggest something simple but meaningful. Maybe roses, but not red. That's too forward for early in a relationship. Pink would be nice, or—"

"What's your favorite?" he interrupts.

"My favorite what?"

"Flower. What's your favorite flower?"

The question catches me off guard. "I... why?"

"Just curious."

"Peonies," I say finally. "I love peonies. They're soft and romantic, and they smell incredible, but they're also resilient. Stronger than they look."

"Peonies," he repeats. "Do you have any?"

"It's not really the season for them, but I have some preserved ones in the back. They're not fresh, but they're still beautiful."

"I'll take them."

"You don't even know how much they cost."

"I don't care."

Who buys flowers without asking about the price? Who looks at a woman like she's the answer to every question he's ever had?

Marc Steel, apparently.

I disappear into the back room, using the few minutes alone to try to pull myself together. This is crazy. I'm reading way too much into everything he says and does. Just because he's buying flowers doesn't mean he's interested in me. Just because he asked about my favorites doesn't mean—

But when I come back with the preserved peonies, pale pink and still achingly beautiful despite being dried, he takes them from my hands like they're made of spun glass.

"They're perfect," he says.

"They're fifteen dollars," I manage.

He pulls out his wallet and hands me a twenty without taking his eyes off the flowers. "Keep the change."

I ring up the sale with shaking hands.

"Thank you," he says, but he doesn't move toward the door. Instead, he stands there holding the flowers, looking at me with that intense stare that makes me feel like I'm the only person in the world.

"You're welcome," I whisper.

I should say something, ask him about his day, comment on the weather, or do any of the normal things people do during normal transactions. But there's nothing normal about this, nothing normal about the way he's looking at me like he wants to devour me whole.

"Christine," he says finally, my name rough on his tongue.

"Yes?"

He holds out the flowers—the peonies I told him were my favorites, the ones he bought without asking the price.

"These are for you."

My heart stops. Actually stops beating for a full second before starting up again at double speed.

"What?"

"The flowers. They're for you." He steps closer, close enough that I have to tilt my head back to meet his eyes. "You said they were your favorites."

"But... but you said they were for someone special. Someone you wanted to get to

know better."

"They are." His lips curve in something that might be a smile if it didn't look so forced. If it didn't look like he hasn't smiled in a long time.. "I want to know everything about you, Christine. What you like, what you dream about, what makes you laugh."

I stare at him, speechless. This can't be happening. Men like Marc don't pursue women like me. They don't buy us flowers or look at us like we're something precious. They don't—

"I can't accept these," I say weakly, even though every fiber of my being wants to snatch them out of his hands and hold them close.

"Why not?"

"Because... because I barely know you. Because you're my neighbor and this could get complicated. Because I don't understand what's happening here."

"What's happening here," he says, his voice dropping to a rumble that I feel in my bones, "is that I'm trying to court you."

Court me. Not date me or hook up with me or any of the casual terms men my age usually use. Court me, like I'm something worth winning.

"Marc..."

"Have dinner with me." It's not really a question, more like a gentle command. "Tonight. Let me take you somewhere nice."

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

"Why not?"

Because you look at me like you want to own me, I think. Because something about you makes me want to do stupid, reckless things. Because I'm already half in love with you and we've known each other for less than twenty-four hours.

"Because it's complicated," I say instead.

"It doesn't have to be." He reaches out and touches my cheek, just a whisper of contact that makes my panties soaked. "Say yes, Christine."

The smart thing would be to say no. To thank him for the flowers and maintain professional boundaries and not get involved with the mysterious man who watches me from his window and makes me feel things I've never felt before.

But when I look into those amber eyes, when I see the hope and heat and something that looks almost like desperation, the word that comes out of my mouth is:

"Yes."

His smile is blinding, "Seven o'clock?"

I nod, not trusting my voice.

"I'll pick you up." He starts toward the door, then pauses and looks back. "And Christine? Wear something you feel beautiful in."

Then he's gone, leaving me standing in my flower shop with a bouquet of peonies and the feeling that my life just changed forever.

I lift the flowers to my nose and breathe in their sweet scent, and for the first time in

my life, I feel like the heroine of my own romance novel.

It's terrifying.

It's wonderful.

And I can't wait for seven o'clock.

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I've been standing outside her building for ten minutes, and I'm starting to sweat.

Not from the cold. October in Cedar Falls has a bite to it that most people would find uncomfortable, but my bear runs hot enough that I barely notice the chill. No, I'm sweating because I can't remember the last time I was this nervous about anything.

Combat missions in hostile territory? No problem. Extracting wounded soldiers under fire? A normal Tuesday, but taking a beautiful woman to dinner?

Apparently, that's where I draw the line.

I adjust my tie for the fifth time, wondering if I'm overdressed.

The navy suit felt right when I bought it this afternoon.

The first new clothes I've purchased in years that weren't military-issued or purely functional.

But now, standing on a small-town street corner waiting for my mate, I feel like I'm playing dress-up in someone else's life.

The bear paces restlessly beneath my skin, agitated by the confined space of formal clothing and the anticipation thrumming through my bloodstream.

It doesn't understand why we're not upstairs already, why we haven't simply claimed what belongs to us.

The concept of human courtship is lost on it.

All it knows is that our mate is thirty feet away, separated by nothing more than a few walls and a staircase.

Soon, I tell it. *Patience.*

But patience has never been my strong suit, and it's definitely not the bear's.

I check my watch: 6:53. She said seven o'clock, and I've been here since six-thirty because the alternative was pacing around my empty house.

At least out here, I can smell her, that intoxicating blend of vanilla and roses that seems to cling to everything she touches.

It's stronger tonight, probably because she's getting ready, and the bear practically purrs with satisfaction.

The restaurant I chose is twenty minutes away, a place called Rosemary's Diner that the woman at the gas station recommended. I have no idea if it's the right choice. I have no idea if any of this is the right choice.

What I do know is that I've been thinking about Christine Parker every second since I left her shop this morning. The way her eyes went wide when I gave her those flowers, the soft gasp she made when I touched her cheek, the breathless "yes" that fell from her lips like a gift.

She felt it too. Whatever this thing is between us, she feels it.

The thought should be comforting, but instead it makes the stakes feel impossibly high. This isn't just dinner. It's the beginning of everything. The first step in a dance

that will either end with her in my arms or with me losing the only thing that's ever mattered.

No pressure.

A light comes on in what I think is her bedroom window, and my pulse kicks up another notch.

I can hear her moving around up there, the soft pad of bare feet on hardwood, the whisper of fabric against skin.

My enhanced hearing picks up the sound of a drawer opening, the rustle of what might be lingerie, and I have to close my eyes and count to ten to keep from shifting right here on the sidewalk.

Get it together, Steel.

This is why I never should have pursued her.

I'm not built for this kind of delicate maneuvering, this balance between human and animal, civilized and wild.

I'm a blunt instrument, better suited to direct action than subtle seduction.

But she deserves better than some caveman dragging her back to his lair, no matter what my bear thinks about the matter.

At 6:55, the front door opens.

And my world stops.

She's beautiful. Not just beautiful—fucking devastating.

She's wearing clothes I've never seen before, something modest but somehow incredibly sexy, showing just enough skin to make my mouth go dry.

Her honey-blond hair falls in loose waves around her shoulders, and she's done something to her eyes that makes them look bigger, bluer, impossible to look away from.

But it's the uncertainty in her expression that nearly brings me to my knees. She looks nervous, hopeful, like she's trying to be someone she's not sure she knows how to be.

"Hi," she says softly, her breath visible in the cold air.

"Hi yourself." My voice comes out rougher than I intended, betraying exactly how much the sight of her affects me. "You look..."

I trail off, because there aren't words for what she looks like. Beautiful doesn't cover it. Stunning falls short. She looks like everything I've ever wanted and never dared to hope for, wrapped up in black fabric and standing on my sidewalk like a miracle.

"Too much?" she asks, her hands fluttering nervously over her jeans.

"Perfect," I say immediately. "You look perfect."

The smile that spreads across her face is worth every moment of anxiety I've endured today. It's radiant, transforming her from beautiful to absolutely luminous, and I have to shove my hands in my pockets to keep from reaching for her.

"Thank you." She ducks her head, a blush painting her cheeks pink. "You clean up pretty well yourself."

I glance down at my suit, suddenly self-conscious. "I wasn't sure what would be appropriate. I don't do this very often."

"Do what?"

"Date." The admission slips out before I can stop it. "I don't date much."

Her eyebrows rise in surprise. "Really? I find that hard to believe."

"Why?"

"Because..." She gestures vaguely at me, her blush deepening. "Because you're you."

I want to ask what that means, want to understand how she sees me, but before I can form the question, she shivers in the cold air. The protective instinct that's been riding me hard all day flares to life, and I immediately shrug out of my jacket.

"Here." I drape it around her shoulders, my hands lingering longer than strictly necessary. The jacket is huge on her, swallowing her slight frame, but she pulls it closer with a grateful sigh.

"Thank you. I should have brought a coat, but I was so nervous about everything else that I forgot."

"Nervous?" I open the passenger door of my truck, offering her my hand to help her up. "About what?"

"About this. About tonight." She accepts my help, her fingers small and warm in mine. "About the fact that I have no idea what I'm doing."

I want to tell her that she doesn't need to do anything, that just being herself is more

than enough. That I'm the one who should be nervous, that I'm the one flying blind here. But the vulnerability in her voice stops me cold.

"Christine." I don't close the door, don't step back. Instead, I lean closer, close enough to see the flecks of silver in her blue eyes. "You don't have to be anything other than exactly who you are. That's all I want."

"What if who I am isn't enough?"

The idea that she could think she's not enough—this woman who makes flowers bloom and babies stop crying, who has more genuine warmth in her little finger than I have in my entire body—is so absurd it makes my chest ache.

"Then I'm even more fucked up than I thought," I say, and she lets out a surprised laugh.

"Language, Mr. Steel."

"Sorry." I grin, surprised by how easy it is with her. "But I meant it. You're..." I struggle for the right words, settle for honesty. "You're everything, Christine. Everything good in the world rolled up into one perfect package."

Her eyes go wide, and for a moment, I think I've said too much, revealed too much of the obsessive need that drives me. But then she smiles. Soft and wondering and so beautiful it makes my bear rumble with satisfaction.

"You're going to make me cry," she whispers.

"Please don't. I have no idea how to handle crying women."

"That's okay. I cry at commercials, so you'll get plenty of practice."

The casual way she talks about the future—about us having a future—makes something tight in my chest loosen. She's thinking beyond tonight, beyond this one dinner. She's imagining a world where we know each other well enough for her to cry at commercials while I watch helplessly from the sidelines.

I want that world more than I want my next breath.

"Ready?" I ask, finally stepping back so I can close her door.

"Ready," she says, but she's looking at me instead of the road ahead, and there's something in her expression that makes me think she's talking about more than just dinner.

I walk around to the driver's side, my heart hammering against my ribs like it's trying to escape. This is it. This is the beginning of everything—the first real step toward making her mine.

The bear settles contentedly as I start the engine, finally satisfied that we're taking action.

It doesn't care about restaurants or proper courtship or the thousand ways this could go wrong.

All it cares about is that our mate is here, within reach, wrapped in our scent and smiling like she wants to be nowhere else.

For once, the bear and I are in complete agreement.

"So," Christine says as I pull away from the curb, "tell me something about yourself that I wouldn't guess by looking at you."

I glance over at her, taking in the way my jacket has slipped off one shoulder, revealing the elegant line of her collarbone. "Like what?"

"I don't know. A secret talent? A weird hobby? Something that would surprise me."

A dozen possible answers run through my head, most of them involving the fact that I turn into a six-hundred-pound grizzly bear when the moon is right and my control slips. But obviously, that's not an option.

"I read poetry," I say finally.

Her eyebrows shoot up. "Really?"

"Really. Started during my second deployment. Someone left a book of Robert Frost in the barracks, and I picked it up one night when I couldn't sleep." I shrug, suddenly self-conscious. "Turns out, words can be weapons too. Just a different kind."

"What's your favorite poem?"

"The Road Not Taken," I answer without hesitation. "Though I think most people misunderstand it."

"How so?"

"They think it's about taking the unconventional path, about being brave enough to choose differently. But it's really about regret. About looking back and wondering what would have happened if you'd made different choices."

"Is that what you do? Look back and wonder?"

The question is soft, careful, but it cuts straight to the heart of everything I've been

running from. "Every day."

"Any regrets you'd undo if you could?"

I think about Jake, about the fight that tore us apart. About the choices that led me to the military, to Afghanistan, to the incidents that ended my career. About the years I've wasted hiding from what I am instead of learning to control it.

"Most of them," I admit. "But not tonight. Tonight feels like the first right choice I've made in a long time."

When I glance over at her, she's smiling.

"Good answer," she murmurs.

"What about you? Any deep, dark secrets I should know about?"

She laughs, and the sound fills the truck cab like music. "I'm an open book, remember? Small-town florist with simple dreams and absolutely no mystery whatsoever."

"I don't believe that for a second."

"Why not?"

"Because simple people don't make me feel like this."

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“Because simple people don't make me feel like this.”

I stare at his profile in the dashboard light... The strong line of his jaw, the way his hands grip the steering wheel like he's holding onto control by a thread and wonder what exactly I make him feel.

Because whatever it is, it's probably a pale shadow of what he makes me feel.

"How do I make you feel?" The question slips out before I can stop it, breathy and far too revealing.

His knuckles go white on the steering wheel. "Like I've been sleepwalking my whole life and you just woke me up."

Oh. Oh.

Heat pools low in my belly, spreading outward until I'm sure I'm glowing in the darkness. No one has ever said anything like that to me before. Hell, no one has ever looked at me the way Marc does, like I'm something precious and dangerous all at once.

"I don't understand what's happening here," I whisper, because honesty seems to be the theme of this evening and I might as well lean into it.

"Neither do I." He glances over at me, and even in the dim light, I can see the intensity burning in his amber eyes. "But I know I don't want it to stop."

"It scares me," I admit.

"Good. If it didn't scare you, it wouldn't be worth having."

There's something almost eerie about the way he says it, like fear is just another obstacle to overcome.

It should probably concern me, this edge of darkness I sense in him, but instead it makes me feel.

.. alive. Like I've been playing it safe my whole life and he's offering me something wild and real and completely outside my comfort zone.

He drives in silence for a few minutes, the tension thick enough to cut with a knife. I try to focus on the scenery rushing past—the familiar landmarks of Cedar Falls giving way to countryside I don't recognize—but my attention keeps drifting back to the man beside me.

He mentioned deployments. Military, then, which explains the scars on his hands, the way he moves like he's always assessing for threats.

It doesn't explain what brought him to our quiet little town.

"So," I say, desperate to break the silence before I do something embarrassing like reach over and touch him, "you were deployed. Army?"

"Marines." His jaw tightens almost imperceptibly. "Two tours in Afghanistan."

"That must have been..." I struggle for the right word. Difficult seems inadequate. Terrifying, maybe, but that feels presumptuous. "Hard."

"It was what it was." The dismissal is casual, but I can hear the walls going up. "I did my job and came home."

There's more to it than that. There's always more to it when someone deflects that quickly, but I can tell he doesn't want to talk about it. Which is fair. We barely know each other, and whatever happened over there is probably not first-date conversation material.

Still, I'm curious. More than curious.

"Is that how you ended up in Cedar Falls? Looking for somewhere quiet after...?"

"Something like that." He signals for a turn onto a road I don't recognize. "What about you? Ever think about leaving? Seeing what's out there beyond small-town life?"

The subject change is so smooth I almost miss it, but I let him redirect because the alternative is pushing a man I barely know about what are obviously painful memories.

And because, honestly, I'm not sure I'm ready for his full story yet.

There's something about Marc Steel that feels too big, too intense for the safe little world I've built for myself.

"I used to," I say instead. "When I was younger, I had all these grand plans.

College in the city, a career in event planning, maybe travel the world coordinating destination weddings.

" I laugh, but it sounds wistful even to my own ears.

"But then Mrs. Chelsea offered me the shop, and Cedar Falls just..

. it's home, you know? Sometimes the life you're supposed to have isn't the one you end up wanting. "

"Do you regret it? Staying?"

"Most days, no. I love what I do, love being part of people's happiest moments. But sometimes..." I trail off, suddenly embarrassed by how provincial I must sound to someone who's seen the world, even if it was through the lens of military service.

"Sometimes what?"

"Sometimes I wonder what it would be like to be the bride instead of just the one arranging the flowers."

I duck my head, hiding behind the curtain of my hair, mortified that I just admitted to a virtual stranger that I'm desperate for my own love story.

"You want to get married."

"Someday," I say, then decide if we're being honest, I might as well be completely honest. "I want the whole thing. The wedding, the husband, the babies. The house with the white picket fence and Sunday morning pancakes. I know it's old-fashioned and probably naive, but—"

"It's not naive." His voice is rough, almost aggressive. "It's what you deserve."

The certainty in his tone makes me look up, and what I see in his expression takes my breath away. He's looking at me like I'm something he wants to protect and possess in equal measure, like the very idea of me having those things with someone else is

physically painful to him.

Which is crazy. Right? We just met yesterday.

Before I can analyze it further, he's pulling into a parking lot in front of a building I don't recognize. It's charming in that rustic-chic way that's popular now—exposed brick and weathered wood with string lights creating a warm, inviting glow.

"Rosemary's," Marc says, reading the sign above the door. "It just opened a couple weeks ago. Thought you might like to try somewhere new."

"I've been meaning to check it out," I say, grateful for the distraction from our conversation. "I heard they have an amazing chef."

He comes around to open my door before I can do it myself, offering his hand to help me down from the truck.

"Thank you," I murmur, very aware that he hasn't let go of my hand.

"My pleasure."

We walk to the restaurant entrance together, his hand warm and steady on my back. It's a possessive gesture, claiming, and I should probably object to being steered around like I belong to him.

Instead, I find myself leaning into his touch.

The hostess greets us with a bright smile that falters slightly when she gets a good look at Marc.

I can't blame her. He's the kind of man who commands attention without trying, all

controlled power and barely leashed intensity.

But there's something almost frightening about the way he surveys the restaurant, like he's cataloging exits and potential threats instead of admiring the décor.

"Table for two," he says, his voice polite but with an underlying edge that makes the hostess nod quickly and grab menus.

She leads us to a corner table that gives Marc a clear view of the entire restaurant, and I realize he chose it deliberately. Old habits from his military days, probably, but it strikes me as both protective and slightly paranoid.

"This is lovely," I say once we're seated, trying to ease some of the tension I can feel radiating from him, "But you seem nervous," I observe softly.

His amber eyes snap to mine, and for a moment, I see something wild flash in their depths. "Do I?"

"A little. Like you're expecting trouble."

"I'm not used to..." He gestures vaguely between us. "This. Being around people. Especially people who matter."

People who matter...

"Well, you're doing fine so far," I assure him. "Though you might want to stop glaring at that poor waiter. He looks terrified."

Marc glances over at the young man hovering uncertainly by the kitchen door and has the grace to look sheepish. "Sorry. Occupational hazard."

"From the Marines?"

"Among other things." He picks up his menu, effectively ending that line of conversation. "What looks good to you?"

I let him change the subject again, but I file away this glimpse of vulnerability. Underneath all that controlled intensity, Marc Steel is just as nervous about this as I am. Maybe more so.

The thought is oddly comforting.

"Everything sounds amazing," I say, scanning the menu. "I'm thinking the salmon with lemon butter sauce. What about you?"

"Steak. Rare."

Of course. I can't imagine him eating anything that isn't red meat, preferably bloody. There's something almost primal about the way he says it, like he's thinking about hunting and killing rather than ordering from a menu.

The waiter finally approaches our table, still looking nervous but professional. Marc orders for both of us, along with a bottle of wine that probably costs more than I make in a week. When the waiter leaves, Marc turns his full attention back to me.

"Tell me about the shop," he says. "How did you get into flowers?"

"It's not very exciting," I warn him.

"I'll be the judge of that."

So I tell him about Mrs. Chelsea, about learning to arrange flowers in her kitchen

when I was twelve years old.

About the way different blooms have different personalities, how color and scent can tell stories and capture emotions.

About the joy of creating something beautiful for people's most important moments.

He listens with an intensity that's almost overwhelming, asking questions that show he's not just being polite. He genuinely wants to know about my work, my passion, the things that make me who I am.

"You light up when you talk about it," he observes when I pause to sip my wine.

"Do I?"

"Like you're glowing from the inside out. It's..." He shakes his head, looking almost pained. "It's beautiful."

When was the last time someone really saw me? Really listened to what mattered to me?

"What about you?" I ask. "What makes you light up?"

His expression shuts down so quickly it's like watching blinds slam closed. "Nothing comes to mind."

"Nothing? There has to be something. A hobby, a dream, something you're passionate about."

"I'm passionate about survival," he says flatly. "About not fucking up other people's lives. Beyond that..." He shrugs.

The words are like a slap, revealing depths of pain I can't even begin to fathom. What happened to this man? What did he see, what did he do, that left him so convinced he's only capable of destruction?

"Marc," I say softly, reaching across the table to cover his hand with mine.

The contact galvanizes him. His hand flips palm-up to capture mine, his thumb stroking across my knuckles.

"You're going to try to fix me, aren't you?" he asks, and there's something almost resigned in his voice.

"Do you need fixing?"

"More than you could possibly imagine."

"Good thing I like a challenge."

His laugh is short and bitter. "You have no idea what you're getting into."

"Maybe not," I admit. "But I'd like to find out."

He stares at me for a long moment, his thumb still stroking my hand, and I can see a war being fought behind his amber eyes. Whatever he's battling, part of him wants to let me in. I can see it in the way he holds my hand like a lifeline, in the way his expression softens when he looks at me.

"Why?" he asks finally.

"Why what?"

"Why would you want to find out? You could have anyone, Christine. Someone uncomplicated. Someone who could give you that white picket fence without bringing a world of baggage along with it."

Because you make me feel alive, I think. Because you look at me like I'm something precious. Because every instinct I have is screaming that you're important, that this is important, in ways I can't even begin to understand.

But what I say is: "Because baggage doesn't scare me as much as being bored for the rest of my life."

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“Because baggage doesn't scare me as much as being bored for the rest of my life.”

She has no idea what she's saying, no concept of the kind of darkness she's inviting into her sunshine-filled world. But the way she's looking at me, like I'm something worth fighting for instead of something to run from, makes me want to believe her.

"You say that now," I murmur, my thumb still stroking across her knuckles because I can't seem to stop touching her. "But you don't know what my baggage looks like."

"Show me."

She's serious. This woman who arranges flowers and makes babies stop crying, who dreams of white picket fences and Sunday morning pancakes, is sitting across from me asking to see the worst parts of me.

And Christ help me, I want to show her. I want to lay every broken piece of myself at her feet and see if she still thinks I'm worth salvaging.

"You sure about that?" I ask. "Because once you see it, you can't unsee it."

"I'm sure."

The waiter appears with our food, and I must force myself to release her hand so he can set down our plates.

The interruption gives me a moment to collect myself, to remember where we are and what's appropriate for a first date.

But the moment he's gone, Christine leans forward, those blue eyes fixed on my face with an intensity that rivals my own.

"Tell me about Afghanistan," she says quietly.

"That's not first-date conversation."

"What is, then? The weather? Our favorite movies?" She picks up her fork but doesn't actually eat anything, just watches me with that steady gaze that makes me feel stripped bare. "I don't want to talk about the weather, Marc. I want to know what put those shadows in your eyes."

Shadows. Is that what she sees when she looks at me? Not the monster I've been telling myself I am, but just a man with shadows?

"It's not a pretty story," I warn her, cutting into my steak with more force than necessary. The meat is perfectly rare, bloody in the center, and my bear approves even as my human side feels vaguely barbaric eating it in front of her.

"I'm not looking for pretty. I'm looking for real."

Real. When's the last time anyone wanted real from me? The military certainly didn't. They wanted efficient, brutal, unquestioning. My commanding officers wanted results, not truth. My teammates wanted someone who could watch their backs, not someone who could share his feelings.

But Christine is asking for something different. Something I'm not sure I know how to give.

"Two tours," I say finally, taking a bite of steak to buy myself time. "First one was standard infantry stuff. Patrol, security, keeping the peace. Nothing I couldn't

handle."

"And the second?"

"Special operations. More dangerous missions, higher stakes." I pause, remembering the weight of gear, the taste of dust and fear, the way everything could go to hell in a heartbeat. "We lost men. Good men. And sometimes..."

I trail off, because how do I explain that sometimes I lost control? That sometimes the bear took over and I did things that kept me awake at night, even when they were necessary for survival?

"Sometimes what?" she prompts gently.

"Sometimes I became something I didn't recognize." The confession tastes like ash in my mouth. "Something that scared the men who were supposed to trust me to have their backs."

She's quiet for a long moment, and I brace myself for the inevitable questions. For her to ask what I did, what I became, what made me so dangerous that my own team feared me.

Instead, she says, "Is that why you left the military?"

"Among other reasons." I take another bite of steak, chewing slowly to avoid having to elaborate. "I wasn't fit for service anymore."

"Says who?"

The question catches me off guard. "What?"

"Says who? Who decided you weren't fit for service? You, or someone else?"

"The Corps." The words come out harsher than I intend. "My commanding officers. They made it clear that my... issues... were becoming a liability."

"And you believed them?"

"I had to. The evidence was pretty damning."

She sets down her fork and leans back in her chair, studying me with an expression I can't read. "You know what I think?"

"What?"

"I think you're a man who's been carrying other people's expectations for so long that you've forgotten who you actually are underneath them all."

Her words hit like a sniper's bullet, precise and devastating. I stare at her across the table, this woman who's known me for barely two days but somehow sees straight through every wall I've built around myself.

"You don't know me well enough to make that judgment," I say, but even as I say it, I know she's right.

"Don't I? You've been watching me, Marc."

Since the moment you moved in, you've been watching me like I'm something precious that needs protecting.

You brought me flowers this morning, took me to a nice restaurant, ordered wine that probably costs more than most people spend on groceries.

You opened doors for me, helped me into the truck, made sure I had your jacket when I was cold.

" She pauses, and when she continues, her voice is soft but unwavering.

"Those aren't the actions of a man who's only capable of destruction. "

"You don't understand—"

"Then help me understand." She reaches across the table again, her fingers finding mine. "Tell me what happened over there. Tell me what made you believe you're broken."

The bear stirs restlessly, wanting to claim her, to make her understand that she belongs to us now and we don't have to justify ourselves to anyone. But the human side of me—the part that still remembers what it feels like to be ashamed—resists.

"There were incidents," I say finally. "Times when I... lost control. When I did things that weren't entirely human."

"Things like what?"

I can't tell her about the shifting, about the way my bear would surge to the surface during fights, lending me strength and speed that no human should possess.

Can't explain how I tore through enemy combatants with my bare hands, how I tracked wounded soldiers through the desert using senses that belonged to a different species entirely.

"I was more violent than I should have been," I say instead, which is true enough. "More brutal. I scared people who were supposed to trust me."

"Were you protecting them?"

"What?"

"When you lost control, were you protecting your team? Your fellow soldiers?"

The question stops me cold. Because yes, that's exactly what I was doing. Every time the bear surfaced, every time I let the animal take over, it was because someone I cared about was in danger. It was because human strength wasn't enough to keep them safe.

"Yes," I admit.

"Then you weren't out of control. You were doing what you had to do to keep the people you loved alive."

The simple way she reframes it—not as a loss of control but as a choice, a sacrifice—makes something tight in my chest loosen. "The results were the same."

"Were they? How many of your team made it home?"

"Most of them." The words come out rough, heavy with memory. "Every mission, every fight, every time we went out, I tried my best to bring them all home."

"Then you did your job." Her grip on my hand tightens. "You did what you had to do to protect the people who mattered. That's not something to be ashamed of, Marc. That's something to be proud of."

I stare at her, this woman who's rewriting my entire understanding of myself with a few simple words. She makes it sound so straightforward, so noble, when I've spent years convincing myself I was a monster.

"You really believe that?" I ask.

"I believe that a man who's truly dangerous doesn't worry about whether he's dangerous.

He doesn't seek out isolation to protect others.

He doesn't move to a quiet town and try to build a peaceful life.

" She smiles, and it's like sunrise. "I believe that you're exactly the kind of man who deserves white picket fences and Sunday morning pancakes. "

"Christine..." I start, but she's not finished.

"I also believe that you're not going to let me pay for my own dinner, are you?"

The subject change is so abrupt that it takes me a moment to process it. When I do, I can't help but laugh—actually laugh, maybe for the first time in years.

"Absolutely not."

"I figured. You have that protective, old-fashioned streak a mile wide." She grins at me, and I realize she's been deliberately lightening the mood, giving me space to recover from the emotional intensity of the conversation. "It's actually kind of sweet."

"Sweet?" I raise an eyebrow. "That's not a word most people would use to describe me."

"Most people don't know you like I do."

"You've known me for two days."

"Sometimes that's all it takes." She takes a bite of her salmon, chewing it. "Besides, I'm a good judge of character. It's why I'm so good at my job. I can tell what people need, what will make them happy."

"And what do you think I need?"

The question slips out before I can stop it, more vulnerable than I intended. But I genuinely want to know. This woman who sees past my walls, who looks at me like I'm something worth saving—what does she think I need?

"Someone who believes in you," she says without hesitation. "Someone who sees past the scars to the man underneath. Someone who isn't afraid of a little darkness because they know there's light there too."

"And you think you're that someone?"

"I think I'd like to try."

She's not promising forever, not making grand declarations of love. She's just saying she wants to try, wants to see what we could build together despite the odds stacked against us.

It's more than I dared hope for. More than I deserve.

But maybe that's the point. Maybe deserving has nothing to do with it. Maybe sometimes the universe just gives you exactly what you need, whether you're ready for it or not.

"Okay," I say, and the word feels like a leap off a cliff.

"Okay?"

"Okay, let's try."

"Good. Because I was going to keep trying whether you agreed or not."

"Is that so?"

"I told you. I like a challenge." She winks at me, and the playful gesture is so at odds with the serious conversation we just had that it makes me dizzy. "Besides, someone has to show you how to have fun again."

"I have fun."

"Reading poetry and brooding in your house doesn't count."

"I don't brood."

"You absolutely brood. You have 'tortured hero' written all over your face."

"Tortured hero?" I can't help but smile at that. "You read too many romance novels."

"Guilty as charged. And you, Marc Steel, are straight out of chapter one of every single one of them."

"Great. No pressure there."

"Oh, there's definitely pressure," she says with a grin that's pure mischief. "Romance novel heroes have very high standards to maintain. You'll need to be brooding but tender, dangerous but protective, mysterious but emotionally available when it counts."

"Anything else?"

"Good in bed. That's non-negotiable."

The bear roars. My bulge throbs, and she's blushing furiously, like she can't believe she just said that, but she doesn't take it back. Instead, she holds my gaze with a courage that makes my bear rumble with approval.

"I'll keep that in mind," I manage.

"Good," she says, then takes a sip of wine like she didn't just turn my world upside down with a single sentence.

This woman is going to be the death of me.

And I can't wait to find out how.

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Did I really just say that?

Heat floods my face so fast I'm surprised the wine doesn't start boiling in my glass. I can feel Marc's eyes burning into me from across the table, and I'm torn between the urge to hide under the tablecloth and the shocking realization that I don't actually regret the words.

Good in bed. That's non-negotiable.

What is wrong with me? I don't talk about sex.

Ever. Especially not with men who look like they could teach graduate-level courses on the subject.

I'm the girl who blushes when the pharmacist asks if I need anything else after buying tampons.

I'm the girl who has to leave the room during the steamy scenes in movies because I get too embarrassed to watch.

And yet here I am, on a first date with the most devastatingly attractive man I've ever met, casually discussing bedroom requirements like I'm some kind of sex goddess instead of a twenty-six-year-old virgin who's never even been properly kissed.

Oh God. I'm a twenty-six-year-old virgin who just told a former Marine that sexual performance is non-negotiable.

I take another sip of wine, hoping it will calm my racing heart, but it only makes the heat in my cheeks burn hotter. Marc is still staring at me with those amber eyes, and there's something in his fierce expression that makes my entire body tingle with awareness.

"I'll keep that in mind," he said, his voice all gravel and promise, and I swear I can feel the words in places that have no business responding to the sound of a man's voice.

This is insane. I've known him for two days, and already I'm thinking about things I've never seriously considered with anyone else. The way his hands would feel on my skin. The weight of his body covering mine. The sounds he might make when—

Stop. Just stop.

But my traitorous brain doesn't want to stop.

It wants to catalog every detail of his appearance, from the way his shirt stretches across his broad shoulders to the way he holds his fork, like he's consciously moderating his strength.

Everything about him screams power, barely leashed intensity, and some primitive part of me that I didn't even know existed wants to be the one to unleash it.

"You're thinking very loudly over there," Marc observes, his voice cutting through my internal spiral.

"Sorry." I force myself to take a bite of salmon, though I can barely taste it through my embarrassment. "I can't believe I said that."

"Which part?"

"The... the bedroom part." I can't even bring myself to repeat the words. "I don't usually... I mean, I'm not normally..."

"Forward?" he suggests, and there's something almost amused in his tone.

"That's one word for it." I risk a glance at his face and immediately regret it, because he's looking at me like I'm something he wants to devour slowly. "I'm usually very shy around men. Especially men like you."

"Men like me?"

"You know." I gesture vaguely at his face, his body, his entire overwhelming presence. "Attractive. Confident. Capable of reducing grown women to babbling idiots with a single look."

"Is that what I'm doing? Reducing you to a babbling idiot?"

"Among other things."

"What other things?"

The question is soft, almost casual, but there's an edge to it that makes my pulse race. He's not just making conversation. He genuinely wants to know what he's doing to me.

"I..." I start, then stop, because how do I explain that he makes me feel like a completely different person? That around him, I feel bold and reckless and hungry for things I can't even name?

"Tell me." he says, and it's not quite a command but it's close enough to make my breath catch.

"You make me feel..." I struggle for the right words, settling on honesty because it's gotten me this far. "Brave. Like I could be someone different than who I've always been."

"Who have you always been?"

"Safe. Predictable. The good girl who never takes risks or says inappropriate things on first dates." I laugh, but it sounds shaky even to my own ears. "Apparently, that's changing."

"Good."

"Good?"

"Safe and predictable are overrated." He leans forward, "I like this version of you better. The one who says what she's thinking, who isn't afraid to tell me what she wants."

"What makes you think I know what I want?"

"Because you're here. Because you said yes when I asked you to dinner, even though every instinct probably told you to run." His eyes never leave my face. "Because you're looking at me right now like you want to find out exactly how good I am in bed."

He's right, that's exactly how I'm looking at him, with a hunger I didn't even know I was capable of feeling. But hearing him say it out loud makes it real in a way that's both thrilling and terrifying.

"I don't know what's gotten into me," I whisper.

"Maybe you're just finally letting yourself be who you really are."

"And who am I, really?"

"A woman who knows what she wants and isn't afraid to go after it." He reaches across the table, his fingers finding mine again. "A woman who's tired of playing it safe."

Is that who I am? Is that who I've always been underneath the careful politeness and small-town expectations? The possibility is intoxicating, like being offered a glimpse of a different life entirely.

"What if I don't know how to be that person?" I ask.

"Then you learn." His thumb strokes across my knuckles. "But I don't think that's going to be a problem for you."

"Why not?"

"Because you've already started."

He's right. Sitting here, having this conversation, feeling this way...

It's all completely outside my comfort zone.

The old Christine would have deflected, changed the subject, hidden behind safe topics and well-thought boundaries.

But this version of me, the one Marc seems to see so clearly, wants to lean into the discomfort and see where it leads.

"This is crazy," I say, but I don't pull my hand away from his.

"The best things usually are."

"Is that your philosophy? Embrace the crazy?"

"It is now." He smiles, and there's something almost boyish about it. "You're having a pretty significant effect on my worldview."

"Good effect or bad effect?"

"Jury's still out."

I laugh, surprised by how easy it is despite the tension crackling between us. "Thanks for the ringing endorsement."

"Give me time. I'm still processing the fact that you exist."

The words are casual, but there's something intense in the way he says them, like my existence is somehow miraculous. It's the kind of thing that should sound like a line, but coming from Marc, it feels like the simple truth.

"I exist," I confirm, trying to lighten the mood before the intensity burns us both alive. "Disappointing as that might be."

"Disappointing?" His grip on my hand tightens. "Christine, you're the opposite of disappointing. You're..."

He trails off, shaking his head like he can't find adequate words.

"I'm what?"

"Everything I didn't know I was looking for."

The confession knocks the air from my lungs and makes my heart race so fast I'm worried it might explode. How is it possible that this man, this beautiful, damaged, incredible man, is sitting across from me saying things that sound like they're straight out of my most secret fantasies?

"Marc..." I start, but I don't know how to finish the sentence.

How do I respond to something like that? How do I tell him that he's everything I've dreamed of but never dared to hope for?

"Too much?" he asks, reading my expression.

"Maybe. But in the best possible way."

"Good. Because I'm just getting started."

The promise in his voice makes heat pool low in my belly, and I have to squeeze my thighs together to ease the sudden ache between them. This is what desire feels like, I realize with startling clarity. This desperate, consuming need that makes everything else fade into the background.

I've read about it, dreamed about it, wondered if I was broken because I'd never felt it before. But now, looking into Marc's amber eyes and feeling like I might spontaneously combust from the desire coursing through my veins, I understand that I wasn't broken.

I was just waiting for the right person to wake me up.

"We should probably eat," I say, gesturing to our mostly untouched plates, "before

they think we're just here to stare at each other."

"Aren't we?"

The question makes me laugh, breaking some of the tension that's been building between us. "Maybe a little."

"I'm not complaining."

"Neither am I."

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The bear is pacing restlessly beneath my skin, agitated by the scent of her arousal and the knowledge that she wants me as much as I want her.

But this is a public place, and Christine deserves better than having me lose control in the middle of a restaurant.

We eat in silence for a few minutes, the tension between us simmering just below the surface. Every time she brings her fork to her lips, every time she takes a sip of wine, I find myself cataloguing the details like they're precious memories I need to preserve.

The way her tongue darts out to catch a drop of butter sauce. The soft sound of satisfaction she makes when she tastes something particularly good. The unconscious way she leans toward me when she laughs, like she's drawn to my warmth.

"Tell me about your family," I say finally, desperate for something to focus on besides the way she's making me feel.

Her expression shifts, becoming more guarded. "There's not much to tell. My parents live about three hours away in the city. Dad's an accountant, Mom teaches high school English."

"You don't sound particularly enthusiastic about them."

She sighs, pushing her salmon around her plate. "It's complicated. They're good people, but they have very specific ideas about what constitutes a successful life. And running a flower shop in a small town doesn't exactly fit their vision."

"What would fit their vision?"

"Corporate job, corner office, husband with a law degree, 2.

5 children, and a house in the suburbs." She laughs, but there's no humor in it.

"They think I'm wasting my potential 'playing with flowers,' as my mother puts it.

But in the same breath, they ask when I'm going to settle down and give them grandchildren. "

The pain in her voice makes my chest tight. "You can't win."

"Exactly. I'm either not ambitious enough or too focused on my career, depending on which conversation we're having." She takes a sip of wine, and I can see her trying to shake off the melancholy. "What about you? Any family?"

My hand tightens around my fork, and I have to consciously relax my grip before I bend the metal.

"A brother," I say finally. "Jake. He's three years younger than me."

"Close?"

"We were." The words taste bitter. "Our parents died when I was fourteen, Jake was eleven. Car accident. We went into the system together, but..." I trail off, remembering the foster homes that couldn't handle two traumatized boys who were already showing signs of being different.

"That must have been terrible."

"We survived. Looked out for each other. Jake was always the smart one, the one who could charm his way out of trouble. I was the one who made sure nobody messed with him." I cut into my steak, memories flooding back. "We were all we had."

"What happened?"

The question I've been dreading. How do I explain that my brother tried to save me from myself? That he saw what I was becoming in the military and tried to intervene? That I was too proud and too scared to listen?

"He thought I was self-destructing," I confess. "After my second deployment, when I came home... I wasn't the same person. Jake could see it. He kept pushing me to talk to someone, to get help, to deal with what I'd been through over there."

"And you didn't want to?"

"I couldn't." The admission comes out rougher than I intended. "I couldn't explain what was happening to me without revealing things that would have put both of us in danger. So I pushed him away instead."

Christine's eyes are soft with understanding. "How long has it been since you talked to him?"

"A few months. We had a fight in a parking lot outside some dive bar. He was trying to stage an intervention, and I... I said things I can't take back. Told him I didn't need him, that I was better off alone." I set down my fork, my appetite gone. "Haven't heard from him since."

"Do you regret it?"

"Every fucking day."

"Language," she says softly, but there's no real rebuke in it.

"Sorry. It's just... Jake was the only family I had left. The only person who knew where I came from, who understood what we'd been through. And I threw it all away because I was too stubborn to admit I needed help."

"Maybe it's not too late."

I shake my head. "You don't understand. The things I said, the way I left... Some bridges burn too completely to rebuild."

"I don't believe that." Her voice is fierce, determined. "Family is family. If he loves you, and it sounds like he does, then he's probably hoping you'll reach out just as much as you're hoping he will."

"What if I'm wrong? What if he's moved on, decided he's better off without his fucked-up older brother?"

"Then you'll know. But at least you won't spend the rest of your life wondering what if."

She's right, of course. I've been carrying this guilt and regret for months, letting it eat at me because I was too afraid to find out if Jake would forgive me.

"When did you get so wise?" I ask.

"I'm not wise. I just know what it's like to have complicated family relationships."

"She reaches across the table, her fingers finding mine."

"The difference is, my parents are still in my life.

They drive me crazy, but they're there. You lost your parents when you were so young, and then you lost your brother too.

That's... that's a lot of loss for one person to carry. "

Her understanding, her compassion, it's like a balm on wounds I didn't even realize were still bleeding. When's the last time someone looked at me with anything other than fear or suspicion? When's the last time someone saw past the walls I've built to the man underneath?

"You make it sound like I'm some tragic hero," I say, trying to lighten the mood before the emotion overwhelms me.

"Aren't you? Brooding, mysterious, carrying the weight of the world on your shoulders?" She smiles, but her eyes are serious. "All you need is a damsel in distress to rescue."

"I'm not looking for a damsel in distress."

"No? What are you looking for?"

What am I looking for? I came to Cedar Falls seeking solitude, isolation, a place to hide from what I am. But looking at Christine, feeling the way she makes me want to be better than I am, I realize I wasn't looking for anything at all.

I was waiting for her.

"I wasn't looking for anything," I say honestly. "I was just trying to survive. But now..."

"Now?"

"Now I'm looking at you, and I can't remember why I thought surviving was enough."

I can hear her heart rate spike. The scent of her arousal grows stronger, sweet and intoxicating, and the bear claws at my control.

"Marc..."

"What do you dream about, Christine? Besides the white picket fence and babies?"

The change of subject catches her off guard, but she recovers quickly. "I dream about traveling. Seeing places I've only read about in books. Maybe opening a second shop somewhere exotic, doing destination weddings on beaches or in castles."

"Why don't you?"

"Because dreams are safer than reality. Dreams don't require you to leave everything familiar behind, to risk failure, to possibly end up alone in a strange place with nothing to show for it."

"They also don't give you the chance to discover you're braver than you thought. That you're capable of more than you imagined."

She looks at me with surprise. "You sound like you speak from experience."

"I do. I spent years afraid of what I might become, so afraid that I never tried to become anything at all. Just drifted from one assignment to the next, one deployment to the next, never really living."

"And now?"

"Now I'm sitting across from a woman who makes me want to be worthy of her dreams."

The words are out before I can stop them, too honest, too revealing. But Christine doesn't look scared or overwhelmed. She looks... hopeful.

"What if I told you that you already are?"

The bear roars its approval, and I have to grip the edge of the table to keep from reaching for her. She believes in me. This incredible woman who barely knows me, who has no idea what I really am, believes I'm worthy of her.

"Then I'd say you don't know me very well yet."

"Maybe not. But I know enough." She leans forward, her voice dropping to a whisper.

"I know you're kind to strangers, that you read poetry, that you've lost people you love and it's made you careful with your heart.

I know you look at me like I'm something precious, and I know you make me feel things I've never felt before. "

"What kind of things?"

"Brave things. Reckless things. Things that would probably scandalize the old ladies at church."

The bear is done with patience. Done with careful conversation and emotional revelations. It wants what belongs to us, and it wants it now.

"Christine," I say, my voice rougher than usual.

"Yes?"

"Come home with me."

I'm asking for more than just her company. I'm asking her to take a leap of faith, to trust me with her body and her heart even though we've barely scratched the surface of knowing each other.

I expect her to hesitate, to make excuses, to suggest we take things slower. Any rational woman would.

Instead, she nods.

"Yes," she says, so low I almost miss it.

"Yes?"

"Yes. I want to come home with you."

The bear rumbles its satisfaction, and I have to close my eyes for a moment to keep from shifting right here in the restaurant. When I open them, Christine is watching me with a mixture of desire and nervousness.

"Are you sure?" I ask, because I need to know she's choosing this, choosing me, with full knowledge of what she's agreeing to.

"I'm sure." Her cheeks are flushed, but her voice is steady. "I've never been surer of anything in my life."

I signal for the check, my hands not entirely steady. The waiter appears with record speed, and I throw down enough cash to cover the bill and a generous tip without bothering to count it.

"Ready?" I ask, standing and offering her my hand.

She takes it without hesitation, and the bear settles contentedly as we walk out of the restaurant together, finally satisfied that we're taking action.

The drive back to Cedar Falls is torture.

Christine sits in the passenger seat, my jacket draped around her shoulders, and every breath she takes fills the cab with her scent.

She's nervous. I can smell it under the arousal, but she's not changing her mind.

If anything, the tension between us is building with every mile.

I keep my hands on the steering wheel, but it takes every ounce of self-control I possess. The bear wants to touch her, to claim her, to make sure she understands exactly what she's agreeing to. But I force myself to wait. She deserves better than being pawed at in a truck cab.

"Tell me something," she says suddenly, breaking the charged silence.

"What?"

"Tell me something else no one else knows about you."

The request catches me off guard. "Like what?"

"I don't know. A secret. Something that matters to you but you've never shared with anyone."

I think about it for a moment, sorting through the layers of secrets I carry. The biggest one—what I am—is obviously off limits. But there are others, smaller truths that I've never voiced.

"I'm afraid," I say finally.

"Of what?"

"Of being too much for you. Of wanting you so badly that I scare you away." I glance over at her, taking in the way she's pressed against the passenger door like she's afraid of getting too close. "Of hurting you."

"You won't hurt me."

"You don't know that. You don't know what I'm capable of when I lose control."

"Then don't lose control."

If only it were that simple. But the bear doesn't understand human concepts like restraint or patience. It only knows what it wants, and what it wants is her.

"Easier said than done," I murmur.

"Then I'll help you keep it together."

She's not running. She's not afraid. She's sitting in my truck, agreeing to come home with me, and she's promising to help me be the man she deserves.

Halfway home, I can't stand it anymore. I reach over and place my hand on her thigh, just above her knee, testing her reaction. She doesn't pull away. Instead, she shifts slightly, and her legs part just enough to make my vision blur.

"Christine," I growl, my hand moving higher on her thigh.

"Yes?"

Her voice is breathless, full of anticipation, and the bear claws at my control.

"If you don't want this, if you're having second thoughts, tell me now. Because once we get to my place, I'm not going to be able to stop myself."

"I don't want you to stop."

My hand tightens on her thigh, and I can feel the heat of her skin through the denim.

"You sure about that?" I ask, my thumb stroking in small circles that make her breath hitch.

"I'm sure."

The bear is done with patience. Done with waiting. It wants what belongs to us, and it wants it now.

"Pull your jeans down," I command.

"What?" She turns to stare at me, eyes wide with shock.

"You heard me. Pull them down. I want to touch you."

"Marc, we're in the car. We're driving—"

"I can drive and touch you at the same time." My hand slides higher, brushing her inner thighs through the denim. "Pull them down, Christine. Let me feel how wet you are for me."

"I can't... we can't..." she says, as her hips arch toward my touch.

"We can." I slow the truck, pulling into the parking lot of a closed gas station to give us more privacy. "It's dark. No one can see. Just you and me and what we both want."

I put the truck in park but leave it running, the headlights illuminating the empty lot. Then I turn to face her, my hand still resting on her thigh.

"Trust me," I say.

She stares at me for a few seconds, and I can practically see the war being fought behind her blue eyes. The good girl who's never taken risks battling the woman who's tired of playing it safe.

The woman wins.

With shaking hands, she reaches for the button of her jeans.

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I can't believe I'm doing this.

I, Christine Parker, the girl who blushes when men look at her, who has spent twenty-six years being safe and predictable, am about to pull down my pants in a public parking lot for a man I've known for less than three days.

It's insane. Reckless. Completely unlike me.

And yet my fingers are already working the button free, already sliding down the zipper with a metallic hiss that sounds impossibly loud in the quiet truck cab.

"That's it," Marc encourages, his voice a low rumble that I feel in my bones. "Show me."

His amber eyes are fixed on my hands, watching every movement. I've never been looked at like this before, like my body is a gift he can't wait to unwrap.

I wiggle my hips, pushing the denim down my thighs.

The cool air hits my skin, making goosebumps rise in its wake.

I'm suddenly, painfully aware of my black cotton panties—practical, comfortable, definitely not meant for seduction.

If I'd known this morning that I'd be exposing myself to the most gorgeous man I've ever seen, I would have chosen something lacy and sophisticated.

But Marc doesn't seem disappointed. If anything, the sight of my ordinary underwear makes him growl low in his throat, a sound of pure approval that makes my pulse spike.

"Beautiful," he murmurs, and his voice makes my cheeks burn.

There's something I should tell him. Something important. But the words stick in my throat, lodged behind embarrassment and the fear that he'll stop if he knows the truth.

Twenty-six years old and completely, utterly inexperienced in anything beyond kissing. And even that's been limited to a handful of awkward encounters that never led anywhere. Never felt like this—this desperate, consuming need that makes me willing to expose myself in a gas station parking lot.

His large hand slides up my thigh. When he reaches the edge of my panties, he pauses, his eyes finding mine in the dim light.

"Still okay?" he asks.

"Yes," I whisper, though my heart is racing so fast I'm sure he can hear it. "Please."

I don't have to ask twice. His fingers slip beneath the cotton, and then he's touching me—actually touching me—in a place no one else has ever reached. The contact makes me gasp, my head falling back against the seat.

"So wet," he growls, his fingers sliding through my folds with a delicious friction that makes my toes curl. "So perfect."

I should be embarrassed by how ready I am, how my body has completely betrayed any pretense of restraint. But the naked hunger in his expression makes embarrassment impossible. He wants this. Wants me. Just as I am.

When one thick finger slides inside me, I can't contain the cry that escapes my lips. It feels nothing like when I touch myself. His hands are larger, rougher, and he knows exactly how to curl his finger to hit a spot that makes stars explode behind my eyelids.

"Marc," I gasp, my hips lifting to press against his hand.

"That's it, sweetheart. Let me feel you." He adds a second finger, stretching me in a way that's both uncomfortable and impossibly good. "So tight. So hot."

I grip the edge of the seat, my arms trembling with the effort to stay upright. Every nerve ending in my body feels electrified, concentrated on the place where his fingers are working their magic. I force my eyes to stay open, partly to watch his face and partly to make sure we're still alone.

The parking lot is empty, shrouded in darkness except for the circle of light from our headlights. There's no one around to see what we're doing, no one to witness this moment of complete abandon.

Just us. Just this.

Marc's expression is a study in concentration, his amber eyes almost glowing in the dim light.

His jaw is clenched, tendons standing out in his neck like he's physically restraining himself from doing more.

There's something wild in his face, something primal and hungry that should frighten me but instead makes me feel powerful.

I did this to him. Me. Shy, ordinary Christine Parker has reduced this powerful man

to a state of barely contained desire.

"You're perfect," he growls. "Every inch of you. So beautiful."

His free hand traces the curve of my hip, the softness of my belly, with something like devotion. There's no disgust, no disappointment in the extra weight I carry. If anything, he seems to relish it, his large hand splaying across my skin like he's trying to touch as much of me as possible.

"I can't—" His voice breaks, and I see his throat work as he swallows hard. "I can't hold back anymore. I need all of you. Need to feel you, taste you, claim you."

The raw honesty in his voice, the desperation, it calls to something equally desperate in me. Something that's tired of being careful, tired of waiting for a perfect moment that might never come.

"I want that too," I whisper, and the words are both a confession and a surrender. "I've never felt anything like this before."

His fingers still inside me, and for a moment, I think I've said something wrong. But then I see the flash of understanding in his eyes, the sudden comprehension.

"You've never...?" he asks, confused.

There's no point hiding it now. "No. Never."

"You're a virgin?"

I nod, unable to meet his eyes. "I know it's ridiculous at my age, but I just never found the right person, never felt like this with anyone else, and I..."

"Christine." My name on his lips stops my rambling. "Look at me."

I force myself to meet his gaze, expecting to see disappointment or, worse, pity. Instead, I find nothing but heat and a fierce kind of possessiveness.

"You're giving me a gift," he says, his fingers still buried inside me. "The most precious gift anyone has ever given me. Are you sure you want this? With me? Like this?"

"I'm sure," I say, and I've never been more certain of anything in my life. "I'm just... I'm afraid I'll be bad at it. That I won't know what to do, how to please you."

A smile, soft and surprisingly tender, curves his lips. "No one is born knowing how to do this, sweetheart. It's something we learn together." His thumb circles my clit, making me gasp. "And I'll teach you everything. Even if we have to practice a thousand times."

The promise in his voice, the heat in his eyes, makes me giggle despite the tension coiling in my belly. "I hope so."

"Get in the back," he commands suddenly, his fingers withdrawing from me with a slick sound that should be embarrassing but is somehow incredibly erotic.

I don't hesitate. Awkwardly shuffling with my jeans around my thighs, I climb between the seats into the back of the truck cab. Marc follows, and reaches forward to push the front seats as far up as they'll go, creating more space for us.

The moment he turns back to me, I see it—the hunger, the need, the barely leashed control. He's like a predator, and I'm his willing prey.

He strips off his suit jacket first, then his tie, fingers working the buttons of his shirt

with an urgency that makes my pulse race. When he pulls the shirt off, I can't help the small gasp that escapes me.

He's magnificent. Broad shoulders tapering to a narrow waist, every inch covered in hard muscle and scattered with scars that speak of battles I can't imagine. A dusting of dark hair covers his chest, trailing down to disappear beneath the waistband of his pants.

"Your turn," he says, and there's a challenge in his voice.

I reach for the hem of my sweater with hands that aren't entirely steady. The blue fabric slides over my head, leaving me in nothing but my bra and the jeans still bunched around my thighs. I should feel exposed, vulnerable, but the way Marc is looking at me makes me feel powerful instead.

"Perfect," he growls, and then he's on me.

His lips are softer than I expected, but there's nothing soft about the way he kisses. All heat and hunger and demand. His tongue sweeps into my mouth, claiming me from the inside out, and I yield to him completely, my arms wrapping around his neck to pull him closer.

One large hand cradles the back of my head while the other slides down my back, unhooking my bra with a dexterity that would be impressive if I had the capacity to think about anything other than the way his chest feels pressed against mine.

When he pulls back to remove my bra completely, the cool air makes my nipples tighten. Marc groans, a sound of pure appreciation, before his mouth descends to capture one stiff nipple between his lips.

I arch against him, desperate for more, for everything he can give me.

"So responsive," he murmurs against my skin, his tongue swirling around in a way that makes me whimper. "So perfect for me."

His hands are everywhere, learning my body with a thoroughness that borders on worship. He traces the curve of my waist, the softness of my belly, the fullness of my hips like he's memorizing every inch of me.

"Marc," I gasp when his teeth graze the sensitive underside of my breast. "Please."

"Please what, sweetheart? Tell me what you need."

"You," I say, beyond embarrassment now. "All of you. I can't wait anymore."

His amber eyes lock on mine, searching for any sign of hesitation. Finding none, he nods once, reaching for the button of his pants.

"I need you to be sure," he says, "This is your first time. It should be special, not in the back of a truck in a gas station parking lot."

The consideration, the care he's taking with me, makes my heart squeeze in my chest. But I don't want to wait. I don't want to second-guess this perfect moment of connection.

"It's already special," I tell him honestly. "Because it's with you. Because I've never wanted anyone the way I want you right now." I reach for him, my hand brushing the impressive bulge straining against his pants. "I want you to claim me, Marc. Make me yours."

Something flashes in his eyes at the word "claim". Something wild and primitive that should frighten me but instead makes excitement curl low in my belly.

"Mine," he growls.

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Mine.

Christine Parker, with her honey-blonde hair and soft curves and heart big enough to forgive a broken man his sins... She's mine. My mate. My salvation.

And she's a virgin.

The knowledge nearly breaks me. This incredible woman has never been touched, never been claimed, and I'll be the first and only man to know her body. It makes the bear roar with satisfaction even as the man in me trembles with the responsibility.

"Marc?" Her voice pulls me back to the present, to the vision of her spread before me in the back seat of my truck, half-naked and waiting. "Is something wrong?"

"Nothing's wrong," I manage, my voice so rough I barely recognize it. "You're perfect. So fucking perfect."

Her panties are the last barrier between us, and my patience is gone. I hook my fingers in the waistband and tug, but my control is slipping. The fabric tears with a sharp ripping sound that makes her gasp.

"Sorry," I pant, staring at the ruined cotton. "I'll buy you new ones."

"It's okay," she laughs, breathless and beautiful. "Those were my cheap ones anyway."

"I'd have ripped them no matter what they cost." The confession spills out, raw and

honest. "Can't control myself around you."

The bear is clawing at my control, demanding I claim what's mine. I can feel it just beneath my skin, fur rippling beneath the surface, claws straining to emerge. But I can't shift. Not now. Not when she's finally mine.

"Take off your pants," she says, her blue eyes dark with desire. "I want to see all of you."

I comply immediately, standing as much as the truck cab allows to unbutton my pants. Her eyes follow every movement, her breath coming faster as I push the fabric down my legs. When I straighten, still in my boxer briefs, she reaches out to trace the hard line of my erection through the cotton.

"Oh," she whispers, her fingers exploring with a hesitant curiosity that makes my cock throb painfully against her touch. "You're so big."

"All for you, sweetheart."

I push my boxers down, freeing myself, and her eyes widen at the sight. I know I'm larger than average—another gift from my bear genetics—and for a moment, I worry that I'll hurt her. That her first time will be painful instead of pleasurable.

But then she spreads her legs wider, an invitation that breaks the last threads of my restraint.

I'm on her in an instant, positioning myself between her thighs, the tip of my cock nudging against her entrance. She's so wet, so ready, but I force myself to go slow. To be gentle with this gift she's giving me.

"Look at me," I command, needing to see her eyes as I claim her. "I want to watch

you take me."

She obeys, those blue eyes locking with mine as I begin to push inside. Her warm pussy makes me grit my teeth against the urge to thrust deep. I can feel resistance, the physical proof of her virginity, and I pause.

"This might hurt," I warn her, brushing hair from her forehead with a tenderness that surprises even me. "Just for a moment."

"It's okay," she whispers, her hands gripping my biceps. "I trust you."

I push forward, breaking through the barrier that marks her as untouched. She gasps, her body tensing, and I freeze, letting her adjust to my throbbing cock.

"Breathe, sweetheart," I murmur, pressing kisses to her face, her neck, anywhere I can reach. "The pain will pass."

"It's not bad," she says after a moment, her body relaxing beneath mine. "Just... different. Full."

I start to move then, small, shallow thrusts that gradually deepen as her body accepts me.

The sensation is unlike anything I've ever experienced, not just the physical pleasure, which is intense enough to make my vision blur, but the emotional connection.

The knowledge that I'm the first man to see her like this, to feel her like this.

The last man who ever will.

"You feel so good," I groan, increasing my pace as her discomfort gives way to

pleasure. "So perfect around me. Like you were made for me."

"Marc," she moans, her hips lifting to meet my thrusts. "It feels... oh God... it feels amazing."

Her pleasure feeds mine, amplifying it until I'm drowning in sensation.

The bear is right at the surface now, lending strength to my movements, sharpening my senses until I can hear the rapid flutter of her heartbeat, smell the sweet musk of her arousal, feel every tiny ripple of her inner muscles around my cock.

"That's it, sweetheart," I encourage as she begins to move with me, finding our rhythm. "Take what you need. Take all of me."

The truck rocks with our movements, the windows fogging from our combined heat.

Christine's eyes are half-closed, her lips parted in silent ecstasy as I drive into her again and again.

Sweat trickles down her neck, pooling in the hollow of her throat before sliding lower to the curves of her breasts.

I've never seen anything more beautiful in my life.

"Mine," I growl, the word torn from somewhere deep inside me. "You're mine, Christine. Say it."

"Yours," she gasps immediately, her nails digging into my shoulders. "I'm yours, Marc. Only yours."

The bear roars its approval, and I feel the shift beginning. Not now. Not yet. I can't

lose control, can't let the animal take over when she's so vulnerable beneath me.

But my body has other ideas. I can feel the fur rippling beneath my skin, my muscles swelling with the change. My senses sharpen further, until I can smell not just Christine's arousal but the specific chemistry of it, the hormones and pheromones that mark her as my mate.

I increase my pace, driving into her with a force that would worry me if I couldn't feel her responding, couldn't see the pleasure overtaking her features. I need to finish this before the shift takes me completely. Need to claim her fully as a man before the bear emerges.

"Marc," she moans, her body tightening around me. "I think I'm... I'm going to..."

"That's it, sweetheart. Come for me. Let me feel you." I grind against her, making sure to hit the spot that makes her gasp with each thrust. "Let go. I've got you."

She orgasms, her body arching off the seat as pleasure overtakes her. The sight of her coming undone beneath me, around me, is enough to trigger my own release.

"Don't stop," she begs, her eyes wild and desperate. "Finish inside me. Please."

The permission is all I need. With a roar that's more animal than human, I bury myself to the hilt and let go, emptying myself deep inside her. The bear howls its triumph as I mark her in the most primitive way possible, my seed filling her, claiming her.

But the victory is short-lived. As the waves of pleasure begin to recede, the shift reasserts itself with undeniable force. I can feel my bones beginning to change, my hands transforming into something that could hurt her.

"Marc?" Christine's voice seems to come from very far away. "What's happening?"

I have to get away from her. Have to protect her from what I'm becoming. With the last shreds of my human control, I pull out of her warmth and stumble toward the door, nearly ripping it from its hinges in my haste.

The cold night air hits my overheated skin like a shock, but it does nothing to stop the transformation. I stagger into the darkness behind the gas station, my body twisting and reshaping itself with painful ardor.

"Marc!" Christine's voice follows me, along with the sound of fabric rustling as she tries to follow. "What's wrong? Talk to me!"

I want to tell her to stay away, to run, to forget what she saw.

But it's too late. The bear has emerged, six hundred pounds of muscle and fur and primal instinct.

I'm trapped inside it, watching through its eyes as Christine appears at the edge of the tree line, her clothes hastily pulled on, her face confused and concerned.

She freezes when she sees me, her eyes wide with shock. "Marc?"

The bear—my bear—recognizes her voice. It knows her scent. And instead of attacking or running, it simply sits back on its haunches and waits, watching her with what I can only describe as expectant patience.

This has never happened before. In all the years I've been shifting, I've never maintained this level of awareness, this control over the animal. But then, I've never shifted with my mate present.

"It's you, isn't it?" she asks, taking a hesitant step forward. "Marc?"

I nod the massive bear head, a gesture so human it must look absurd on such a creature.

"You're a... a bear? Like, a werewolf but with bears?" She takes another step closer, and I'm stunned by her courage. "That's why you ran? Because you were turning into... this?"

Another nod.

"Can you change back? Can you explain what's happening?"

I concentrate, focusing on my human form, on drawing the bear back inside.

It resists at first, but the presence of our mate seems to calm it, to make it more willing to yield control.

The shift reverses, a process almost as painful as the original transformation, until I'm kneeling naked on the floor, human once more.

"Christine," I gasp, my voice raw from the change. "I'm so sorry. I never wanted you to find out like this."

She approaches slowly, still cautious but not running. Not screaming. "What are you?"

"A bear shifter." The words feel strange on my tongue after so many years of keeping the secret. "I was born this way. It's genetic."

"Like a werewolf." She says it again, and there's a hint of wonder in her voice that

gives me hope.

"Similar but bears instead of wolves. There are others like me, but not many." I reach for her, half-expecting her to flinch away. She doesn't. "I understand if you want nothing to do with me now."

"Are you kidding?" To my complete shock, she actually laughs. "This is... well, it's insane, but it explains so much. The way you look at me, the intensity, the possessiveness."

"You're not afraid?"

"Should I be?" She kneels in front of me, close enough to touch. "You didn't hurt me. You ran away to protect me."

"I could have hurt you. The bear isn't always so controlled."

"But it was this time. Because of me?"

She's too perceptive by half. "Yes. Because of you. Because you're my mate."

"Mate?" Her eyebrows rise. "Like, soulmate? Fated to be together kind of mate?"

"Exactly like that." I take a deep breath, preparing for rejection. "I knew it the moment I saw you. My bear recognized you as mine. That's why I've been so... intense. So focused on you."

"Huh." She sits back on her heels, processing. "You know, this is crazy, but it actually makes sense. I felt it too. This pull toward you. Like I'd been waiting for you without knowing it."

Hope flares in my chest. "You believe me?"

"I just watched you turn into a bear, Marc. I think we're past the point of disbelief." She reaches out to touch my face, her fingers tracing the curve of my jaw. "Besides, I read paranormal romance. This is straight out of chapter seven."

The absurdity of it—of this sweet, incredible woman accepting my supernatural nature with a literary reference—makes me genuinely laugh for what feels like the first time in years.

"Seven, huh? What happens in chapter eight?"

"Usually the hot sex scene, but we've already covered that." She grins, and there's a mischievous light in her eyes that makes my heart swell. "Chapter eight is also when the heroine decides to stay with her supernatural lover despite the dangers."

"And does she? Stay?"

"Always." She leans forward, pressing her forehead to mine. "Always."

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A year later

"There's my little cub," I coo, lifting four-month-old James from his bassinet. His amber eyes—identical to his father's—blink up at me with sleepy recognition before his tiny face breaks into a gummy smile that melts my heart every single time.

It still amazes me how much love can fit inside a human body. Before Marc, before James, I thought I understood what it meant to love someone. I had no idea. The emotions that flood through me when I look at my son, at the family we've created, are so overwhelming they sometimes bring me to tears.

Happy tears, of course. The kind that make Marc panic until I explain that some feelings are just too big to contain.

"Your daddy will be home soon," I tell James, settling into the rocking chair by the window where I can watch for Marc's truck coming down the road. "He's been delivering Mommy's flowers all day."

James gurgles in response, his tiny hand clutching at the neckline of my blouse. Even at four months, he has his father's strength. And, if the slight golden gleam that sometimes flashes in his eyes when he's upset is any indication, he might have inherited more than just Marc's coloring.

We don't know yet if he'll be a shifter. Marc says it's too early to tell, that the signs usually don't appear until puberty. But sometimes, when James is particularly fussy, I swear I can feel a rumble in his tiny chest that reminds me of his father's bear.

The thought doesn't frighten me anymore. Nothing about Marc's nature frightens me now. If our son inherits the ability to shift, we'll handle it together, just like we've handled everything else this whirlwind year has thrown at us.

And what a year it's been.

After that night at the gas station, after Marc revealed his true nature and I surprised both of us by accepting it without hesitation, everything moved at lightning speed.

I moved into his rental house two weeks later, partly because I couldn't bear to be apart from him and partly because the bear wouldn't allow it. The mate bond, as Marc explained it, demanded proximity in the early stages.

Not that I was complaining. Living with Marc meant waking up to his warmth every morning, falling asleep in his arms every night, and discovering all the ways his bear nature influenced our daily life. The protectiveness. The territorial instincts. The insatiable appetite—for food and for me.

Three months after that first date, I discovered I was pregnant.

The news sent Marc into a protective frenzy that was equal parts endearing and infuriating.

He wouldn't let me climb ladders at the shop.

Wouldn't let me lift anything heavier than a bouquet.

Practically growled at male customers who stood too close.

But he also rubbed my feet every night, built a crib with his bare hands, and read parenting books with the same focus he once reserved for military operations.

And when James was born, a relatively easy delivery, thanks to my "compatible mate genetics," according to the shifter midwife Marc found, he cried without shame, holding our son with trembling hands.

The flower shop has flourished almost as much as our little family.

What started as a modest local business has expanded to serve three neighboring towns, largely thanks to Marc's idea to offer delivery services.

Who knew that having a former Marine with enhanced senses delivering flowers would be such a hit?

Women swoon when he arrives with bouquets, though he swears he never notices anyone but me.

I've hired two new employees. Lily, a twenty-year old girl with an incredible eye for design, and Thomas, a retired gentleman who manages the books. They run the storefront while I work from home, designing arrangements and managing orders online between feedings and diaper changes.

It's not exactly the life I imagined when I told Marc about my white picket fence dreams, but it's better. Richer. More authentic and raw and real than any fantasy I could have conjured.

The sound of tires on gravel pulls me from my thoughts.

I shift James to my shoulder and move closer to the window, peering out to see Marc's truck pulling into our driveway.

My heart still skips when I see him—this massive, beautiful man who chose me, who gave me a family, who shows me every day what it means to be truly loved.

"Daddy's home," I whisper to James, who perks up at the sound of the truck door slamming.

Marc takes the porch steps two at a time, and I meet him at the door with our son in my arms. The smile that breaks across his face, so different from the guarded expression he wore when we first met, never fails to delight me.

"There's my family," he says, voice gruff with emotion as he leans down to kiss me. Even after a year, his kisses still make my toes curl. "How's my boy?"

James squeals in response, tiny arms reaching for his father. Marc takes him with hands that could crush stone but never, ever harm his son.

"He missed you," I say, leaning into Marc's side as he cradles James against his broad chest. "We both did."

"Missed you too." He presses a kiss to the top of my head, inhaling deeply the way he always does when he's been away. Scenting me, marking me as his in the subtle ways of his kind. "Got some news today."

"Oh?" I lead him into the kitchen where dinner is simmering on the stove—beef stew, heavy on the meat, the way he likes it. "Good news or bad news?"

"Good, I think." He settles into a chair at our small kitchen table, bouncing James gently on his knee. "Jake called."

My heart skips. Marc's brother. The one he hasn't spoken to in years, the relationship he thought was irreparably broken. "What did he say?"

"That he's been looking for me. That he heard through the grapevine that I'd settled down, started a family." Marc's voice is neutral, but I can see the emotion in his eyes. "He wants to visit. Meet you and James."

"That's wonderful!" I move to his side, running my fingers through his dark hair.
"When?"

"Next month, if that works for us." He looks up at me, vulnerability written across his features. "Is that okay with you? Having him here?"

"Of course it is. He's family." I press a kiss to his forehead. "Your family is our family."

The relief in his expression makes my heart ache. After all this time, he still sometimes expects rejection, still braces for the worst even when surrounded by love.

"There's something else," he says, reaching into his pocket with his free hand. "I found a house today. On my delivery route."

"A house?"

"Five bedrooms, three acres, just outside town. Needs some work, but it's solid. And..." He pulls out his phone, showing me a picture. "It has a white picket fence."

The house on the screen is perfect—a two-story farmhouse with a wraparound porch and, yes, a white picket fence surrounding a yard big enough for children to play in. For a family to grow in.

"It's beautiful," I whisper, tears welling in my eyes.

"I put in an offer. Was that okay? I should have talked to you first, but it felt right, and the bear—"

I silence him with a kiss, pouring all my love and joy into the connection. "It's more than okay. It's perfect."

The tension leaves his shoulders, and he pulls me onto his lap next to James, creating a little family huddle that feels like the safest place in the world.

"I never thought I'd have this," he confesses. "A home. A family. A mate who accepts all of me, even the parts that aren't entirely human."

"I never thought I'd be married to a bear shifter," I tease, brushing my fingers along his jaw. "Life is full of surprises."

"Regrets?" he asks, and though he tries to make it sound casual, I can hear the genuine question underneath.

"Not a single one." I rest my head on his shoulder, watching our son's eyelids grow heavy as he nestles against his father's chest. "How could I regret the greatest adventure of my life?"

His arm tightens around me, and I feel the rumble of satisfaction deep in his chest. The bear expressing its contentment in the only way it can while Marc remains in human form.

Outside, the sun is setting over Cedar Falls, painting the sky in shades of pink and gold that would inspire a dozen wedding bouquets. In a few hours, after James is asleep, Marc will take me to bed and show me all the ways a bear can worship his mate.

In a week, if our offer is accepted, we'll begin planning our move to the house with the white picket fence. Next month, we'll welcome Jake into our growing family.

And someday, when James is older, we'll tell him the story of how his parents met—how a broken soldier found healing in a small-town flower shop, how a shy florist found courage in the arms of a bear, and how true love can transform even the wildest of hearts.

It's not the fairy tale I dreamed of as a little girl.

It's better.

Because it's real, and it's ours, and it's just beginning.

Thank you for reading it!