



Cowboy Bear's Hope (Motley Crewd Shifters #3)

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Category: Fantasy

Description: Hope is just another word for family. Family is who we pick.

Dante Bianco isn't your average Bear. He guards his heart ferociously and prefers it that way.

After suffering a personal loss, there isn't much hope left for a man like him.

Then she walks into his life, carrying a little spitfire of a daughter, and his Bear just can't stop growling.

Rosalie is a bright-eyed child with a heart of gold. Weird, since her mom is such a smart-mouthed female. But the closer Dante gets, the more he realizes things aren't what they seem.

What Avery doesn't know about her tiny tot is a lot. That's something Dante can truly sympathize with and maybe he can even help. But that means getting her to agree.

Is this a match made in heaven, or will Avery dash all this Bear's hope away?

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What the fuck am I doing?

Walking down the snow-covered path from my cabin on Max Leeds' property towards the barn where I had plenty of work just waiting to be done was no big deal.

It was a short walk. Twenty minutes or so, and I was moving pretty fast. With the big old Grizzly I had living inside me, the cold didn't bother me none.

Neither did the early hour or the overall quiet on the ranch at this time of day.

The sun wasn't up yet. But neither were most people.

I was bigger and stronger than just about everyone on the place, except for maybe Max, but that was because his monster was more magic than animal. Like Zeke, who harbored a huge fucking dragon inside of him.

Being born a Shifter, I'd learned to utilize my dual nature to benefit me where I needed it the most. Long hours and heavy lifting were no strangers to me.

Farm work was in my blood—it always had been.

I was born into the Willow Creek Clan, nestled in the heart of rural Pennsylvania, where sprawling fields stretched as far as the eye could see.

Generations of Shifters had tilled that land, turning the rich soil into a thriving patchwork of crops. The work was hard but honest, and for a long time, I thought it would be my future, too.

But the hateful politics of that Clan? That was another story.

The Alpha was an old tyrant—a relic of another era—mean-spirited and hostile, more interested in control than community.

His way of leading wasn't about prosperity or peace. It was about dominance.

He saw every problem as a battle to be fought and every man, woman, and Shifter as a soldier in his endless imaginary war.

When my mama passed away, something in me shifted.

Willow Creek no longer felt like home—it felt like a cage.

Without her steadying presence, I didn't have anything tethering me there. No family, no ties, no real loyalty to the land or the Alpha. And with my beast so close to the surface, I knew staying under his rule would only make things worse.

He thrived on conflict, but I didn't want to be a weapon for someone else's war.

I wanted peace—freedom, love, a chance for a real future.

So, I packed what little I had and walked away from everything I'd ever known.

When I came across the job advertisement for farm work here in New Jersey, I answered without a second thought.

The truth was, I'd always liked it there, having visited infrequently in the past. With its rolling meadows and thick woods and only a few hours from the nearest shore or the big city, I felt like it had the best of every world.

It wasn't exactly far from Willow Creek, but it felt like a whole different life.

This was my fresh start, away from the noise and the battles of my old life. A place where I could work the land without feeling like I was one bad day away from losing control.

This time, the only thing I'd answer to would be the rhythm of the earth beneath my feet.

The pay was good, which was a plus.

I enjoyed being outdoors, and the animals here seemed to like me. They responded just fine to my natural dominance. Even the long hours were good for me.

I needed something to quiet the great growling beast I harbored, and that was no easy feat.

I enjoyed tending to little things. That was exactly what this place needed. Someone who could handle the small herd of dairy cows, goats, chickens, and the other assortment of farm animals that lived on this property.

Of course, Jed handled the goats. All those Dolly Lees, Dolly Whos, and Dolly Whats, were his babies. That was just fine with me. Ornery little critters.

Max had dubbed this place the Motley Crewd Ranch, and I had to hand it to the millionaire Jersey Devil, it was a fairly apt description for it. And for us.

That was what we were alright, a mixed up Crew of crude and raunchy Shifters who had a snowball's chance in hell of making a go of it. And yet, here we were. Trying and shit.

It was a miracle we hadn't killed each other yet.

Especially Kian. How that Bull managed to survive each day to see the next was a riddle I'd yet to solve.

My own inner Grizzly urged me to take a bite out of the cocky bovine, but so far, I'd managed to control my bestial urges.

Credit for that had something to do with Penny and Jezebel moving onto the property.

Females had a way of making things better. It wasn't just their presence—it was something deeper, something woven into who they were.

Like they carried a quiet kind of magic, their innate softness following them into even the roughest places.

Somehow, that softness didn't make them weak. It made them strong in a way that men like me couldn't quite understand.

It wasn't about fixing things outright—it was about making the weight of the world feel a little lighter.

They gave men like me—and the others who lived and worked here—something to protect, something to take care of.

Not necessarily in a possessive way, unless they were your mates, but in a way that made us feel more grounded.

As if having someone to anchor you kept the darker parts of you at bay. When you've got someone to love, you fight harder to stay good. To be worthy.

That was all I'd ever wanted.

That's what I'd always imagined mates did for their men. Maybe it was just a story I'd told myself—a fairytale for monsters.

Still, I liked to believe that someone out there could see beyond the beast, beyond the scars. Someone to remind me that even the roughest hands were capable of gentleness.

It wasn't about needing saving. It was more about finding balance.

And in a place like this, surrounded by sweat, dirt, and demons of the past, balance was everything.

Mates brought balance. At least, that was what I thought.

Turned out, I was fucking wrong.

Dead wrong.

I rubbed my forehead and growled at the not so long ago memory of a metal bat colliding with my thick skull. It had been wielded by the tiniest, curviest, and angriest woman I had ever met in my whole life.

Which was saying something since I grew up with Sows. I should tell you, proverbial Mama Bears were much worse in the flesh.

Anyway, I wished that was the worst of our encounters, but nope. That little firecracker got me again and again.

Maybe not with a bat. But Avery didn't need a weapon to attack. She did just fine

with her razor sharp tongue.

I was starting to think no was her favorite word.

The point I was making was, no, I wasn't searching for a mate. I was not looking for that elusive dream of a woman to come busting down my door to save me from a life of loneliness or lead me to one of love.

That is, I wasn't doing that anymore.

See, I knew damn well who my fated mate was.

But did she bring me peace?

Did she offer me a taste of that softness I alluded to earlier?

Fuck no.

Avery was a different breed of woman altogether, and ours was definitely not going to be just another love story.

The woman had outright rejected me.

Several times.

And every fucking day that passed was like a trial on my beast and my frayed nerves. Every day she denied me was just one more test of my strength.

I had to prove my worth, I understood that. But goddammit, it was hard to hold on to hope.

My Bear grumbled as the barn came into view. He didn't want to go to work. He wanted to hunt our mate.

The beast was mad as fuck at my incompetence. He blamed me for not claiming what was ours.

But he was also my fiercest cheerleader. My ornery Bruin was determined to see this deal done. And I had to admit, he had it right.

This was no time to start doubting myself.

I was going to claim the sexy little mama, and her sweet little cub, Rosalie, as my own.

Make no mistake.

Whether or not Avery wanted to face facts, that curvy female was all mine. She filled the hole inside my heart accurately and definitively.

She might not be all sweetness, but I liked her sour just fine. She was fucking brilliant.

A honey scented goddess of a woman who had to be tough to survive what she'd been through.

I admired her greatly, and more than anything, I wanted to show her I was worthy of a chance. I didn't need to cow a woman to prove my strength. I wanted to lift her up. To shower her with affection and keep her and Little Rosie safe.

Speaking of Rosie, the clock was ticking on that little time bomb.

I was pretty sure the child had a secret. But I also knew she wasn't aware of it. Neither was her mama.

The time for that conversation was drawing nearer and nearer, I just needed to find my tongue.

I didn't expect that to be an easy discussion with Avery. But nothing ever was, and maybe then she'd accept the fact that she belonged with me.

I grinned, looking forward to that day more and more. My inner monster was counting the seconds till she wore my claiming bite.

It wouldn't be too long now.

Especially with what happened after Emmet and Jez got hitched. I just had to wait her out, and I knew how to be a patient hunter.

Mine.

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“Nurse Brown!”

I cringed inwardly—and probably outwardly, too, if the way Casey, the newest addition to the school nursing staff, arched an eyebrow was any indication.

She looked at me with a mix of amusement and pity. I just couldn’t help it.

The man had a way of making my skin crawl, always teetering on the edge of inappropriate with his overly familiar tone and invasive demeanor.

I’d done everything in my power to steer clear of our new assistant principal, but avoiding Mr. Dryden felt like trying to dodge a heat-seeking missile.

Somehow, he always managed to track me down whenever I was at work.

“Nurse Brown, there you are!” he exclaimed, his voice carried across the hallway like nails on a chalkboard. “I was hoping we could take a coffee break together.”

His grin spread wide, revealing teeth that were yellowed and streaked with tobacco stains.

The truth was, he stunk like an old ashtray, the kind my Paw Paw used to have overflowing in his old Buick.

Ew.

I resisted the urge to visibly recoil, though my stomach twisted in protest. Why was it

always the ones with no sense of boundaries who had the audacity to act like we were in some office rom com?

Seriously. No, thank you.

Casey shot me a look that said, Good luck, Av, you're on your own with this one .

I never wanted to scream more. But I was a professional, and if little kids with bleeding boo-boos, snotty noses, and toilet accidents didn't scare me, then neither did this creep.

I glanced at Casey one last time, to see if she might help, but nope. She busied herself with the files on the desk, leaving me to fend for myself.

Forcing a polite but strained smile, I responded, "Thank you, Mr. Dryden, but I've already had my coffee."

And if he kept this up, I was going to need something a lot stronger.

"Oh, drat. That's a shame. Well, tell me, how is little Rosalind?" he asked, and I refrained from rolling my eyes.

"Rosalie ," I corrected, "is fine."

"No more incidents, I presume. We had a nice little chat she and I," he said, eyes gleaming.

"What? When?"

"I had Miss Dembeck bring her to my office after the morning snack for a talk about how to play nice with our friends," he said, smiling at me as if he was some sort of

hero.

Alarm bells went off inside my brain and it was all I could do not to punch him right in his stupid throat. I was barely resisting the urge, keeping the fact I needed a job to pay the bills firmly in my mind.

Most importantly, I had to pay the mechanic who just informed me I needed a new transmission on my piece of shit car. It broke down this morning on my way to school with Rosie and both of us had been late.

It was the third time this year that stupid hunk of metal had crapped out on me and transmissions were not cheap. Luckily, Rosie and I could catch a ride with Penny after school, since she was usually at the bakery around that time.

The mornings would suck since that was when it was coldest, but we'd get by. We always did.

First, I had to deal with this dickwad.

"Excuse me? You did what?" I asked, hoping I'd heard him wrong.

He was new to town and to this position, but ever since he'd arrived less than two weeks ago, I'd had the worst feeling about him. Like something was off with the tall, skinny man.

Big time off.

But since I tended to be uptight about new people, I tried to ignore it. My defenses were always on high alert. I mean, I was a single mom.

Once bitten, twice shy. Wasn't that a song?

“I would think you’d be happy Rosalind, and I were becoming such good friends,” he said, still saying her name wrong.

Was he serious?

“I’m sorry, am I understanding you? Did you really speak to my child without my knowledge?”

Oh, hell no.

“Well, after that little incident with Lisa on the playground yesterday, I felt someone should step in to guide Rosalind’s behavior. I know how being a single parent can be detrimental to some children’s development. I also know Rosalind has no father at home. But you and I seem to get along, don’t we? I was sure you wouldn’t mind?—”

Well, it looked like my first instincts were correct. The man was nuts.

“Stop right there, Mr. Dryden. The fact is, I do mind. Very much,” I said, feeling that familiar rage only another single parent could identify with, build inside of me.

This was bad. I couldn’t afford to blow up at work, but really? What did he expect? That I would be grateful for him sticking his big nose in my business?

I knew Rosie was having a difficult time getting along with her friends right now. And there were a million possible reasons for her behavior, but I was working on it with her.

Mr. Dryden had just started at the school and the fact was he didn’t know me or my child from Adam.

How dare he?

My sweet little girl had been showing signs of being overly emotional just lately. But I was working with her on positive ways to process her feelings as well as acceptable ways to express them without violence or tantrums.

It was a work in progress, and Miss Dembeck was aware since we'd discussed it together. We even came up with a plan of action to help in case Rosie became upset during school.

And absolutely none of those plans involved this man marching in and taking my child to his office without my knowledge or permission. I didn't give a crap if he was the assistant principal.

"You have no right to have my child taken out of the classroom for private chitchats in your office about anything, do you hear me? You have seriously overstepped," I said, barely hanging on to my temper.

"I am sorry you feel that way, Avery. I thought you would appreciate it, and I assure you my actions fall very much in line with my job description," he said, presenting himself as Mr. Do-Gooder with what I knew was false sincerity.

But I had no proof. And I needed my job.

"Well, in your job description or not, consider this your notice that I, as Rosie's mother, do not give you or any other faculty member at this school permission to speak to my child alone without my presence. I will be sending this in an email to Principal Jefferson. Right now, in fact," I said, narrowing my eyes at the man.

He might be taller than me, but I was pretty sure I could take him in a fight. And right then, I wanted nothing more than to pummel his dumb ass.

"I understand you are upset, but I think you'll see I only meant to help Rosalind,

Nurse Brown. I'm sure when you have a chance to think it over, you will appreciate my efforts. Don't worry, we can try coffee again on Monday," he said, touching his fingertips to my arm before walking away.

What the actual fuck?

I stormed into the nurse's room and covered my face with my sweater so I could scream into it without causing a commotion.

"Um, Av? Are you okay?" Casey asked.

"No! I am not okay. Did you hear that?"

"I did, and I agree. The man overstepped, and he is so gross," Casey whispered.

"And coffee? Does he really think I would drink coffee with him? Ugh. Well, I'm sending that email. I do not want him talking to Rosie again. He couldn't even get her name right!"

I sat down at my desk and opened a blank email, which I filled with my complaint and my request.

Before I could talk myself out of it, I sent the thing. Marked urgent.

A few minutes later, I received a vague reply from Principal Jefferson saying she'd pass my request to Miss Dembeck, Rosie's teacher.

Of course, I'd already emailed her as well, and she apologized profusely for the entire thing.

For some reason, Miss Dembeck was under the impression I was dating the new

assistant creep and that he had my permission to parent my daughter.

As fucking if.

Rosie might not have a dad, but even if I were in the market for a father figure for her, it sure as fuck would not be that pencil dick asshat.

The image of one particular man came to mind when I thought of prospective dads for my Rosie, but I quickly pushed it away.

Dante Bianco was not mine.

Whatever shenanigans went on out at the Motley Crewd Ranch, that man was none of my business.

Sure, my BFF had married and mated—which after she'd come out to me as a newly made Jersey Devil Shifter, I assumed was referring to some claiming ritual and not just the badoink-a-doinking that was going on out there—a Shifter, but that didn't mean everyone else was that lucky.

It took me like a day to understand what the heck Penny had been talking about, but after she transformed into a very red and very furry creature with wings, I'd just accepted it as fact.

Supernaturals were real.

And they lived really fucking close to me.

I had no idea if the rest of the staff at Motley Crewd shared Max and Penny's gifts, but I was sure they were more than human.

Especially Dante.

He was just so big and powerful. I mean, all the guys were handsome, but he took the cake as far as I was concerned.

Those velvet brown eyes and plump lips. Impossibly wide shoulders and thick, juicy thighs of his could only be the result of some supernatural force.

In other words, the man was too damn hot for words. Definitely too hot for a single mom with wide hips and stretch marks on her belly and boobs.

Don't judge. Having a baby was hard on a body, fuck you very much.

I wasn't self-conscious, just self-aware. Anyway, Dante and I had our chance to see if we were compatible, but we missed that opportunity by a mile.

He didn't want a single mom as a girlfriend or possible mate, if that was his thing.

I'd heard him talking to his friends after the tumultuous kiss we'd shared at Emmet and Jezebel's wedding and what it all boiled down to was bad timing.

I was the girl who carried too much reality to the party. The one with excess baggage.

Oh well. Story of my life.

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The memory replayed itself in my head and I wished like hell it wouldn't, but there it was. Plain as day.

I laid Rosie down on a makeshift bed of a couple of hay bales and a thick, cozy blanket. Having a wedding in a barn had its advantages, I supposed, and I grinned as I smiled at my baby girl.

Ever since I knew she existed, she'd stolen my heart. I'd do anything for her. Anything at all.

But just lately I'd been feeling restless. A longing for something else in my life. And of course, that made me feel guilty.

"She looks like an angel," a deep voice said beside me, and my whole body shivered in response.

"Thanks. I mean, I like to think so," I said, agreeing with Dante.

His big body always felt so warm when he stood next to me, and I turned slightly so I could see his handsome face.

He always had just a smattering of scruff lining his cheeks and defining that strong jaw of his and my fingers itched to touch it.

I'd been denying it, but I had it bad for the man.

"You know, Rosie is crazy about you," I whispered.

“Yeah? I like her too,” he said with a smile that seemed to fade when he looked down at me.

He was easily a foot taller than I was, even in heels. But that didn’t stop me from sliding my hands up his chest and wrapping them around the back of his neck.

“What are you doing, Avery?” he murmured, his voice impossibly deep.

“Just wanted to test a theory,” I whispered, tugging on him just to see what he would do.

Dante bent his head, his warm lips brushed against mine, and I swear, I felt him everywhere. All through me. Especially when we kissed in the dark at the back of the barn.

Music and chatter from the wedding party faded into the background, and all I wanted was to keep on kissing him. But Dante stopped.

Shaking his head, he stepped back, those warm velvet eyes looked hunted as footsteps approached.

It was Penny and Max. The owner of the ranch slapped his hand on Dante’s back and the two of them walked off, leaving me and Penny with Rosie.

A few minutes later, I asked Penny to watch my little girl while I sought Dante out. I had to know if he was feeling the same way I was.

Something about that kiss had started a fire in my blood, and I wanted, no, I needed him to help me figure it out. Only when I did find him, he was talking to Max.

“I can’t. She’s a mom with too many responsibilities!”

Dante's rough words had stopped me cold, and I left that night without talking to him. In fact, I'd been avoiding him since. Throughout the holidays, I'd managed to keep my distance.

But Rosie's birthday was next week, and she'd asked if Danny—that was her nickname for Dante—could come to her party.

What kind of mom would I be if I said no? Besides, we were having it at the ranch. That would be kind of rude of me to leave him out.

I had the invitation with his name on it in my purse, along with the handful of others I'd addressed and placed in stamped envelopes.

Dante might not be the man for me, but he was kind to my daughter. She loved the big cowboy, and that was enough for me to invite him.

Like I already said, I would do anything for my Rosie.

Ignoring the big, burly man wasn't going to be easy. But I'd manage.

All I had to do was remember he didn't want me.

Oh no. Not a mama with a ready-made family.

Mr. Sexy Cowpoke wanted a virgin, some mythical, untouched maiden to fit perfectly in his little fantasy world where women stayed barefoot and pregnant in his kitchen.

Guys like him all wanted a real damsel in distress type. The kind where he could play knight in shining fur or whatever for however long it took until he got bored and moved on to greener pastures, and well, I simply wasn't that.

Rosie was irrefutable evidence of that I was about as far from virginal as you could get.

I couldn't say I was surprised by Dante's rejection of me. But I was disappointed.

Terribly disappointed.

I needed to get over it and him. Because honestly? I didn't have time to waste on someone who didn't want me or couldn't accept me as I was.

Not even big, sexy someones who treated my little girl like a princess and was as polite and gentle as he was hulking and handsome.

Okay, I was being ridiculous.

Mourning him was idiotic.

One kiss did not a relationship make, and even though I thought it was pretty nice—and by that I meant earth shattering —Dante clearly did not feel the same.

I was much better off having shoved the confounded man into the friend-zone where my desire for him should hopefully die a quick death.

Only, it wasn't working.

I still dreamed about him. Still pictured him when I used my little personal massager in the dark of night when I was all alone in my bed.

Shit.

The bell rang, its sharp, familiar tone echoing down the hallways and signaling the

countdown: two more hours to go.

I let out a slow breath, reminding myself that I could get through it.

Most days, being a school nurse was fulfilling.

The small victories kept me going—patching up scraped knees, soothing anxious students, and occasionally being the only adult who really listened to a kid in need.

But today wasn't most days.

After Mr. Dryden's little revelation about talking with Rosie, my mood had taken a nosedive.

Time crawled, and I was still reeling from that jerk's words.

No father at home.

What did Dryden, or anyone else for that matter, know about mine or Rosie's lives?

I never knew much about the man who'd fathered her. He wasn't exactly my boyfriend or anything.

Just a guy I had a one-night stand with that resulted in me getting pregnant at just twenty-three years old.

That kind of thing happened a lot, right?

It didn't make me a bad person. I wasn't a tramp or easy or whatever else it was my own parents had said when I'd told them the news.

It took a long time for me to get over their rejection, but I was fine with it now. We didn't need that kind of negativity.

My parents had no part in mine or Rosie's life. Neither would anyone who talked down to me or my child.

Screw anyone who thought they had the right to that.

Her father was supposed to be just a one night stand. He'd been passing through town. Just another cowboy competing on the Northeastern circuit.

I'd seen him before. We'd flirted whenever he came to our own little Cow Country Rodeo. That year he'd been through a few times.

His name was Nicky Crowden.

He'd been big and handsome with the same crooked grin my Rosie had.

No, I didn't regret a single minute of the night we'd shared for one simple fact. He gave me her.

Nicky showed up about two months after she was born. And again when she had her first birthday. That was when he'd cleaned out the emergency funds coffee can I'd kept in my kitchen on top of the fridge.

I'd had about six hundred dollars saved at the time and had been planning on using it to start a college fund for Rosie.

After that, I never heard from him again. And that was still too soon for me.

The bastard.

There'd been no one since then. I mean, I'd shied away from men, choosing to focus on my daughter.

It'd obviously been the right choice since the one man I'd been attracted to since Nicky had turned me down flat.

I'd seen Dante several times since Jezebel's wedding. He'd tried talking to me, but honestly, I didn't want to hear it. I usually raised my hand and said no before he even opened his mouth.

I was being rude, but whatever.

Clearly, my man radar was broken.

I'd only just considered trying to date again when Mr. Dryden appeared at school. Two conversations in the lounge and the creep thought he could parent my daughter.

Hell. No.

The idea of him anywhere near her made my blood run cold. Dryden's involvement just felt wrong.

And I was through feeling charitable. With him. With everyone.

My hands tightened around the clipboard I picked up as I went to watch the students in the hall.

I forced myself to loosen my grip before I snapped it in half.

Two more hours till I could take my sweet girl home and leave this place behind for the weekend.

I could do this. I'd been through worse.

Still, the weight of everything felt like it was pressing down on me.

Here I took care of cuts and bruises. I doled out Band-aids and sugar free lollipops, making the boo-boos go away.

Usually, I took pride in my work. In my ability to offer sympathy and compassion to these kids when they were away from their parents.

But today, it felt like I was losing ground.

Self-doubt crept in and I wondered if I wasn't a terrible mother, after all. It was my biggest fear. Every parent's biggest fear. That something lacking in me was causing Rosie's upset.

That I was to blame for it.

I sighed and offered a wan smile to the passing kindergartners who waved as they walked to the cafeteria.

I had enough on my mind without that unfortunate kiss taking up residency like it was paying rent.

It was best not to think about big dumb men who made me crazy.

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“ G oddamnit, Jed! Will you get Dolly Lou Who outta here!” Kian screeched, grabbing his ass where the goat head butted him a second time.

My Bear snarled as the sound of the Bull Shifter’s wails reverberated in the closed dairy barn. We were repairing some leaks we’d found on the roof, using a special sealant on the ceiling inside to finish up the job.

“Sorry, Kian. Doll Lou is just a curious little thing, ain’t cha girl?” the old Prairie Dog Shifter replied, tossing a rope around the little goat’s neck, and tugging her outside.

This barn was for the dairy cows. The new one for the goats was located in the enclosed pasture next door. Cows and goats got along fine, but Jed spoiled his little girls, giving them free rein.

Personally, I was a fan of Dolly Lou, and any other goat who took issue with Kian. That obnoxious bovine was on my last nerve.

Ever since Emmet got hitched, the asshole couldn’t stop yapping about finding his mate. After which he always seemed to bring up Avery. Almost hinting the woman was his mate.

Fuck. No. Grrrr.

I knew for a fact he was just being a dick. But that didn’t stop my inner Grizzly from wanting to tear his head off.

“Dante, can I talk to you for a second?” Emmet, our foreman, asked, and I nodded, tossing the sealant covered rag I was holding at Kian’s stupid face.

“Finish this up, douche canoe,” I mumbled.

“What’s the magic word? You know, I would happily do it if you just admit your feelings for me!”

“Shut. Up.”

“You can’t keep denying our love!”

“Easy,” Emmet said, eyebrows raised.

He glanced down, Demon shining in his eyes, and I followed his glare to see my hands had shifted into claws.

Fuck.

I was seconds from shifting into my Bear right there inside the barn.

That wouldn’t be good, seeing as how I was too fucking big for this place to contain me.

The damage alone would cost a fortune. Not to mention what Max would say if I killed that asshole Bull.

“You alright, man?” Emmet asked.

“Yeah. Sorry. What’s up?” I growled, rolling my neck on my shoulders and forcing the monster back inside.

“Kian only fucks with you because you react. You do know that, right?”

“Yep. I know it. Was that all you wanted? To impart those words of wisdom or was there a fucking point to you interrupting me, Emmet?” I snapped.

“Not a fan of small talk then, huh? I can appreciate that,” the Wolf said and dipped his chin.

“Well? What do you want?”

“Oh! It’s not what I want. There are two things actually. I caught a scent when I was checking the woods this morning.”

“A scent?”

“Ursine. Not yours. And not wild.”

“Alright. I’ll check. What else?”

“Oh, Penny called my wife because she came home early from the bakery.”

“And?” I asked and shrugged.

I mean, sure I cared about the women, and all. But really, what the fuck did Max’s mate coming home early have to do with me?

“ And Jez says she’s not feeling too good,” Emmet continued, the duh was implied. “Of course, we think it might be the fact she’s carrying twins and doesn’t seem to know it. Boss hasn’t told her yet either.”

“Okay. And?” I asked, losing my fucking patience.

“Oh, the other and is she was supposed to pick up Avery and Rosie. They’re coming to work on decorations for the little one’s birthday party next week. We’re having it in the old barn.”

“Why isn’t Avery able to drive? Is she okay?” I asked.

I was curious, concerned, really. And yeah, I was already removing my tool belt.

Of course, I would fetch them. My heart thundered at every single prospect of seeing that woman and her cub.

Ever since my mother died, and I left my old Clan, I’d been searching for a connection. Something to ground my Bear.

When I first met the little firecracker of a human, she damn near brained me with a metal bat.

But I swear to the gods that had nothing on the lightning bolt that zapped me right in the chest the second I met her honey gold stare.

Avery was it for me. The woman was my fated mate.

I knew it.

My Grizzly knew it.

But she didn’t.

And that was the whole fucking problem.

Really, I should just stay away from her. A monster like me had no business with

soft, sweet things like her.

But I couldn't. She took up every inch of available space in my head and my heart, and I wanted her with a ferocity that rivaled my Bear's hunger for all things honey flavored—which coincidentally happened to be her natural scent.

What were the odds? A woman smelling like honey, with eyes just as gold, and a temper worse than Lucifer himself.

Fucking perfect.

"Car's at that new place, Lance's Auto Repair & Body Shop. It's a chain," Emmet explained before continuing, "Dion, the mechanic, is a Lion Shifter, he said it needs a new transmission. Gonna cost an arm and a leg."

"That car would serve everyone better if it was crushed into a cube like a piece of modern art," I grumbled, worrying about the safety of my future mate always put my Bear on edge.

"I agree. But Avery won't let Max buy her a new one. He already offered."

That Max had offered to buy Avery a new car was a kind gesture. At least, I was sure he meant it that way, likely to keep his own mate from worrying.

But it made my fur bristle and my Bear chuff angrily. No one should be taking care of my girls but me.

I shouldn't think about Avery and Rosie as mine, but the sassy woman and her sweet cub felt important to me. The Bear had already claimed them in his mind.

Sure, we'd only kissed the one time, but I knew even before her lips touched mine,

she was the one.

I didn't know what the fuck I'd done wrong to make her hate me ever since then.

In all honesty, it wrecked my confidence having her growl the word no at me every time she saw me since. But not talking to her was making my beast unmanageable, and a pissed off Grizzly wasn't good for anyone.

I had to talk to her. To come clean about my feelings.

But it wasn't easy.

The fear of rejection was real and mighty.

Aside from all that, I still had to tell Avery what I suspected about Rosie Posie. That child was special. And not just because she was so sweet she gave me a toothache just looking at her.

Cute little cub. Precious baby.

See, ever since I met the pretty little girl, my Bear had started calling her cub . More than that. The possessive beast thought of her as my cub .

At first, I thought it was just my animal being proprietary, laying claim to the child of the woman the Fates destined to be our mate.

Then I scented fur beneath the little girl's skin, and I realized there was another reason my Bear called her cub.

Another possibility that her own mother had absolutely no idea about.

How could she know? She's human.

I knew through their friendship that Penelope had told Avery a little about her own situation.

How Penny was Max's mate and through his claiming bite she was now a supernatural creature just like him.

It must have blown the tiny human's mind, learning that monsters were real. I felt for her, I really did. But I didn't know what Penelope told Avery about the rest of us, if anything.

What did she understand about the paranormal world and the secret she must now keep?

Did Avery know about fated mates and what she was to me?

And what would she say to me if I told her all that?

The supernatural world was a secret from the normal one. Keeping that secret was tantamount to our very survival.

Humans could be terrible creatures, and though it was true, there were many who knew of our existence, the world, as a whole, denied it.

Really, that was simply fine. It was probably better for us all that way.

But what about Avery?

Was she aware her daughter's biological father was likely a Shifter?

I had no idea how she would react. No clue if she'd even believe me.

"So, will you go?" Emmet interrupted my spiraling thoughts.

"Will I go where?" I asked dumbly. "Oh! Yes. I'm leaving now," I said without looking back.

My Bear rumbled inside my chest, the beast eager to see them both. I could bring them back, maybe pick up dinner for everyone to share once we got back here.

I wished I were taking her home to my cabin, but baby steps. Maybe Max wouldn't mind if I joined them for dinner if I provided the pizza.

Avery worked so hard, and she did such a good job caring for Rosie after work. She might appreciate not having to cook.

I could do that for her.

Cook, laundry, whatever.

My mama didn't raise me to be a slob, and I respected women. Christ, I missed my mother. And no, that didn't make me a pussy, fuck you very much.

Men should respect and care for the woman who bore them, and I still loved my mother fiercely. Even though so many years had passed since she'd left this world.

She was a good Sow. She taught me well, and yes, I believed in equal distribution of chores and household duties.

Hell, taking care of a mate, of Avery and Rosie, as my cub, specifically, would be the honor of my life.

I just had to convince her to give me a shot. I had to make her see, to let me prove I was worthy.

My truck creaked as I got inside, even though it had been customized to bear my weight. I was a big fucker. I knew that.

Hulking. Uncommunicative, and mostly crude when I did talk. But I could do better. For them, I would do better.

I just had to make her listen.

Fat fucking chance.

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“Mama, it’s so cold Mr. Bunny Tail got frost on his whiskers,” Rosie said, jumping up and down and waving her favorite stuffed bunny in the air.

He was an old beat up toy with purple fur and painted buttons for eyes. I couldn’t count the number of times I’d operated on him, but she loved the silly toy, and it was always my pleasure.

“I see that, Rosie Posie. Just a few minutes longer, and Aunt Penny should be here to get us,” I said, sending a silent thank you into the universe for my best friend.

Penny was the bomb. I was so happy she’d finally met a man who deserved her in Maximillian Leeds, but I missed having her as a neighbor.

I hadn’t been able to find a replacement tenant yet, and losing the extra income was sadly noticeable in my meager savings account.

“Looks like Mr. Bunny Tail’s got another boo boo, Rosie,” I said, frowning at the gap in the seam of his right foot.

“Oh no! Can you fix it?” my little girl asked, her big brown eyes wide and guileless.

My heart squeezed inside my chest every time I looked at her. Logically, I knew perfection didn’t exist.

But even if she threw up on my infrequent gentleman callers, or had the occasional kerfuffle with a classmate, Rosie was the perfect little light of my life.

She was a wonderful child. And I'd punch anyone who said otherwise right in the nose.

"Of course I can fix Mr. Bunny Tail. Well, that is, I know I can do it if someone can be my good little helper," I said, grinning at her.

"I'm a good little helper, Mama!" she said and raised her hand in the air.

"You sure are, Rosie Posie," I said, and pulled her hood on.

She never seemed to get cold, but I was freezing my rather sizeable ass off while we waited for Penny to come fetch us.

Where is she?

My mind wandered to my sewing kit, and I knew I had the right needle and thread to fix Rosie's favorite stuffie. I'd just ask Penny to stop by the house so I could grab it on the way to the ranch.

I'd gotten almost as good at mending dolls and stuffies as I was fixing boo boos on the kids at school. Only these patients weren't quite so squirrely.

Thank God.

Word had somehow spread about my sewing talent, and students had started bringing me their toys and dolls to fix. Even Principal Jefferson had hired me to repair this antique rag doll she'd inherited from her grandmother.

It had taken a little bit of time to get the right material, authentic from the time period when the doll was made, but I managed it. She was thrilled with the results, paid me quite nicely, and a handy little side business was born.

I even had a one page website set up where customers could leave reviews and prospective clients could send inquiries. I called it Avery's Care & Repair for Dolls & Precious Things .

It was long, but it got the point across.

My phone buzzed, and I frowned at the incoming text message from Penelope.

Penny

Hey Av,

Sorry I have a stomach bug, so I'm not driving.

I sent Dante to get you. Don't say no.

Just get in the car and bring me my favorite niece.

I had to read it three times before panic started to set in. Leave it to Penny to try to play matchmaker, only she sucked at it.

Just for that, I did not bother replying to her text.

The prospect of being alone with Dante in a small, confined space was not pleasant. Like at all.

What if I did something stupid?

Like licked him.

Oh my God. I'm such a total dork.

The fact that my libido had been on life support ever since Rosalie was born was something I lamented. But I'd learned to live with.

Then I met Dante, and it was all hellooooo nurse , er, cowboy .

Seriously, it was like my pussy had received a jolt from a defibrillator on the highest setting.

Every night for months, I'd had dreams of the big guy. And when I said dreams, I meant the dirty, sweaty, waking up with a pulsating pussy kind of dreams.

I blinked my eyes and looked straight ahead, not really seeing anything. Then the rumbling of a big engine sounded. I jerked my gaze to the pickup truck that pulled in front of us, and startled at the pair of warm, velvet irises that seemed so intent on me.

Dante.

My entire body lit up like the fourth of July, and I wanted to curse and scream for all of my bad luck. But then Rosie caught sight of him, and it was too late to tuck tail and run away.

What was he doing here?

The answer was obviously Penny. She was trying to get me back for setting her up with Max. I mean, she thought she was doing me a solid.

But Dante didn't want me, and I was too embarrassed by the situation to tell her what had happened between me and the big guy.

Looked like I'd have to, though, or she might never give up on her latest get Avery laid campaign.

“Danny!” Rosie shouted.

I couldn’t deny she liked the guy. I mean, she hadn’t puked on him, so that was a good sign.

Geezus. Lord, have mercy.

Did he have to be so tall? And wide? And just, fuck, I don’t know, hot as the sun?

Height could be subjective. I’d always been short, which meant everyone appeared tall to me.

But not Dante. He really was tall compared to everyone. The man had to be over six and a half feet.

I stood a not so towering five foot two inches. But what I lacked in height I made up for in being curvy.

Seriously, my boobs sometimes entered rooms seconds before the rest of me.

Same could be said for my ass if I was walking backwards, which, as the mother of a spunky six year old, I did and often.

Naturally, I had a thing for big men. Rosie’s sperm donor had been big. But even he had nothing on Dante.

The cowboy was just large and graceful, too. Effortlessly so.

Whenever I was near him, he commanded all my attention. I was rendered blind, deaf, and mute to all others when in his presence. Helpless to resist the compulsion to watch his every move.

He should have been awkward or robotic given his size, but he was anything but.

Watching him was like observing a dance, or a moving work of art. He had this smooth way about him that would have made other men cocky, but not Dante.

He wasn't conceited, and he didn't give off jerk vibes—believe me when I said I had first-hand experience with those.

Really, he was the perfect man.

And, of course, he wanted nothing to do with me.

FML.

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D ante Bianco checked every single one of my boxes.

If I were a sculptor, he would be my very own Pygmalion come to life.

I sometimes wished I was one of those effortlessly confident women who could make men fall at their feet with barely a glance. You know the type. Tall, elegant, perfectly aware of their place in the world at the top of the totem pole.

But that wasn't me. In fact, I was the polar opposite of whatever that was.

So naturally, I stood like a moron as he exited his truck and walked around to greet Rosie, those sturdy arms open wide for my little girl.

My mouth went dry, my thoughts silenced by the sight of him closing the space between us.

Every step seemed deliberate.

Each one a display of restrained power.

The sturdy denim of his jeans gripped his tree trunk thighs like it was barely holding together.

Stretching and yielding as if defying the laws of whatever it was that held fabric together.

Physics maybe?

I wasn't exactly in a position to contemplate that since I had to remind myself to breathe as my chest tightened.

The flannel shirt clung to his broad torso, hinting at the raw strength beneath.

I'd seen him without it once—just once—but it had been enough to etch the memory into my mind.

Dante wasn't just a man. He was a force of nature.

His muscles weren't chiseled in the way leaner men's often were. But he didn't need intricate definition to be sexy as fuck.

What he had was raw, unfiltered power. The kind that spoke of function over form, of strength born not from vanity but from purpose.

And God, but it pulled at something primal in me.

There was a part of me that wanted to be enveloped by him. Like I wanted to just sink into the warmth and safety of his presence.

It was irrational. A purely visceral desire—to feel the weight of his arms around me, to take refuge in the unyielding shelter of his body.

The dominance he carried wasn't flashy or loud. It was quiet, understated, like a steady hum of electricity in the air, a shield of confidence and capability that surrounded him.

His muscles seemed to ripple with each motion, tensing and relaxing in a symphony of strength.

Even the simple act of adjusting his belt before crouching down to scoop up my eager daughter seemed to radiate a kind of masculine grace.

Rosie didn't hesitate. She darted toward him with a giggle, certain that his arms would open for her—and they did.

He caught her like it was his job. Like he'd done it a million times. His big hands cradling her as though she were made of glass.

It was a sight that should have melted me, should have made me trust him more.

Instead, it made me wary. Because, as much as it pained me to admit, Dante wasn't ours.

He might seem like a gentle giant, but he was a man who could break hearts. And I wasn't sure I could afford to let mine be one of them.

See, Dante might be my dream guy, but I wasn't his dream girl. Rosie wasn't his daughter. And he wasn't here to sign up for me and my ready-made family.

The cold hard truth was we were nothing to Dante. Admitting that, even if only to myself, hurt more than I cared to admit.

I had to force the lump in my throat down before I nodded my hello at him.

My heart squeezed as I listened to Rosie rattle on about her day. Dante listened, as he always did, giving her his full attention.

Shit.

I wished he wouldn't do that. I mean, I just didn't want him to let her down once he

got tired of her, as single men who weren't fathers tended to do.

I'd have to have a chat with him.

But right then, I allowed myself to enjoy the fantasy of seeing him hoist my daughter in the air and smile at her like he really did care.

She squealed with delight as he held her up high and gave her a spin that had her giggling uncontrollably.

Dangerous daydream, Avery.

Shut it down.

"Let's get her buckled before she pukes on you," I said.

"Pukes?" he asked, eyebrows raised.

"Mama, I only puked on that man who smelled bad like old coffee. You said you wasn't mad," Rosie murmured, and her lower lip quivered.

"Oh, Rosie, I wasn't mad. And it wasn't your fault, precious girl. But you wouldn't want to throw up on Mr. Bianco, would you?" I asked and reached for my daughter.

"It's Dante, and no worries, a little throw up is nothing. Ain't that right, Rosie Posie?" he asked, putting her in the back seat of his truck where he had a child safety seat ready and waiting.

Hmm.

That was weird. It looked new. But why would Dante buy a safety seat for his truck?

“Avery, you comin’?” he murmured, and I looked up to see him waiting with the passenger door open.

“Oh, um, thank you,” I said, and went to climb inside.

It was a tall truck, and I was a short woman. I’d been inside it before, but I guess I was more tired than I thought because I missed the runner and almost toppled backwards with my big bag weighing down my shoulder.

Lucky for me, Dante was quick, and strong.

“Easy. I gotcha,” he rumbled, his big hands catching me by my waist.

“Oof! Uh, thanks,” I murmured, feeling my cheeks burn as I righted myself and got into the damn truck.

Kill me now.

Bad enough I’d already thrown myself at the big guy and been refused, but now he’d managed to cop a feel right where I was squishiest.

My stomach was soft, and I had stretch marks there that matched the ones on my boobs, thanks to my pregnancy and my love of everything delicious and chocolatey.

Sure, I could blame it on genetics or being big-boned or whatever, but the fact was I liked food.

I’d tried fad diets, but they never worked. And despite being a nurse, I was not big on taking unnecessary medication. I was overweight, but I was active and relatively healthy, too.

I simply enjoyed eating.

It probably didn't help that my bestie was an out of this world baker. I'd helped Penny over the years at her bakery, and now at the monthly rodeo, I worked her food truck with her, too.

She paid me in muffins and birthday cakes for Rosie.

Don't laugh, those were damn expensive. Especially the artistic ones Penny made.

This year my baby girl had requested a cake shaped like a big old teddy bear, and Penelope was thrilled with the challenge of creating realistic fur using only chocolate buttercream.

I couldn't wait.

Speaking of which, I had to stop by the house for my sewing kit and the decorations and plans for Rosie's party.

"Um, could you drop by my place? I have to get something," I asked quietly, and Dante hummed before responding.

"Of course."

"Mama has to get her kit for Mr. Bunny Tail," Rosie enthused.

"Your what?"

"Oh, she means sewing kit," I explained.

"Nuh uh, Mama. It's your Care & Repair kit!"

Dante raised his eyebrows and glanced at me expectantly while maneuvering his truck expertly down the icy streets.

“It’s for Mr. Bunny Tail,” I blurted.

“Mama fixes all my friends’ dolls and stuffies, Danny. She’s the best nurse,” Rosie confirmed.

“I don’t doubt it, Rosie Posie,” Dante said with that killer grin that made my heart beat double time.

He pulled up to my front door, and I unbuckled my seat belt.

“Do you need help?”

“No, no. You two stay here. I’ll be right back!” I said too brightly.

Ugh. Kill me now.

The sky was heavy with clouds in every shade of gray and white, and I knew we were going to get snow.

Excitement filled me, battling with my nerves at the thought of driving out to the ranch, sitting in the passenger seat of Dante’s truck.

I mean, why should I be so excited? This man had basically rejected me twice. And yet, I couldn't seem to stop crushing on him.

Apparently, I was a glutton for something other than Penny’s amazing baked goods.

When will I learn?

“Mama, are we gonna build a snowman?” Rosie interrupted my turbulent thoughts.

“We sure are,” I told her with a smile.

“Supposed to get a foot or more. Did you all bring enough clothes?” Dante asked, his brows furrowed with concern.

“Yup! Mama got me pink sparkly snow pants! They only had plain in the store, but Mama fixed them cause she’s magic.” Rosie said, and my cheeks burned with embarrassment.

“I used a ton of fabric glue and glitter. It’s no big deal. She, um, likes pink,” I murmured, my cheeks burning for whatever reason.

“I disagree. I think it’s a very big deal, Avery. You’re a real good mom,” he said, and a ripple of pure pleasure rolled through me at the unexpected compliment.

I hummed noncommittally and turned my attention to the scenery speeding by. But Dante didn’t drive recklessly. On the contrary, he had total control of the vehicle. And I felt completely secure in both mine and Rosie’s safety with him at the wheel.

“How about some music?” Dante’s deep voice interrupted my thoughts, and I nodded as he flipped the station on.

“Is this 80s glam rock?” I asked with a giggle catching in my throat.

“Don’t tell me you don’t like Poison?” he asked, the started belting along with Brett Michaels about roses and thorns and turning my insides to goo.

He could sing, too? What the actual fuck?

Dangerous, sexy man.

Rosie knew the song well, since it was one of my favorites, and soon, we were all singing along as we made our way to Penny and Max's house.

It was beautiful on the Motley Crewd Ranch no matter the season, but something about seeing it draped in white made my insides quiver with expectation.

Or maybe that was just the company.

Down girl. Down.

Three times rejected was not something I wanted to experience. Best to ignore the trembling butterflies in my stomach whenever he was around.

Rushing into things was how I wound up a single parent, and even though I wouldn't change it for the world, I didn't need a man who played games. No more emotional rollercoasters for me.

Dante Bianco might be a good man.

Heck, he might be an exceptional man.

But he wasn't my man.

Just remember that, Avery. And you won't have any problems.

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Mine.

My Bear chuffed inside of me, pawing at the ground in the metaphysical realm where he waited until we swapped skins.

My entire being seemed to buzz with awareness, and I knew it was all because of her. Avery Brown was everything I ever wanted in a woman, but I didn't know how to tell her. It wasn't even that I couldn't find the words, and God knew I wasn't a poet.

It was more that I couldn't get close enough to even try. She kept throwing up roadblocks every time I drew near. Mixed signals were confusing in the best of times, but I was a Shifter.

With her mouth saying one thing and her scent another, I didn't know whether I was coming or going.

Definitely not coming.

As if I wasn't keenly aware of the fact my cock ached for her day in and out, it gave a hefty thump beneath my jeans at that precise moment.

Grrr.

"What was that?" she asked.

"Nothing," I murmured, forcing my Bear to shut the fuck up.

Mine.

The idiotic beast inside of me didn't understand why I was delaying what he saw as inevitable.

Claim her. Mate.

The animal in me didn't get it. But frustration was my middle name. Every second spent without Avery in my arms was adding up, mounting one on top of the other, building up to an unattainable height.

It was dangerous for Shifters like me. See, I needed something to anchor my monster, and a mate would do that for me. Give me purpose.

But Avery deserved the right to choose.

Fuck, how I wanted her to pick me.

It was borderline pathetic.

Still, I wasn't a total cave Bear, though. I mean, it wasn't like I was going to grab her by the hair and drag her to my den.

I wanted to, don't get me wrong. Avery was it for me. She was the one woman in the entire world I wanted.

But there would be no hair pulling— unless she asked for it.

It was a real fucking problem.

I parked the truck in front of Max's place.

“Thanks for the ride,” Avery began, jumping out of the truck faster than I could blink.

What was wrong with me that this woman lit out like her boots were on fire every time I got close?

It wasn’t just once or twice—it was every single time.

Like I had some kind of invisible warning label slapped on my forehead.

And yet, no matter how many times she bolted, I couldn’t stop myself from wanting her. Damn, it was frustrating as hell, like trying to catch smoke with my bare hands.

Still, hope clung to me like a burr in a horse’s tail, refusing to let go, no matter how much it hurt.

Hope could be a poisonous thing, couldn’t it?

Sweet at first. Like honey.

I should know, right? I mean, hello, Bear shifter here.

But it had a way of corroding you from the inside out when it went unfulfilled for too long.

Some days, I wondered if it would leave me hollow, burned up from the inside until there was nothing left but ash and regret.

How much longer could I keep this up—aching for her, chasing a dream that always seemed just out of reach?

Every time she walked away, I told myself I’d let it go. That I’d turn my back and

forget her.

Like maybe the Fates had it wrong, and she wasn't mine.

But the second she was gone, the hole she left behind opened wider, like a canyon splitting my chest in two.

And God help me, I didn't know what to do about it.

I wasn't used to feeling powerless. But with her, that's all I ever felt.

Powerless to make her stay.

Powerless to figure out why she ran.

Powerless to stop wanting her.

It was like trying to navigate a storm with no compass, and every step I took only left me more lost.

But still, I couldn't help but hope that maybe, just maybe, one day she'd stop running.

"No, Mama! I want Danny! Pick me up, Danny, please," Rosie Posie yelled from the back seat.

At least somebody liked me.

"I got her," I said, waiting for Avery to nod her okay before I unbuckled the little imp.

God, she was adorable. Her face scrunched up at the fat snowflakes falling from the

sky.

“She’s heavy,” Avery protested, but I just chuckled.

“I’ll come back for the bags,” I murmured, and Avery bit her bottom lip and nodded.

But before we got to the front door, Max was there, shaking his head.

“I’m sorry Av, Rosie, but Penny isn’t feeling well,” he said, and damn, but he looked bad.

“Is she sick? Oh my God, I have to see her,” Avery replied, obviously worried about her best friend.

“No, sorry, Av. She doesn’t want you or Rosie to see her like this. Her head’s in the toilet, and well, Mrs. O’Hare is mopping the kitchen after she caught a whiff of some raw chicken and just went straight up Exorcist on the place,” Max explained, shaking his head, and turning a little green himself.

“Oh God. Is she sure? I mean, I am a nurse?—”

“I know that. Thing is, well, this isn’t how I was planning on telling anyone,” Max mumbled, and stepped further out onto the porch.

“Maximillian Leeds, if you don’t tell me what is going on with my best friend, I swear to all that is holy I will end you,” Avery snarled at the man, completely unfazed by his natural Alpha dominance.

Just one more reason the woman was hot as fuck. I mean, if Jersey Devils didn’t make her afraid, my Bear would be a piece of cake for her.

“I’m gonna set Rosie down,” I murmured.

“Okay. Rosie, you stay close,” Avery told her, but didn’t break eye contact with Max.

“Can I play with the snow?” Rosie asked, and I nodded, figuring it was okay.

“You see, uh, Sugarplum doesn’t know yet, but well, she’s expecting ,” Max stage whispered.

“Oh my fuck, you knocked her up!” Avery hissed.

“I mean, it was a mutual knocking of certain, um, parts,” he mumbled, rubbing the back of his neck.

“Ew. I do not need to know that. Okay, so she’s pukey. I get it,” Avery said, and smiled while her eyes filled with tears.

“Congratulations! You’re gonna be a great dad,” I said, extending my hand.

“Dad? Shit. I’m gonna be a dad!” Max whisper-screamed and turned around so fast he spun on some snow and fell right on his ass.

“Uh, you alright?”

“Yeah. Yeah. I’m fine. Just gonna be a dad. Shit. What if I fuck it up?” he asked, and his eyes were so wide, I wondered if they might fall out of his head.

“You won’t,” I replied, clapping him on the shoulder. “And if you do, the Crew will be here to help you make it right.”

“Right? Yeah. Okay.”

“Max! Get in here,” Mrs. O’Hare yelled from inside.

“Okay. Bye. Thanks, um, bye.”

Max ran inside and closed the door on us. The snow was falling heavily, and I watched Rosie playing out of the corner of my eye while I tried to figure out my next move.

“A baby? Penny’s gonna have a baby,” Avery murmured.

Her eyes were overflowing now, and shit, what was I supposed to do? I took her hand and pulled her closer. She allowed it, which was a good sign, so I kept going, tugging her gently until I had her cradled in the warmth of my arms.

Avery hugged me back, and I held her while she cried, reveling in the fact that this strong, beautiful woman was leaning on me, even if just for a moment.

“Snow is coming down hard. Should I call an Uber?” she asked, sniffing and moving back.

“Fuck no, I mean, sorry,” I blurted. “Look, the roads are icy now, and it’s late. Why don’t you and Rosie come back to my place?”

“Your place?”

“Yeah. We all have cabins on the property, and I’ve been remodeling mine. I’ve got a pizza in the truck, we can heat it up, have dinner, and you can both stay over so you can check on Penny in the morning. And I have a guest bedroom with furniture in it, just in case you think I’m being fresh,” I said, and grinned when she did at my use of that old timey expression.

“Oh, I mean, are you sure? That’s a really nice offer. Rosie, you’re too far away,” she called out.

“I’m positive. Go on and get inside the truck. I’ll get Rosie,” I said, and nudged her gently.

Rosie had wandered close to the woods, and I jogged to catch up with her. She was staring into the copse of trees, like she could see something I couldn’t, so I used my Bear’s senses to sniff.

“Whatcha doing over here, Rosie Posie?”

“Just playing,” she said, and scrunched her nose up adorably.

“Well, come on now. Your mama is waiting.”

I picked her up with one last sniff to see if I could determine what she’d been looking at.

It was hard to discern scents in the dead of winter, but fur was pretty unmistakable and that was what I smelled.

I just didn’t know whose fur, and that worried me.

“Rosie, I want you to promise me you won’t go off in the woods alone ever, okay?”

“Why?” she asked.

“Because it’s not safe and your mama would worry. You promise?”

“But what if someone needs my help?”

“If that happens you come tell me and I’ll help too, okay?”

“Okay, Danny. I promise,” she said and laid her head down on my shoulder.

I got her inside the truck and buckled in no time. About seven minutes later, we arrived at my cabin, and I waited with bated breath to see what Avery and Rosie would think of my modest home.

It wasn’t a sprawling house like Max’s. But then again, I wasn’t a multi-millionaire like him, either.

Don’t get me wrong, I wasn’t completely bereft. I’d worked all my life, and I’d saved some money. More than some. I mean, I could never spend it all on my own. But it was enough to care for a family.

My family .

If I were lucky enough to have one, of course.

“Is this your cabin?” Avery asked, moving closer to the window so she could see.

Inside me, pride and nerves were having an all-out slap fight. Like the reels of Eastern European traditional slap contests that Kian kept showing everyone when we were supposed to be working.

What a fuckhead.

But honestly, it was the best metaphor I had for my battling emotions.

It wasn’t clear who was winning.

Pride stood there, all smug and confident. Like it had this whole situation under control.

Meanwhile, Nerves was panicking in the corner. Shouting things like don't let her in and she's gonna hate it .

It felt like a sitcom playing out in my chest—if sitcoms involved way too much sweating and a stomach that couldn't decide if it was doing flips for love or sheer terror.

But I was in it now, and there was no going back. I just had to ride out this wave of emotional stupidity and see for myself how Avery would react.

“Um, yeah. This is mine. Max worked it out with the Crew. We each get a place with an option to own it ourselves if we stick it out on the ranch. He also gave us all percentages of the ranch.”

“Wait. So, you like own part of the ranch?” Avery asked as we exited the truck.

“Yeah. I do,” I said and stood a little straighter as I unbuckled Rosie from her car seat and handed her to Avery.

I might not have understood at the time why a man like Max, someone who had money, power, and an ivy league education, was giving a bunch of slobs like me a stake in his place.

But I understood it now.

He was tying us to the ranch, to him, and giving our beasts something to work for.

I said it before and I'd say it again, the Devil was smart.

“This doesn’t look like Uncle Emmet’s cabin, Mama. Danny’s is better,” Rosie observed, and I grinned as pride finally won the war inside me.

“It sure is,” Avery said, offering me a shy smile.

“You can go inside. Door’s unlocked. And I’ll, um, get the bags and everything.”

“Okay. Thanks,” she replied, holding only her pocketbook and Avery.

My heart constricted, squeezing me to death as I watched Avery walk inside my home with Rosie in her arms for the first time.

Heat filled me and a sense of rightness. Having them here was everything I’d ever imagined it would be.

I just had to figure out how to make it permanent.

Mine.

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Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 10:35 am

The snow was really coming down as I tucked Rosie into the full-sized bed inside Dante's guest room.

Strange, I expected dark, masculine colors to dominate the big man's home, but I was wrong. The entire place was bright and cozy, with large windows facing the forest that seemed to edge along the entire property.

Inside the cabin, the wood floors were polished and gleaming. All the accents were all pale nudes, peaches, and sage greens. The guest room in particular surprised me with the mostly pink accent rug and bedding.

I wouldn't say it was for a child, but it was definitely more feminine than I expected. I worried my lower lip, leaving the door slightly open so I could hear Rosie if she woke.

If Dante had a woman in his life since he'd been at Dry Creek, I hadn't seen her. But why else would he have pink bedding, for fuck's sake?

The idea of him with someone else made my stomach twist in knots, but that wasn't fair.

I had no claim on him. We weren't exes or anything. I mean, we were never involved with each other.

Heck, we weren't even friends.

Why did you agree to stay here, then?

“She go down all right?” Dante asked, startling me, and I jumped, clutching my hand to my throat.

“Sorry, I didn’t mean to frighten you,” he whispered, backing up and rubbing his hand over the top of his head as I entered the surprisingly large living room.

My mouth went dry. He’d removed his flannel sometime during the pizza dinner he’d picked up before getting us, having had it safely tucked away in the covered bed of his truck. Left in a solid white t-shirt that molded to his body left me with a very serious problem.

Like how was I going to resist climbing Mount Dante and planting my flag at the topmost peak?

“Yes, she’s fine.”

“Good. Um, wine?” he asked.

“Sure.” I nodded and watched him retrieve my glass from the dining table that sat off to the side of the living room area.

It was only seven-thirty. Way too early for me to pretend to be tired. Not that I was tired. Like at all. Even after working all day, I never went to bed before eleven.

Of course, that was usually when I worked on my side gig, sewing stuffies. Which reminded me, I had a certain bunny rabbit to fix.

“I love the way you opened up the kitchen, dining, and living rooms,” I told him as I accepted the glass and took the stuffed bunny and sewing kit over to the large sofa that sat in beside the fireplace.

“Yeah? Thanks. I just thought it would be nice. Make the place bigger,” he replied, and I would swear he was blushing.

“Wanna sit with me while I fix Mr. Bunny Tail?” I asked, then froze. Mortified by my suggestion.

“I’m sorry, that’s stupid. You probably have things to do. I don’t know why I even suggested that. I mean you’ve already been so nice inviting us into your home—” I babbled, about half a second from a full on freakout.

“Avery,” he said my name and grabbed me by my upper arms. “I’d love to sit with you while you fix Mr. Bunny Tail. I’m just gonna grab a beer from the fridge. Is there anything else you’d like?”

My eyes went wide as I imagined all the things I would like from the man, but I shook my head instead. I might have been incapable of speech, but at least I didn’t make an even bigger ass of myself.

Dante’s velvet brown irises seemed to darken to an almost impossible black color, and he nodded before he let me go—reluctantly, too, or so I thought.

A few moments later, he was sitting beside me with a beer in hand as I mended my daughter’s stuffed rabbit.

“You do that well,” he remarked, and a stupid amount of pride filled me.

“Thanks. It’s probably corny, but I like to sew.”

“When did you learn? And why on earth would it be corny?” he asked, and I peeked up at him to see if he was teasing. But he looked earnest, so I answered him honestly.

“Well, I don’t know. I mean, you know I had Rosie when I was fairly young. And well, young people don’t sew.”

“But you learned?”

“Yeah, I learned.”

“And what about your family? When you found out about Rosie, didn’t they help?”

“Oh, um, no, actually. Well, it’s complicated,” I began, and surprised myself by explaining. “When I was in my late teens, early twenties, I went a little wild. Penny and I would sneak off to the rodeo and I was just dazzled by the excitement and the cowboys,” I whispered the last.

“You like cowboys?” he asked, eyebrows raised.

“I’ve been known to admire a cowboy or two,” I teased.

“Just so happens, I’m a cowboy,” he murmured, and I snorted a laugh because as usual I was just that smooth.

Don’t be jealous.

“Anyway,” I said, dragging out the word. “After that, I got pregnant. So, when people my age were hanging out in bars and having a good time, I was learning how to take care of a baby and balance a checkbook. There wasn’t a lot of money.”

“That must have been so hard. Didn’t you have anyone to help?”

I shrugged my shoulders. Truth was, I never really thought about it.

I carefully set down Mr. Bunny Tail, satisfied that the tear in his seam was stitched up good as new. Turning to Dante, I braced myself.

This wasn't easy—talking about myself—but there was something about Dante that made me feel like it was all going to be okay. Like I just had to be honest with him.

He had a quiet steadiness, a way of listening that didn't just hear but truly seemed to understand.

With him, the words I usually kept locked away felt safe to speak.

Talking to Dante was easier than I expected, easier than it had been with anyone else in a long time.

I hadn't realized how much I missed this—having someone to talk to, to open up to.

Sure, I had Penny, my best friend, but she had her own life to live now that she'd finally found happiness. I was glad for her, really, I was.

Sometimes, if I felt a little green-eyed monster sitting on my shoulder, I just brushed it off. I was only human. A woman with wants and needs of my own. But I'd been a mother for so long, pushing my desires away was second nature now.

With Dante, though, I felt all those yearnings simmering beneath the surface, coming back with a vengeance.

There was no pretense, no need to sugarcoat it.

"You know," I began, my fingers fidgeting with the hem of my shirt, "it wasn't easy. Going to nursing school while raising an infant... there were nights I thought I wouldn't make it."

“That must’ve been hard,” he growled, and damn if I didn’t feel that sound all the way to my toes.

“I don’t regret a single minute of it. Rosie is everything to me.”

My voice softened, my eyes searching his face for any flicker of judgment or understanding— was that even possible?

“She’s a wonderful child, Avery. You’ve done real good with her,” Dante said, his voice low and sincere.

His words wrapped around me like a warm blanket on a frosty night.

His praise was simple and heartfelt. It pierced through my ice exterior, heating me down to my core.

It was perfect.

I needed it. Just like I needed him.

So damn much.

His words were a validation I hadn’t realized I’d been starving for. My chest tightened, my heart swelling with an unexpected emotion that made my throat ache.

“Thank you,” I said, my voice barely above a whisper. “I guess I never realized how much those words would mean until someone actually said them out loud.”

I ducked my head, embarrassed by the tears that had suddenly pooled in my eyes, threatening to spill over.

I blinked quickly, trying to push them back, but it was no use. The raw emotion of the moment was too much, and for once, I let it wash over me.

It felt like a release—a crack in the wall I'd built around myself for so long.

Dante didn't say anything, but his presence filled the room like a quiet assurance.

He didn't need to speak. His steady gaze told me everything. I wasn't alone, not in this moment, and maybe, just maybe, not anymore.

“Would it—I mean, would you mind very much?” I murmured and nodded at him.

“Come here,” he whispered.

I simply couldn't help myself. So, I crawled onto his lap and flung my arms around his neck, holding him as tears wracked my body.

“Easy, I got you, Honey.”

Fuck. He called me Honey.

“Dante?”

“Yeah?”

I leaned back, catching his gaze with mine.

“Would it be alright if I kissed you?” I whispered, but I didn't allow him to respond.

I just pressed my lips to his and hoped for the best.

Please don't push me away.

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Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 10:35 am

Ever since I'd arrived at the Motley Crewd Ranch, I'd been building.

Not just this cabin, but a whole new life—or at least trying to.

Max gave me the two-story log cabin, like he did every one of the Crew, complete with a wraparound porch, big, picturesque windows, and enough charm to make it Instagram-worthy, someday.

When I first moved in, though, it looked more like a haunted house than a dream home.

The porch sagged like it had given up on life. The windows were so dirty they could've doubled as blackout curtains. And don't even get me started on the inside. Let's just say the raccoons seemed to think they owned the place.

I'd let my Bear roam the grounds, marking up the trees and getting my scent to rid the area of unwanted critters. They knew better than to stick around once the big dogs, or Bears, moved in.

Then I rolled up my sleeves and got to work.

Every spare dime and free minute went into fixing it up, piece by piece.

By the time I was done, it wasn't just a cabin—it was my cabin.

A home. A place where I could picture bringing a mate, raising a family, and maybe even teaching my kids to wield a hammer without smashing their thumbs.

And then came Avery.

She arrived in my life like a lightning bolt in the middle of a clear day, all fire and fury. Far as first meetings went, ours wasn't exactly romantic—unless your idea of romance involved a woman wielding a baseball bat and me walking straight into it.

To her credit, she thought I was one of the people helping Max to keep her best friend hostage.

To my credit, I didn't cry. Much.

Seriously, though, getting hit in the head with a bat fucking hurts.

Despite that less-than-perfect start, my Bear knew right then she was it. My one true mate.

Of course, Avery wasn't the demure mate I'd had in mind.

She was feisty, stubborn, and had a knack for turning my perfectly laid plans into chaos.

But damn, if she didn't make my life better for it.

And now here we were, sitting in the living room of the cabin I'd poured my heart and soul into.

The fire crackled in the background, casting a warm glow over everything, snow falling outside blanketing the whole area in white, but I barely noticed any of it.

How could I? Avery—this beautiful, infuriating, incredible woman—was in my lap, kissing me like it was an Olympic sport and she was going for gold.

Honestly, I was trying to keep up, but it was hard to think when her hands were tangled in my hair and her lips were doing things that short-circuited my brain.

This wasn't just a kiss. This was the culmination of every fantasy I'd ever had.

She pulled back just enough to catch her breath, and I blinked at her like a dazed idiot.

"You okay there, cowboy?" she teased, a wicked little grin tugging at her lips.

"Yeah," I managed, my voice a little hoarse. "Just trying to remember how to breathe."

She laughed, the sound bubbling out of her like sunshine, and in that moment, I knew one thing for certain.

Life with Avery was going to be a lot of things, but boring sure as hell wasn't one of them.

Holy. Fuck.

She was so damn sexy. So warm and sweet. The soft curves of her body melded to mine, and I'd never been so hard in all my life. I was seconds from embarrassing myself.

"Are you sure this is okay? I mean, you turned me down those other times, and I don't want you to be uncomfortable?—"

"Whoa, slow down, Honey. I don't know what I did to make you think I would ever turn you down, but I swear to every god in the universe, I want you more than anything," I growled, my Bear making my voice rough.

“But I’m a single mom and you said at Emmet’s wedding I had too many responsibilities for you to want to get involved,” she whispered, and ducked her head.

But I wasn’t having any of that. I cupped her cheek and waited for her to lift those gorgeous eyes to mine.

“Avery, I wasn’t saying I didn’t want you because of that. I was doubting myself. See, I didn’t think I was worthy of you and Rosie.”

“Why on earth would you think that?”

“What do you know about Penny and Max?” I asked.

My Bear snarled. He wanted me to shut the fuck up and just claim her. My whole body was on fire, burning with the need to mark this woman as my own.

But despite being a Shifter, I wasn’t an animal. Avery deserved the truth. And she deserved the opportunity to say no. Even if it killed me.

“What? Oh, um, well they are mates. Max bit Penny, um, during sex and she’s like him now,” she said.

“Do you know what I am?”

Her eyes dilated and her expression turned dreamy as she ran her hands up my chest and to my face,

“I know you’re Dante. You’re a good man, and I am guessing you have a secret, too. Like Max?”

“I do. See, I’m not human like you, Honey. I’m a Shifter.”

“A Shifter? Like a Werewolf?” she questioned.

“Sort of. But I’m not a Wolf. I’m a Grizzly Bear Shifter.”

“You mean you turn into a Bear?” Avery’s eyes widened, and she shivered all over.

“You’re safe, Honey. I don’t want you to be afraid. Me and my Bear would never hurt you,” I said.

It was very important to me she understood that. Avery smiled then, and all my angst eased under the warm glow of her happiness.

This woman was so special. So strong and heartbreakingly beautiful. She had the power to make or break a man like me.

Did she know? Could she tell I was completely besotted?

“I know,” she said.

“You know?”

“I know I’m safe with you, Magic Man. I knew that the first time I met you,” she said, and licked her lips.

“You did? Then why have you been pushing me away?”

“Because I thought you rejected me first, and I was trying to protect myself.”

“Oh, Honey, I would never reject you. I couldn’t if I tried. And I don’t want to try.”

“Why?” she whispered, her eyes narrowed on my lips, conjuring a growl from my

inner beast.

“Because you’re mine, Avery Brown. All mine.”

I pulled her to me, making sure she had ample time to refuse before I slid my lips against hers, claiming her mouth like I’d been dying to for months.

She moaned sweetly, and I swallowed the sound, capturing her response and making it a part of me. My Grizzly rumbled his approval.

The animal couldn’t wait to stake our claim. But she was human. I had to take it slow.

“I’ve got a confession,” I said, kissing her again.

“What?”

“I’m a novice here, Honey. You’ll have to tell me if I do something wrong.”

“A novice? You mean you’ve never been with a woman?” she asked, and I could sense her surprise.

“Never,” I confessed the truth.

“But how? Why?”

“My Bear wouldn’t allow it. The beast never wanted anyone’s touch. He was waiting, you see.”

“For what?”

“Not what. Who ,” I corrected her. “See, my Bear was determined to abstain from sex

until we met our fated mate, Avery.”

“Are you saying I’m your fated mate? But I can’t be,” she said, shaking her head at the same time wonder filled her tone.

She moved back, and I allowed it. Hating how cold I felt as she stood between my splayed legs, her hands covering her mouth.

“I’ve been waiting for you my whole life, Honey,” I whispered, tracing circles on her waist where I still loosely held her.

I just couldn’t bring myself to let her go completely. Not just yet. Not till she told me to.

“I won’t force you. I won’t use tricks or wiles to seduce you. Not that I’d even know how. But I’ll be true to you, Avery. If you choose me, I swear I will do everything in my power to be worthy of you and little Rosie.”

“So you mean you want to claim me? Like have sex?” she asked, her voice going incredibly high on the last word.

“I want to claim you, yes. But I need you to understand this won’t be just sex for me. It can’t be. If I take you, if I make you mine, it’s forever. My Bear won’t survive if you walked away,” I said, and braced myself for rejection.

“And you don’t mind about Rosie? That she’s not yours?”

“Honey, ever since I met that little girl, my Bear has been calling her his cub. If you say yes, she’ll be mine, same as if I fathered her. Same as any other cubs you might want to give me someday,” I whispered, confessing my most sacred hope.

“I-I don’t know, Dante. I mean, I thought you hated me. But I feel?—”

“What do you feel?” I asked, pushing away the hurt that slapped at me when she said she thought I hated her.

“Warm and wet. I want you so badly,” she whimpered and pressed her thighs together.

“You don’t have to decide right now,” I said, giving her as much of an out as I could.

“But what about? I mean,” she murmured, motioning to the obvious erection beneath my jeans.

“Don’t worry about that. Come here, Honey. Let me make you feel good,” I growled, sucking in her heady scent greedily like the beggar I was.

“Dante,” she whimpered, allowing me to pull her close.

Lifting her shirt, I kissed her belly first. She ran her fingers through my hair, and I moaned, nibbling and licking a path upwards, all the way to her cotton-covered breasts.

The simple underwear should have been plain. But on her it was sexy as fuck. I pulled on the cups until her heavy mounds spilled from them, falling into my waiting hands.

“Fuck, Honey. You’re so beautiful,” I groaned and suckled her one at a time.

Avery responded instantly. Climbing back onto my lap and holding me tight while I lavished attention on her.

My cock was dripping precum inside my pants, but I didn't give a fuck. I wasn't going to stop.

“Oh God. Dante, please,” she moaned, her hips moving restlessly as she sought something that seemed just out of reach.

“What do you need, Honey? Tell me and you can have it.”

She looked at me with her pupils completely blown and she licked her lips, sealing my fate just like that.

It didn't matter if Avery only wanted this from me. I was helpless to deny her. And if it meant my total and complete ruination, then so be it.

I would do anything for this woman.

Even slit my own throat, metaphorically speaking.

Grrrrr.

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Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 10:35 am

Heaven.

This was what it felt like. I finally knew. Having Dante's lips on my body was pure heaven.

I felt like I was skating along the edge of an icy precipice. I needed, fuck, I needed to come, but I didn't want him to stop what he was doing with his mouth.

"What do you need, Honey? Tell me and you can have it."

His deep voice rolled over me like a slow, rumbling storm, sending shivers cascading down my spine.

It wasn't just the sound—it was the way his words covered me.

Rich and resonant, making the air feel charged, like the moment before lightning strikes.

Every syllable seemed to linger, tugging at something primal and electric inside me, leaving goosebumps in its wake.

The question hung there between us. It was real. Like a living thing. And I could see hunger dancing in the pitch black of his gaze.

Is he really asking me what I want?

The thought was almost too much to process. For so long, I'd been navigating a

world where choices were made for me, or where I had to sacrifice my own needs for someone else's.

Don't misunderstand. I wasn't complaining.

But when you lived in a world where your voice barely registered over the noise, it was hard to comprehend someone just handing you a choice.

But now here he was, right in front of me, offering something I wasn't sure I knew how to handle.

Control.

The question seemed simple. But it was profound. The weight of it pressed against my chest.

The way he looked at me, his steady gaze silently promising that whatever choice I made, he'd honor it. That he wouldn't push, wouldn't take. That he would only ever give was more than I could hope for.

My mind raced with a mix of disbelief and vulnerability.

My heart was racing, half with excitement and half with fear.

His question was a gift in disguise. One I wasn't sure I'd earned, but I wanted it. Desperately.

Giving me control wasn't just an act of trust—it was an invitation, a declaration that my desires, my choices, mattered.

And for the first time in a long time, I felt a spark of something unfamiliar but

thrilling.

Power.

“I want you, Dante. I want to be with you, but no biting, no claiming just yet. Can you do that?” I asked, knowing it wasn’t fair.

“I can do that, Honey. For you, I can do anything,” he grunted and started taking off my clothes.

“Shirt,” I whimpered, tugging on the hem of his shirt, but he stopped me with soft hands on my wrists.

“I don’t have a six-pack,” Dante blurted. “I mean, I’m bigger than most other men,” he mumbled, pink staining his cheeks.

I froze.

Could it be?

Was this gorgeous man unsure of my attraction to him?

It wasn’t farfetched that men had the same worries and concerns as women did. But Dante was so damn hot, how could he doubt I wanted him?

“Hey, you can hear lies, right? Penny said something like that to me about Shifters,” I began.

“Yeah. Well, it’s not like I have a built in lie detector, but subtle changes in body language and the tone and pitch of your voice give away your emotions. Shifters learn early what happens to someone when you lie, and we can pick up on it.”

“So then you know I’m not lying when I tell you I don’t need a six-pack, Dante. I mean I’m not perfect, either?—”

“Who the fuck said you’re not perfect? You are everything a woman should be, Avery,” he growled, and shivers ran through me.

I wasn’t a Shifter, but the way he was looking at me. Like I was his favorite meal had me all hot, wet, and wanting.

I felt his desire all the way to my core, and it made me tremble.

“To you, maybe,” I said, not even bothering to hide my grin. “But that’s all I need. You . I just need you, Dante.”

“You mean that?”

“You tell me,” I countered, and felt his chest rumble with his Bear.

Oh, but this man felt big to me. And I didn’t mean his size. I meant he was important. Special.

Mine.

“As for looks, you must know you’re ridiculously hot. The first time I saw you I almost swallowed my tongue.”

“You did?”

“Dante, I made an ass of myself twice, throwing myself at you. I’ve wanted you from day one. You know that, right?”

“You never made an ass of yourself. It was my own hang ups that made me falter, but never again, Avery. I swear it.”

My stomach trembled with butterflies as he spilled his secrets, telling me his feelings. Could it be we’d both gotten the wrong idea about each other?

I thought he hated me, and he thought I was indifferent. But nothing could be farther from the truth.

I wasn’t a woman who trusted easily. But I wanted to believe him. And it was time I told him that.

“I believe you, Dante. Now, take off that shirt. Let me see you,” I said.

This time, when I took the bottom of his shirt from his fingertips, Dante allowed it. I tugged the soft cotton over his head, revealing hard, warm, bronzed skin and all the air seemed to get sucked right out of the room.

How could he think he was anything other than gorgeous?

I was frozen in my study of him. Held captive by the masculine beauty that graced his form. Every curve of muscle was a work of art. Every swirl of dark hair, perfection.

My heart thudded, the pace increasing and I wondered if it was possible to come apart without ever touching.

Excitement filled me. An eagerness I never felt before.

“You too, Honey. I wanna see my girl,” he rumbled.

Dante’s big hands slid up my sides, and I had one moment of doubt as they skimmed

the soft rolls of my belly, but he just kept on humming his approval and I didn't have time for self-consciousness.

He moved them behind my back and unhooked my bra. It took him two tries, but it only endeared him to me. It was silly, but I was damn happy he fumbled.

I was glad Dante wasn't some wannabe Romeo. Truth was I hardly noticed, since I was, at that moment, drooling over his deliciously thick body.

What had he said about not having a six-pack?

He was crazy to worry about that. I mean, the man was insanely hot.

"You keep looking at me like that, Honey, and I'm bound to make a meal of you."

"I can't help it," I whispered, "Dante, you are so beautiful."

My hands were steady as I brushed them across his pecs and his shoulders, trailing my fingers down to his hard stomach.

"You're the one that's beautiful. I've never seen anything like you," he purred and dropped a hard kiss on my lips.

Then he got busy, peeling my pants along with my panties down my legs, and for the first time I wasn't obsessing about my cellulite or wondering if I missed any spots when I shaved before work.

He made me feel seen, cherished, even. Like I was the only woman in the world. And, well, there was simply no comparison to that.

Next to him I felt small, petite. I wasn't the fat girl, or the single mom with a pretty

face but too plump body.

Dante looked at me with desire, and it had been a really long time since I felt so good about myself.

“Lift your feet,” he murmured, and I did, allowing him to finish undressing me.

His shoulders were massive, but he was so gentle with my things as he removed them unhurriedly. His chest was still rumbling, and I liked the sound of it very much.

My eyes dipped to his lap.

I’d managed to take off his buckle and undo his pants, but there was no way I could remove them without his help.

His cock pulsed beneath the dark gray fabric of his boxer briefs, the outline teasing me with his incredible size and girth.

Oh, there was no denying the strength and power of his build. Dante was all kinds of hot.

Hell, the man was literal fire. And I was so ready for him.

“Come here, Honey,” he growled, running his nose first, then his lips across my belly as he picked me up.

I gasped and clutched his arms, but he just grinned and lifted me higher.

“What are you doing?” I asked, eyes wide.

Dante’s smile turned positively feral as he leaned his back against the couch and

hoisted me up, so I was sitting on his chest.

“Drop those legs on either side of my head. Good girl,” he instructed.

I was so shocked, I just did it. I opened my legs and placed my thighs one on each of his broad shoulders.

Arousal gushed inside my core, and I bit my lip, afraid it was going to drip onto him.

“You smell so fucking good,” he growled, and his eyes darkened as he breathed in deeply.

His growl vibrated through me, and Dante did it again. He sucked in a big gulp of air. Like he was desperate to swallow more of my scent. And fuck, that was hot.

I felt open, vulnerable, and so fucking turned on, I could hardly speak.

“I-I’ll crush you,” I whispered.

I was one part desperate to move closer, and sit on his face, and another part terrified I was going to suffocate him in that position.

“A little thing like you? No way. Now, be my good girl, Honey. Sit on my face and let me taste you,” he growled.

I trembled with need as Dante fastened his enormous hands to my hips and pushed me forward so my pussy was right up against his seeking lips.

“Oh my God!” I moaned at the first nuzzle.

This was nothing I’d ever done. I felt wanton and wild. Completely and utterly

feminine as he cradled me to him and kissed me sweetly.

“Fuck,” he breathed the word. “So sweet. Like fucking honey.”

I whimpered and held on as he pressed his nose against my slit, inhaling my scent.

Then I was speechless as Dante just made out with my pussy. I mean that exactly as I said it. The sexy man placed hot, openmouthed kisses on my nether lips.

Sliding his tongue between my folds, he groaned as he swallowed the moisture that pooled between my legs. I couldn't help it. My ovaries were going off like fireworks, he was so fucking hot.

I was almost embarrassed by how wet he made me.

Almost being the key word.

But the truth was, it felt too good for me to be self-conscious. I had neither the time nor the inclination to do anything but enjoy the ride.

And what a ride.

“Christ, you taste divine. Like hot honey and daffodils. Sunshine and rain. I'm addicted to you already,” he moaned and lapped at my slit.

His filthy words sounded so good. I moaned at his praise and naughty confessions. My fingers dug into his scalp, holding him to me as he feasted on my body.

The next swipe of his tongue sent spirals of electricity racing up my spine, and I knew I wasn't going to last long.

“Oh fuck. Dante!”

“Am I hurting you?” he asked, lifting his head.

My body heated at the sight of my slick glistening on his lips. He never looked so good as he did right then. Never looked so much like mine.

My chest tightened and I could hardly breathe. I wanted to kiss him. To fuck him. To beg him for his bite and to make him mine for good.

But I was still uncertain.

I had more to consider than just my needs. I had Rosie. And Dante too.

His desires needed to be taken into consideration. My pulse raced and my chest thundered with the force of my heartbeat.

“Stay with me, Honey. Stay right here. Answer me. Am I hurting you?”

Just like that, I calmed down. Well, my panic receded. My body, however, was drawn tight like a bow just begging to be released.

“No. Not at all. Please, Dante, do it again. It feels so good,” I moaned, rocking my hips against his face.

“Mine,” he rumbled, and fuck, I liked the sound of that.

His eyes bled to complete black as he leaned forward, sucking on my clit with his amazing mouth.

Geezus, I never felt anything like him. It was like he had more appendages than even

I could comprehend as he ate me like a starving man.

He worked my clit with his lips and shoved his tongue deep into my pussy, fucking me so good. I moaned his name and rocked my hips in time with his thrusts. Pleasure built and built until suddenly it was right there.

I froze, arching my back, when my climax hit me like a fresh bolt of lightning. It was too much. It wasn't enough.

The world spun upside down, or maybe that was just me. Next thing I knew, I was lying on my back on the soft rug in front of the fire and Dante was on his knees between my splayed legs. He had one hand wrapped around his thick cock and he tugged himself twice, three times, before ropes of hot cum landed on my skin.

It was the hottest fucking thing I'd ever seen. When he finished coming, he leaned forward and crushed his mouth to mine.

And I accepted his kiss, willingly, desperately. Nothing had ever felt as right as Dante's lips on mine.

I hope he keeps me.

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Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 10:35 am

My mate's sweet pussy was definitely number one in my top five favorite things to eat.

No question.

Seeing her naked and on her back with my cum decorating her pretty pale skin was number one on my top favorite sights.

Hell, it was just about the best damn thing I'd ever seen.

Having her return my kiss and pulling me down on top of her sweet body, despite or maybe because of the mess clinging to the two of us, well, that was just my favorite thing of all.

"You're hard again," she pointed out, opening her legs wide and sliding her wet pussy against my rock hard dick.

"I'm always hard around you," I told her.

Hell, it was only the truth.

My Bear was growling nonstop, and my chest rumbled with it. As if she understood, Avery stroked me there, trying to soothe the monster inside me.

But she couldn't really understand.

She didn't know how desperate he was to claim her.

“We should stop now, Honey. Bear’s feeling possessive,” I said, even though it was killing me to even suggest it.

“Don’t you want to do it?” she asked.

The vulnerability I saw in her eyes cut me like a knife. She was so damn wonderful, but for some reason, Avery didn’t see it.

I hated that for her. It was part of the reason I knew I’d be a good mate. I could show her how perfect she was. Help build up what the world tried to break down.

Avery deserved that. She deserved it all.

For now, I simply nodded. I pressed my forehead to hers, hardly able to comprehend the gift that was her. But I knew just how lucky I was to have her there with me.

Being in the moment with her was better than I had dreamed.

Can you even imagine that?

How could someone surpass even your wildest expectations?

I was a fairly simple man, I supposed. But Avery was something else. She was better than me. I knew that. But I would work every day for the rest of my life to earn a shot at keeping her here.

“Yes,” I answered her previous question. “Fuck, yes, I want to. But the Bear wants to claim you, and I don’t know if I can stop him once we get started.”

Grrr.

Avery was looking at me with her pretty amber eyes, all big and sparkling. Christ, she was beautiful. And I wanted her more than anything in this whole world.

“Would that be so bad? If you claimed me?” she asked, ducking her head like she was shy with me all of a sudden.

If it wasn’t for that slight hesitancy, I would have bitten her right then. My Bear chuffed, the animal was already decided. But it was more complicated than that.

Claiming bites weren’t like human marriages. If I tethered myself anymore to this woman, I would never be able to walk away.

What she’d already given me was so precious, so perfect. I didn’t think I could give her up as it was.

But if I claimed her, I knew I’d never walk away. I couldn’t.

Did she know what she was saying?

“Look, I’m sorry. It’s okay if you didn’t mean what you said about claiming me before?—”

I stopped her with a hard kiss. I just couldn’t let her finish that sentence.

“Look at me, Honey. Hear my truth,” I said, testing the softness of her skin with my hands on her face and throat.

“Claiming you would be the honor of my life, Avery Brown.”

I tilted her head, kissing away the frown that had marred her pretty features.

I felt Avery's smile then, and it was like pure sunshine.

Her hands slid up my arms, leaving a trail of goosebumps in their wake, as she clutched my shoulders.

I moved us both, sitting up with her in my arms. She wiggled her fantastic body, and I loosened my hold, allowing her to nudge me where she wanted me to go, which was sitting up with the sofa at my back and my legs straight in front of me.

"What are you doing?" I asked, my heart pounding like the entire Giants' drum line.

Fucking Giants. They really needed to do better at the draft this year.

But those thoughts left as suddenly as they appeared. Right then, football could go fuck itself.

All I ever wanted was finally within reach.

"I'm taking what I want, Dante," Avery said.

And just like that, everything else faded away. Everything except her.

Mate.

She bit her lip, and straightened her shoulders, thrusting those gorgeous tits out as she placed herself pertly on my lap.

Saucy little minx.

I was powerless to stop her, even if I'd been so inclined—which I wasn't.

Far as I was concerned, Avery could have anything and everything she wanted. If it was in my power to give it to her, I would. Period.

I was hers. Utterly and completely.

Mine.

My Bear growled. The beast was already wholly dedicated to her.

I saw our matebond every time I closed my eyes. It was already there.

I could feel it wrapping tightly around my heart, binding me to her for all eternity. But it wasn't cloying or strangling me. Quite the opposite, actually.

Being with her put everything to rights. All the difficulties of my past. The problems I've had anchoring my Grizzly. They all faded around Avery.

She was my life, my reason for being. Denying it was futile.

Hell, at this point, biting her was a formality.

I moaned as she leaned forward, kissing my chest and teasing my nipple with her tongue. She licked her way to my ear, nibbling on the lobe and fuck, my cock leaked precum at the sensations running through me.

When she had me where she wanted me, Avery slid her hips against mine and rubbed her slick pussy along my aching cock.

"Fuck, you feel so good," I moaned, gasping at how hot, how wet, and warm my sweet mate felt.

“You feel good, too. Want you inside me, Dante. I’m clean and I have an IUD.”

“I’m clean, too. I told you, I never did this before, but what’s an IUD?”

“Birth control. I-I won’t get pregnant. I just need to feel you.”

“Fuck. Honey, are you gonna let me inside you without a condom?” I asked, my voice rough with my Bear.

“Yes, please,” she begged.

“Show me what to do.”

She nodded and lifted her body, grabbing my cock at the base and positioning me at her entrance.

Avery licked her lips, her pupils blown with desire. She whimpered, taking just the tip inside her tight heat.

My whole body rumbled in response, my Bear present in the moment when I would finally fill my woman.

“You’re so big.”

“You can take me, Honey. You were made for me. Fuuckk,” I growled as she moved fast.

Avery sank down on my cock, and fuck, I never felt anything like it.

One. Inch. At a time.

She enveloped me.

And. She. Was. Everything.

Every nerve ending was ablaze with sensation. Her pussy squeezed my cock, and I pulsed in response. She fit me like a glove.

Perfect, sexy mate.

I squeezed her ass, fitting one hand inside the crack as she rocked her body, taking me even deeper.

I damn near lost my mind.

When I was fully seated, Avery's entire body seemed to quiver and shake. She cupped my face and pulled me to her, claiming my mouth with a ferocity I never dreamed she'd reciprocate.

"Oh God," she moaned.

"Am I hurting you?"

"No. I feel full. So full, Dante."

"Feels good to me too, Honey. But I need to move or I'm gonna come right now," I groaned, my cock pulsating inside of her.

"Mmm, yes."

She grinned then and started flexing her hips, keeping her thrusts shallow, and oh fuck, did she know what she was doing!

Her tight, hot sex gripped me. The sounds of our bodies sliding and slapping against each other were lewd and loud, and so fucking sexy.

The slippery mess between us made it easy for her to glide her pussy up and down my shaft. Every move has me on edge, ready to come, but the Bear won't let me.

He waited quietly in the back of my mind for the perfect moment to claim her.

I was there for that. I needed to bind her to me. Instinct, the primal kind, was an unyielding beast.

It rode me hard. My mouth salivated and my gums ached. Sooner than later, my canines would descend, and the need to strike would be overwhelming.

"Dante, you feel incredible."

"So do you. You look so fucking gorgeous, Honey, riding my body like a goddamn Valkyrie," I told her, grabbing her hips and pumping her up and down.

"Is it what you thought it would be? Fucking me?" she asked, tossing her head back and letting me take over.

I was new to sex, but I knew the mechanics well. Everything else was pure instinct.

"No. It's more," I growled, and doubled my efforts.

Driven by the need to pleasure my mate, I allowed the words in my head to spill from my lips. Told her all the things I wanted to do.

"You're such a dirty little girl, aren't you, Honey? Sitting on my lap with your wet pussy, grinding it all over me," I growled, and was rewarded with a gush of wetness

flooding between us.

The way she fit me could only be destiny. I was a big man, but Avery was made for me.

“That’s it. Let me feel how slick I make this pussy. S’perfect. I wanna stay buried in it forever. Tell me I can. Tell me it’s mine,” I demanded as I fucked her harder.

Her eyes and lips were wide open. And Avery nodded.

“Words, Honey. Tell. Me.”

“Yours. I’m yours,” she mewled, clutching at my shoulders as her walls tightened around me like a vise.

“That’s right. Mine,” I grunted, and picked her up by her ass as I rose to my knees.

Never once did I stop fucking her. I pressed my hand to her chest, so she had no choice but to lay back as I worked my cock deeper, searching for that special place inside her. The one alluded to in magazines and the dirty novels Penny liked to read.

I’d borrowed a couple myself on the off chance I’d have the opportunity to be with Avery like this.

All I could say was every man should read a romance book or two. I adjusted the angle, pressing my pubis against her slippery little clit.

“Oh, God!” she cried out, and I knew I’d succeeded.

She felt so tight, so hot and wet. It was pure heaven. I watched her like a hawk, waiting for the precise moment she started to come.

Then I shifted our positions, laying her down, caging her in with my body so I could pound into her. On my knees, I had all the leverage I needed. The sound of my balls slapping against her ass was so damn hot.

I couldn't stop myself from letting go. Oh, I should have been sweet and soft for her. But this was momentous, and I couldn't hold back if I wanted to.

"Oh my God. I'm still coming. Dante, I'm still," Avery cried.

I felt her body clench around me and knew her orgasm was still spiraling.

Holy. Fuck.

She was divine. I slammed my lips to hers, needing to taste her pleasure.

Our kiss grew deeper, hotter, and I licked into her mouth, savoring her honey sweetness on my tongue.

My cock was so primed. Any second, I was going to explode.

I lifted my head, searching her eyes for a sign. Avery met my gaze and gave the slightest nod before tilting her head to the side.

"Do it. Make me yours."

Thunder roared in my head, or maybe that was the Bear. Either way, I knew I was going to take what she offered.

No way I could resist claiming this woman as my mate.

Her body squeezed mine even tighter, and the wave of her pleasure grew and grew

until it was so big it threatened to pull me under. I didn't bother resisting.

In fact, that was when I struck.

I pierced the skin between her shoulder and neck with my canines, marking Avery as my own at the very same moment we both came undone.

My Grizzly roared in victory as I swallowed her life's force, binding us together in a Shifter ritual as old as time.

When we finally stopped moving, and the pleasure began to ebb, I fell forward, careful not to crush Avery with my weight.

I'd never felt like that before—so completely consumed and yet utterly at peace.

My body hummed with the aftershocks of pleasure, every nerve alive, every muscle loose and sated in a way I'd never imagined possible.

This wasn't just carnal bliss. It was something deeper, something that struck at the very core of me.

Still caught in the warmth of her, I cupped her face with both hands, unable to stop myself from leaning in to pepper kisses across her sweet, impossibly soft skin.

She chuckled sweetly. Her laughter, light and breathy, bubbled up, and I felt it like a balm over wounds I hadn't even known I carried.

Avery finally picked me. This time, she said yes.

It wasn't just about the physical. Though she did give me something I never had before.

It was more than that. Avery gave me peace.

A quiet, soothing calm that wrapped itself around me, filling spaces that had always felt hollow. For the first time in my life, I wasn't fighting my beast.

My Bear, usually a restless, wild force within me, was actually silent.

Not because he was subdued or restrained, but because he didn't need to be anything else.

With her in my arms, I had everything I ever wanted.

My Grizzly wasn't stomping around or pushing against the edges of my control. He wasn't champing at the bit, desperate to take charge.

Instead, he was still. The animal quietly observing with a presence that felt as vast as the mountains. And in his stillness, I felt his emotions rolling through me much like my own—pure adoration, unshakable devotion, and an overwhelming sense of rightness.

The Bear's feelings mirrored mine. He was fixed on her. Our beautiful mate.

Her hair was deliciously tousled. Her skin was flushed in places where my beard had scratched her.

The claiming bite I'd given her had already started to heal, but I knew she would bear the scar forever, which was exactly as it should be.

Oh, thank the Fates. She is finally mine.

The way her lips curved into a soft smile, the sleepy contentment in her eyes as she

met my gaze—she was everything I’d never dared hope for.

Everything I hadn’t realized I needed.

I rested my forehead against hers, closing my eyes for a moment and letting the quiet settle over us.

My Bear, my soul, and my heart all agreed on the same thing for once.

Avery is mine.

And for the first time ever, I knew what it felt like to truly be at ease.

“That was so,” she murmured, lifting her sleepy eyes to mine.

“Yeah, it was, Honey. S’Perfect.”

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Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 10:35 am

I didn't remember going to bed, but I woke up in the middle of a king-sized one, covered in soft sheets and feeling deliciously sore.

The floor to ceiling window overlooking the yard showed a world covered in white. I smiled at the picturesque winter wonderland and allowed myself a moment to simply enjoy it before the weight of reality settled in.

Last night, I'd slept with Dante. More than that. I allowed him to claim me.

Butterflies went wild inside my stomach and I bit my bottom lip, trying to remember everything Penny told me about mating bites and all those paranormal romance novels we'd been reading.

Shit.

With all the boinking going on last night, I forgot to ask one pretty big question. Was I gonna turn into a Bear?

Fear and insecurity filled me, and I was halfway to hyperventilating when Dante came in with a mug of coffee in his hands.

"Hey, what's wrong?" he asked, placing the steaming mug on the side table and sitting down next to me.

"Am I going to turn into a Bear now?"

"What? No," he scoffed, then he nodded. "I see. You're thinking about Penny. Um,

her situation is different. See, Max isn't a regular Shifter. Jersey Devils were created with a different kind of magic."

"Oh," I said, not really understanding.

"Good morning," he whispered, and dipped his head.

I didn't know why I should feel shy with him. After all, he'd kissed, nibbled, and worshipped every inch of me the night before. But my cheeks were burning.

I held the sheet to my breasts as he pressed his lips to mine in a sweet, chaste kiss. But that only lasted a moment. I moaned as he wrapped his hands around my neck, tilting my head and deepening our kiss.

"Rosalie?"

"We made pancakes for breakfast, then Kian and Jed came to take her to feed the goats on their 4-wheelers a little while ago. I figured it was okay."

"Oh, nice. She loves goats. So, we're alone?"

"We're alone," he confirmed.

"Good," I said, dropping the sheet.

I wasn't normally such a physical person, but with Dante, I was insatiable. I grabbed his shirt, tugging on it until he whipped it off, and I moaned as his big, warm body crushed mine into the mattress.

"Too heavy?" he asked, rearing up.

I shook my head, loving the way his eyes bled to black as he looked me over from head to toe.

“Fuck, Honey. You look so good in the morning. I gotta have you,” he said.

“Please,” I begged, eyes crossing as he closed his mouth over one beaded nipple.

Dante sucked and tugged on each one, doing impossible things with his lips and mouth. I couldn’t even comprehend it.

“Bears have prehensile lips,” he said, and I realized I must have blurted that aloud.

Prehensile lips? Good to know.

But that was just about all the thinking I was capable of. Especially when Dante moved down my body and settled himself between my thighs.

“Good morning. You miss me,” he said to my pussy, and I leaned up on my elbows, watching him like the lunatic he was.

“Are you seriously talking to my pussy right now?”

“Hey, you said she was mine, and she is. No take backs now,” Dante said, grinning.

Before I could offer him some smartass reply, he snaked his tongue out of his mouth and licked into me. Stars exploded behind my eyes as pleasure so intense, I thought I might die from it, skyrocketed through me.

“Mine,” he growled, feasting on me.

I clutched at his head, pulling his hair. But that didn’t stop him. He just kept on

licking me until I exploded.

Then he was moving over me, his big dick in his hand, Dante gripped his shaft and jerked it. But I needed more. I leaned up, capturing his head with my lips.

“Fuck. Want me to feed you my cock, Honey?”

I nodded, with my lips still around his dick.

“Fuck. Okay.”

Dante moved to all fours, and I laid back on the bed. His big dick was hard and long, bopping against my cheek as he got into position. I wrapped my hands around his juicy thighs, and I licked his cock from root to tip.

“That’s it, Honey. Get me nice and wet, then open your mouth and take me deep as you can,” he growled.

I moaned and did exactly as he asked, choking myself on his incredible length. I could barely fit half of his length down my throat.

But that didn’t stop me. I found my rhythm. Moving my hands to his base, I gripped him and started moving up and down. Jerking him while I sucked, it wasn’t long before his whole body started trembling.

“Fuck. I’m gonna come, Avery. Move now if you don’t want it in your mouth.”

But I did want it. Pride and power sizzled through me. I never felt so damn sexy in my life as I did when I swallowed the salty sweetness of Dante’s cum as it hit the back of my throat.

His bellow was loud and so damn sexy. I was so turned on I was already touching myself when he rolled off me.

“Fuck, Honey. That was so good.”

“Dante,” I whimpered.

“What is it, mate? Do you need to come?” he asked, noticing my maneuvers.

I whimpered and nodded. His eyes heated, and when I glanced down, I saw his still hard cock straining towards me.

“Come here. Get on,” he growled, and I rolled over, climbing him like a tree.

We both moaned as he filled me, and nothing ever felt so right.

I moved my body a few times, but it wasn’t enough. Dante growled, grabbing my hips. He flipped us over and rolled me until I was chest down on the bed with my ass pressed up and back.

“Fuck,” I yelled as he filled me from behind.

“Goddamn,” he grunted, flexing that big dick in and out of my pussy.

His big hands had my cheeks spread and even though I’d never done anything like that, I didn’t hate it when he circled my hole with his thumb, pressing lightly against it.

“Dante!” I screamed.

“Easy, I got you,” he growled, reaching around and flicking my clit with his other

hand.

Something warm and wet slid between my cheeks and I could barely comprehend what it was before I felt even more pressure back there.

“Let me in, Honey.”

Dante held nothing back. He was everywhere, filling every inch of me, and I’d never felt so alive, so wanted and cared for.

“Good girl. That’s it,” he growled, and I gasped at the fullness of it all.

His thumb was seated in my ass, and his cock was hitting me at just the right angle. That and his fingers strumming my clit meant I was coming before his next stroke.

I almost collapsed beneath him from the strength of my orgasm, but Dante would never allow that.

He held on to me.

He provided for me.

Took care of me.

And I trusted him wholly to do just that. His movements slowed down, and I could barely breathe for all the pressure building up around my heart.

I love him.

“I’m coming, Honey. Fuck,” he moaned, the rush of his cum flooding my womb happened just as the realization crashed into me.

I want to tell him.

But I managed to bite my tongue. Holding myself still as I tried to regain my breath. Dante lifted off me a few minutes later. Then he picked me up and carried me to the bathroom where he had an enormous shower and a separate tub.

“Here. You get washed. Kian and Jed are almost back with Rosie,” he said, dropping a kiss on my temple.

“How can you tell?”

“I can hear the 4-wheelers,” he said with a lopsided grin that made my heart squeeze.

Then he winked and walked to the bedroom to redress and, holy shit, I really was in love with him.

Now what am I gonna do?

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Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 10:35 am

I left to check the periphery of the woods around my cabin before starting my shift at the barn.

Emmet hadn't mentioned any more signs of the strange Bear Shifter he'd scented a few days ago, but it still lingered around the spot where he first picked it up.

The nearest established Bear Shifter Clan was hours away in South Jersey, but they were mostly Black Bears. This was a Grizzly.

My beast chuffed angrily at the thought of another encroaching on our territory. I took off my clothes and slipped into my fur, releasing my animal so he could do what he did.

Basically, he fucked shit up.

My Grizzly tore at the trees around the frozen patch of earth where the other Shifter had dared piss. And yeah, I fucking marked the area, too, erasing the scent of other .

Afterwards, I spent some time searching, but I came up empty.

Whoever had been wandering in these woods, it looked like they'd never come back.

I shifted back to my human skin and dressed quickly. It hadn't snowed again, but we were due for more in the next day or so.

I walked to the pen outside the dairy barn, doing up the buttons of my flannel when the motherfucking bane of my existence stopped in front of me.

Idiotic sandy-haired cretin.

“Damn, Teddy! You went and claimed her, huh?” Kian asked with a big dopey grin on his dumb face.

“None of your fucking business,” I growled, pushing past him.

The big moron leaned over and sniffed, raising all my hackles. Didn’t this fool know not to fuck with a newly mated bear?

“None of my business? Bro, it’s everyone’s business. Plus, you smell like Avery and fucking. Were you guys sexing it up all night? Do Grizzlies fuck doggy style or is it beary style? Or—ggg,” he choked at the end.

But that was likely because I turned and grabbed him by the throat. Then I punched the moron right in his stupid face, taking a little satisfaction in watching him fall ass over teakettle into a big pile of manure once I let go.

Fucking bovines.

“Dammit, Dante! What was that for?” Kian bellowed.

“Serves you right, idiot,” Zeke murmured.

“That was a warning,” I said, ignoring the sputtering imbecile. “Don’t ever talk about sex and my mate in the same sentence ever. In fact, never talk about Avery again. Understand?” I growled, my voice rough with my Grizzly.

“What? I wasn’t saying anything bad,” he mumbled, slipping back into the pile of shit when he tried to stand.

No, I wasn't going to grin. Even gritted my teeth to stop myself.

It was Saturday, and all I wanted to do was be with my mate. But I dropped Avery and Rosie at Penny and Max's house right after we ate.

Penny was apparently feeling better after being sick all day yesterday. Couldn't say the same for her mate, though.

Poor Max.

Penny had apparently walloped him good for not telling her she was pregnant. And with twins.

I'd heard an earful about stupid, red-skinned Devils, and their super sperm, but that was all before I kissed my pretty mate and told her I'd be back in a few hours after I finished working.

Saturdays were still working days on the ranch.

They had their own rhythm.

A slower pace compared to the chaos of the week. Even so, there was shit that had to be done.

But I had to admit I hated dropping her off like that. Like I couldn't shake the feeling I was missing something.

I pressed my hand against my chest and closed my eyes, feeling our new matebond contract and expand as if it too were having trouble being away from Avery.

Maybe it was because our mating was still so new. Every moment was uncharted

territory.

I was still getting used to the fact that she was mine. Really mine.

I didn't have to look at her from across a room and swallow my daydreams, wondering about what could be.

She was here, real, and wearing my bite—something I'd craved for longer than I cared to admit.

Or maybe it was because I'd wanted her for so damn long that now that I had her, it was like getting the first taste of a feast I'd been starving for.

She wasn't just a meal. Avery was the whole banquet. One I wanted to savor slowly, every bite more satisfying than the last.

But work didn't stop just because I wanted to sit and indulge in the warmth of her presence.

The moment I dropped her off replayed in my mind. Rosie had sensed something different, and the sweet cub gifted me with a cute, sloppy kiss on my cheek, shouting her goodbye before taking off for her Aunt Penny.

Avery had just glanced back over her shoulder, a soft smile playing on her lips as she waved. I couldn't help but think about the end of the workday—about the moment I'd get to hold her again.

That thought alone was enough to push me through the hours ahead.

“Max! Dante just punched me into a pile of shit!”

I scoffed. Kian actually fucking tattled on me.

“Did he now?” Max said, and I could tell from his expression the Jersey Devil was amused.

“Hey, Boss.” I nodded at our Alpha.

Max dipped his chin, then turned to scratch his head as he watched Jed try to help Kian out of the holding pen. Pretty damn comical since Dolly Lee—or maybe Dolly Lou?

Anyway, the little she-goat kept head butting Kian in the gut and knocking his sorry ass back down.

Snort.

It was still cold as fuck, but cows were cows. They needed time outdoors.

The herd was a mixture of Jerseys and Holsteins. They were hearty for cold weather, and in Dry Creek that only lasted a couple of months out of the year.

We mainly kept them in the barn, but we were updating the ventilation system and Jed had moved the old girls outside early this morning.

“Fuck,” Kian muttered, and I had to work not to smile at the picture he made covered in cow shit.

“Uh, Dante, can I talk to you a second?” Max asked.

“Sure.”

I trudged over to where he was, straightening my shoulders. The Alpha and I rarely had a need for private discussions, but I knew this one was coming.

“So, you claimed Avery last night?” Max, our Alpha, asked, his tone even but his piercing, red-rimmed gaze was impossible to ignore.

“I did,” I replied, my voice steady.

In my old Clan, claiming a female without permission from the Alpha was a punishable offense. Usually, that meant a challenge. A fight in either human or Bear form.

Usually, the first one to draw blood won. But sometimes, well, sometimes fights were to the death.

I supposed I should have asked Max if he planned any rules like those for the Motley Crewd Ranch. We were his Shifters, after all. We’d named him Alpha, and my beast recognized him as such.

“And does she understand what that means?” he asked, his gaze unwavering.

“Yes, Alpha. I explained it to her,” I said carefully.

He nodded slowly, tapping his fingers on his jean clad legs. Max wasn’t a bully. Nor was he a tyrant like my last Alpha. But exercising caution was always wise.

“I see, I see. Did you, uh, happen to mention the possibility of Rosie’s father’s supernatural biology?”

Max circled me and I moved with him, scratching the back of my neck and rolling my shoulders.

Keeping loose.

Staying ready.

I did not think he'd attack. But I couldn't be sure. And my Bear didn't like uncertainties.

My inner Grizzly stirred, pushing closer to the surface, his presence a heavy weight in my chest.

The beast let out a long, deep growl, vibrating through me.

I didn't like where this was going. Didn't like the Alpha poking his nose into my business.

Rosie and Avery were my business. No one else's.

I came from a place where trust was not easily given.

Grrrr.

The animal in me clawed to get out. He didn't like what Max was suggesting.

I tried to rein him in, but it was difficult. See, the Bear was created to protect.

My supernatural DNA demanded I use my dual nature to defend what was ours.

Max isn't like our old Clan's Alpha, I reminded my Bear.

He didn't use people, didn't abuse his power.

The Motley Crewd Ranch was different. This place was a refuge for those of us who needed a fresh start.

Sure, Max was still figuring things out, but he was Alpha. Emmet was the Beta, and he was a damn good one. The rest of us were trying to work out the correct pecking order necessary for peace in groups composed of dominant, lethal creatures like us.

Each member of the Crew was a monster. All of us carried scars and baggage from our pasts. But this place gave us a chance to heal and trust again.

Even so, my Grizzly didn't take kindly to the idea of anyone questioning my bond with Avery. No matter how good of a man, or Alpha, Max was.

"Not yet," I admitted, my voice tight. "I was planning to broach the subject of Rosie when it felt right."

Max sighed, nodding his head.

"Penny is concerned. Avery is her dearest and oldest friend, and apparently, she's been through a lot?—"

"Pardon me, Alpha." I cut him off, the words slipping out before I could stop them.

My Grizzly rumbled his approval, and I straightened my spine, meeting Max's gaze head-on.

"But I know about Avery's past. Everything she had to go through, every challenge, every heartbreak—it made her the woman she is today. And I wouldn't change a single thing about her."

Max studied me in silence, his expression unreadable. I let the weight of my words

settle in the room before continuing.

“But the past is the past. I’m her present. And I’m her future. Whatever she’s been through, wherever she’s going, she doesn’t face it alone anymore. She’s mine, Alpha.”

“And Rosie?” he added.

My heart thudded inside my chest whenever I thought of that tiny cub and her sweet smile.

She was a terrific kid.

How could she not be with such a good mom?

I’d always craved family. From the time I was a cub, I knew I wanted a big one.

Having Rosie didn’t make Avery any less attractive to me. In fact, it was the opposite.

I already loved the little girl like she was mine.

Sweet, adorable cub.

I loved watching how Avery was with her. She was so good and patient. Protective and loving.

Everything a mother should be.

“My Bear has already claimed the cub. She’s mine regardless of who her sperm donor was,” I said.

Max leveled me with a look I was certain meant we were about to throw down and I tensed, readying for it.

My senses were on high alert, and I was well aware of the men surrounding us. The wind shifted, a low fog settling over the snow riddled ground. There was a bitter bite to the air that cut through clothes and made even Shifters shiver.

The Crew was listening, watching us. But none interfered.

Then, suddenly, Max's mien shifted from one of deliberation to something else.

A smirk appeared on the side of his face, and he held out his hand, surprising everyone, but none more than me.

"Good for you, Dante. I'm sure you won't let either of them down," he said as I shook his hand.

I paused a second before dipping my chin at his comment.

"I won't. I'll do everything in my power to make Avery and Rosie happy and to keep them safe."

Max's lips curved into a faint smile, and he gave me a single nod of approval.

"Good," he said simply. "Then I'll trust you to handle it."

I dipped my chin in acknowledgment, silently promising that I would.

Avery deserved nothing less.

"Well, then, congratulations, Dante. Consider your mate and her young a part of the

Crew.”

“Oh great. Yogi gets a family! Can we address the fact that I am covered in shit because of this guy?” Kian barked.

“Right,” Max said, “I suggest you go hose that off before it gets stuck on there permanently.”

I snorted, as did some of the other fellas, while Max walked away, shaking his head.

“Well, if there’s one thing about this ranch that’s true,” Emmet said after a minute, “it sure as shit never gets boring.”

“Agreed,” Zeke called out.

“Again with the shit? Fuck, Jed! That’s cold!” Kian yelled from around the side of the pen where Jed was hosing him off.

“The filtration system is back online. Let’s move these old girls inside,” I said, fighting the urge to grin and losing.

We worked together to move the small herd inside the barn just like we’d been doing for months now, and everything went smoothly as could be.

Except for Kian, who’s zipper froze shut after being drenched by the hose.

Idiotic Bull wound up having to shift just to get out of his clothes, which really, he should have done in the first place.

I mean, why did he even care about cow shit when he was one?

Those were musings better suited to another day. I had more important things to do. Like get back to my mate and cub.

My family.

The words hit me like Thor's hammer, and I almost fell down the second I thought them.

"You alright?" Zeke asked, stopping to gaze at me with his vertical-slitted purple eyes.

"Uh, yeah, I'm good."

But was I?

I mean, was I a good enough man to deserve a family of my own?

Yes. Mine.

Satisfaction filled me as my Bear pushed those thoughts into my head.

Whether or not I was worthy was no longer the question. Fact was, I had a family now. And they were more than I'd ever hoped for.

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“Are you feeling any better?”

I lifted the pot of freshly brewed tea and poured some into Penny’s mug before sliding it over to her.

My BFF looked green around the gills, and I didn’t envy her. But that was morning sickness. A big old bucket of fun.

“I don’t know if I can even swallow this,” Penny murmured, lifting the mug to her face.

Speaking of buckets .

I grimaced and inched the small garbage bin Penny had been keeping beside her—just in case—a little bit closer to her chair.

“Mama! Mrs. O’Hare says I can help make cookies, can I?” Rosie asked, running into the living room where we were sitting and chatting.

I grinned at the picture she made with a too big apron tied around her small waist and her curly hair pulled back from her face with a kerchief.

“You sure can, Sweetheart,” I said with a grin.

“Aw, she is so sweet,” Penny said, going in for a sip. “Oh, no.”

She quickly put the cup down and grabbed the garbage bin, spitting into it as another

wave of pregnancy fun hit her.

“Okay. It’s gonna be fine,” I said, grabbing the package of Saltines from the tray and taking two out for her.

“Here, try these.”

“Ugh, this is so awful. When will it end?” she moaned.

“That depends. It could go away tomorrow or last the entire pregnancy, but don’t worry! That hardly ever happens,” I said when her face started turning red.

“What?” Penny wailed, just in time for Jezebel to come in through the front door.

“Is someone dying?” she asked, grinning as she juggled a stack of DVDs in one hand and a huge bag of movie theater popcorn in the other.

My stomach rumbled. It was just about the best salty snack ever. I was partial to sweets but come on. Who didn’t love popcorn?

“Wow! Do people still use DVDs?” I asked, grabbing the pile of movies before they fell.

“Thanks. Well, yeah, before streaming service came along, you betcha. Plus, we have this projector at the drive-in that runs these. Anyway, I thought maybe you could use some cheering up, Pen,” Jez said and joined us.

“Oh my gah! Did everyone know I was pregnant before me?” she hollered.

Jezebel looked decidedly guilty, and I just bit my lower lip. Truth was, I suspected she was pregnant weeks ago.

“I’m gonna kill Max,” she growled, and damn, her skin really did turn red for a second.

“Pretty Penny, take it easy. You know you shouldn’t get worked up,” I cooed, using my pet name for her.

The fact that all the Shifters around her didn’t tell her was something she’d have to come to terms with.

That or she could get them back.

And knowing Penny, she would come up with some pretty clever forms of retribution once she was feeling better.

I wasn’t worried.

“How could my fiancé be such an idiot?”

“Oh, Sweetie. Max went to an ivy league school. He’s not an idiot,” Jezebel said.

“What does that have to do with being an idiot?” she growled, and I had to admit she had a point.

Having a degree didn’t make you smart. The same way going to church didn’t make you a good person.

But I wasn’t saying any of that to Penny. I knew how she felt about her man. While she might be allowed to call him names, it wouldn’t be okay for any of us to do the same.

Not that I would. I liked Max. Especially for her. The two of them together were one

of those power couples the tabloids loved to write about.

Truth was, I'd been jealous of Max and Penny's love affair. Not in the I hope they break up kind of way.

More the why can't I have that in my life kind of way.

I bit my lip as the sudden realization hit me that I did have that in my life now. With Dante.

My very own mate.

I might be human, but I had feelings for the man. Big feelings. No, he hadn't made any declarations of love, but claiming me had to mean something, right?

He just has to care.

"Right, Avery?" Jezebel asked, and I felt guilty cause I hadn't been paying attention to the conversation.

"I think we need some movie therapy. Let's see what we have here. How about a romcom? I am always up for one of those," I said, looking through the goldmine of chick flicks Jezebel brought over.

"I vote for Clueless, " she said, naming the 90s redo of the classic tale Emma by Jane Austen, starring Alicia Silverstone.

"Oh, I love that one," I said, handing it to her.

Truth was, it didn't matter to me what was on the TV. MY thoughts were all over the place.

Okay, well, that wasn't entirely true. My thoughts were focused, just not on anyone in that room.

They were on Dante. I bit my lip, my entire body lighting up at just the thought of him.

Having sex with the big man was one thing. But loving him? That could lead to my destruction. And I had Rosie to think about.

Oh my God. What have I done?

"Here. Let me put this in a bowl," I said and grabbed the popcorn and a big bowl from the side table.

Penny must have known Jez was bringing popcorn, I mused as I poured.

"Thanks," Penny murmured.

She was frowning, but at least she wasn't turning red anymore.

While Jezebel futzed around with the DVD player, I had to admit to feeling a modicum of guilt. Me and Penny used to be in each other's pockets. But nowadays, we just didn't see each other like we used to.

Lately, I'd been stuck in town, and she'd been at the ranch more and more. Ever since she hired a baker to take over her duties, she barely even worked at the bakery.

I knew, of course, it was because she was trying to get control of her new supernatural side. But that didn't account for her and Jezebel having gotten so close.

Ever since Emmet and Jez got married and moved into his cabin on the property, I've

felt the distance between me and Penny grow.

Truth was, I'd been feeling left out. Like I'd been losing my friend. And that wasn't fair or true.

Penny had always stood by me and Rosie. She deserved better than for me to be petty about her newfound happiness. And I was so glad she and Max had found each other. They were perfect together.

Besides, there was no longer a reason for me to feel envious. I had my own happiness now, too.

At least, I really hoped I did.

"I have a confession," I blurted, never one to sit on my feelings.

"OMG! I knew you looked different. Okay, spit it out. What is it?" Penny asked, eyes wide.

"Up until a few months ago, I thought Jezebel's name was Jordan!" I blurted and slapped my hand over my mouth.

Penny laughed and Jezebel snorted.

"What? Why?" Jez asked, but she didn't look mad.

"I don't know, but I am so sorry. I don't know why I thought that."

"That's okay. Not like we talked much before then, Av. It's no big deal," she said with a grin and a shrug.

“You are awful with names,” Penny agreed, and then snorted a laugh.

Heifer.

“Also, I was jealous of you two becoming friends. And well, I just thought you should know,” I said, owning up to my shortcomings.

“Oh, no! I hate that you felt like that. But well, I understand,” Jezebel said and came to sit by me.

“What? Avery! Why on earth would you be jealous?” Penny asked, and she looked totally surprised.

“I don’t know. It’s ridiculous, I was lonely, I guess, and feeling bummed out. Can you two forgive me? I feel like such an ass!”

Both women moved closer to me and threw their arms around my shoulders. We hugged and cried a little and laughed at the end.

What the hell was wrong with me? This wasn’t normal behavior for me. Like at all.

I was just an emotional mess. Penny was still wiping at her tears when she leaned her head on my shoulder. She froze suddenly and turned her face into my neck.

“Penny!”

Then, she sniffed me, and well, that was when all hell broke loose.

“Oh my God!” Penny screeched and jumped up, pointing at me like my hair was on fire.

“What is it?” I asked, patting my head to check for fire or spiders, or I didn’t fucking know what.

“Girl, what are you doing?” Jez asked, mouth agape at her ridiculous shenanigans.

We both glanced at each other, but neither of us had a clue why my bestie was squealing like a newborn piglet and pointing at me like a crazy person.

“Penny? You tell me what is going on right now!” I said, using my best professional voice, and slapping my hands against my thighs.

“You-you did it! You got naked and nasty with Dante! Our Dante? And you didn’t even tell me,” she whisper-screamed.

“Oooh, okay, she did this when Emmet and I got mated. It just makes her a little crazy, like you know, having another woman in the Crew,” Jezebel said to me.

“Spill! Come on, Av, and you better not leave anything out,” she said, landing back on the couch in a huff right next to me.

“Fine, first of all, what do you mean our Dante ?” I asked, eyebrows raised.

“Oooh, she’s got a little green monster sitting on her shoulder,” Jez said, chomping on some popcorn.

“He’s Crew. Now, I want to know what happened. Are you going to tell me or not? Are years of our friendship going to be thrown out the window like so much trash? Don’t you remember Girl Club? All our rules?” Penny said, and dear Lord, was she laying it on thick.

“As if I could forget Girl Club, Pen. I’m the one who made it up!”

I sighed and closed my eyes, praying for strength and patience.

“Rule 27, Avery. We share our big D stories! And I know Dante must have a very big D! Have you seen the size of that man?” Penny said and held her hands extremely far apart.

“Geezus, Penny! He’s not that—oh, okay, actually maybe,” I mumbled and tilted my head sideways.

Truth be told, she was pretty on point.

“Oh my God! Is he really hung like that?” Penny asked, her eyes bulging.

Jezebel snorted. Then she choked on a kernel. Spit it out. And snorted some more.

Penny and I turned and watched the pretty woman as she sat there, laughing hysterically at the two of us.

She even covered her face when she started crying, she was laughing so hard.

“I can’t believe I apologized to you,” I said, pretending to be scandalized.

“Y-you shoulda seen your face when Penny held her hands up!” Jezebel laughed and hiccupped loudly.

Then Penny started.

And soon, I joined in.

“You’re both enjoying this, aren’t you?” I said and side-eyed the two of them.

I grabbed a handful of popcorn and tossed a few kernels at Penny first, then Jez next. But I wasn't an idiot. I ate the rest of the salty, buttery goodness.

"Don't blame me. You thought my name was Jordan up until recently," Jez replied, her eyes sparkling with mischief.

"Hilarious. You both are so fucking funny. Now, I am not one to kiss and tell?"

"BULLSHIT!" Penny replied.

"Fine. I might have done that when we were kids. But I am a mated woman now," I said, and tilted my head, showing off my claiming bite.

That led to another round of squeals and giggles. Real camaraderie was a rare commodity in my life, but it was a good feeling.

"Oh my God! Avery, I am so happy for you," Jezebel said first, and I gladly accepted her hug.

She was a really special woman, and the truth was, aside from Penny, I hadn't known a lot of them.

But Jez was one of a kind, and having a second best friend was a gift I wouldn't take for granted.

"Thank you," I told her sincerely.

"What about you, pretty Penny? Aren't you happy for me?" I asked my suddenly quiet bestie.

I waited for her to look at me, a little confused, and more than a little hurt by her

reaction.

But the vibes she was giving weren't happy ones. In fact, she was frowning. Hard.

"Oh Av, I mean, of course, I'm happy for you. But it's just, you always act like the person you're about to date is going to be the love of your life. Ahem, Mark," she said and made a face like duh before continuing, "Avery, you pick them, then you run when it gets serious or when he has an annoying quality?—"

"Cheating on your taxes isn't an annoying quality, Penny. It's criminal behavior. And Rosie hated Mark. She puked on him!"

But Penny was on a roll, apparently. Drumming up my disastrous dates like they were some sort of proof I was a flake and couldn't be serious about Dante— and the hits just kept on coming.

"Plus, you never act like you like Dante. And well, mating is for life. I don't think you get it. If you leave him," she whispered, leaving the last bit unsaid.

"What are you talking about? I do not act like every date is my potential forever, Penny. And I haven't been on that many," I argued.

"I know that, Av. I just mean you can't dump him like you normally would?—"

"Why would I do that? What are you even saying? That I'm not good enough for him?" I asked.

It was true, in the last couple of years I'd tried dating again. But it was only a few times. I wasn't flippant about men or my feelings, for fuck's sake.

"No! I didn't say that. I know you're not flippant," Penny started, and dammit, I

realized I'd said all that aloud.

"You know what? I gotta go," I said, shaking with emotion.

"Avery, wait! I just want to make sure you understand how serious this is. Shifters can die without their mates. You can't just throw him aside when you get scared," she said, and I hated that even a part of that made sense to me.

"For your information, Dante and I spoke at length about what it means to be mates. I'm sorry if you don't think I'm good enough for him, or that I'm too emotionally immature to understand, but what you think doesn't matter because he disagrees with you," I told her, ignoring the metaphorical knife she just stuck in my back.

"Rosie? Rosie, get your coat on, Sweetheart. Say bye to Aunt Penny and Aunt Jezebel. We have to go," I called out.

Standing up quickly, I walked away from Penny and Jezebel. I ignored the sound of my name coming from the two women and found Rosie standing by Mrs. O'Hare plating up the cookies they'd just baked.

It smelled great, but I was in no mood. Shock and anger mixed with grief and sadness, but I had to keep it together for Rosie.

"Wow! You two were busy!" I said with false gaiety.

Rosie narrowed her eyes, and she nodded towards the cookies.

"Mama? Are you okay?"

"Yep. I'm fine."

“The cookies are ready. Want one?”

“Not yet, Baby. Get your stuff,” I told her.

“Think Danny will want some?” Rosie asked, smiling at the mention of his name.

I was glad she was chatting about cookies. That meant she hadn’t heard me argue with Penny. That was something, at least.

“Nice. I’m sure he will. We can take some to go. Mrs. O’Hare, would you be so kind,” I said, clearing my throat and trying to hold my tears at bay.

The front door opened, and with it a burst of chilly wind flew inside.

“Sugarplum? Hey, Avery. Is Jez here? Emmet is coming in a few minutes for her,” Max said and went straight to the living room.

I barely acknowledged his greeting. My eyes were on the figure standing behind him.

“Danny!” Rosie yelled and ran to Dante who scooped her up in his big, capable arms.

He nuzzled her cheek and said all the right things to Rosie’s million questions, but his velvet eyes were on mine. I knew he could tell something was wrong, and right then, that meant everything to me.

“Coat on, Baby Girl,” I said, and Rosie went to grab hers off the hook.

I sucked in a sharp breath, the kind that felt like it expanded every corner of my chest, and Dante stood there, waiting.

His posture was steady, unmoving, but there was something in his eyes. An intensity.

A quiet plea.

It spoke louder than words. I felt something tugging inside my chest. Like a thread wrapped around my heart, and it was leading me to him.

He didn't hound me. He was giving me space, letting me come to him when I was ready.

Without thinking or hesitating, I ran straight into him.

Dante didn't falter. Not an inch.

The moment I reached him, his arms opened wide, enveloping me in a hug that felt like home.

He pulled me close, holding me tightly to his warm, solid body, and I let out a shaky exhale, everything in me finally releasing.

The scent of him wrapped around me. Crisp, clean, like winter wind carrying the fresh bite of pine trees.

It wasn't just comforting. It was grounding.

Like stepping barefoot onto cool earth after wandering lost for too long.

Dante was great at giving hugs. His embrace was firm yet tender, as if he knew exactly how much strength I needed without overwhelming me.

I pressed my cheek against his chest, feeling the steady rhythm of his heartbeat beneath my ear.

That sound, that steady thrum of life, soothed my frayed nerves in a way nothing else could.

Dante didn't speak yet, and neither did I. We didn't need to. In that moment, his presence said everything I needed to hear.

I'm here. You're safe. Whatever it is, we'll face it together.

And for the first time in what felt like forever, my angst began to fade, replaced by the calm certainty that I wasn't alone.

"What happened, Honey?" he asked, kissing my temple.

"Nothing. It's nothing. My emotions are just all over the place."

"Did you wanna stay for dinner? Max invited us."

"No," I replied too quickly. "I want to go home."

"Home?" he asked, and my heart jolted.

"Oh, um, I meant your cabin," I said, tearing up and feeling like a fool for thinking of it as my home.

"That is your home, Honey. Yours, mine, and Rosie's," Dante said, his big hands cupping my face. "Got it?"

"Got it," I whispered, needing to hear that from him.

"Good. Let's go. You ready, Rosie Posie?"

“I’m ready,” Rosie said as Mrs. O’Hare walked back inside with her and a wrapped plate with cookies.

“Good evening, Dante,” the older woman said and nodded her head at me.

“Mrs. O’Hare,” he said and dipped his chin.

She’d always been kind to me and Avery, and I appreciated her not saying anything now about the argument I’d had with Penny.

“Look! I made cookies, Danny,” Rosie interrupted stated matter-of-factly.

“They smell great,” he said.

Dante took the plate from Rosie with one hand, keeping the other on the small of my back as he ushered the two of us outside to his truck.

It was still warm inside, thank goodness. The icy wind bit through my jacket and the temperatures were dropping. Rosie didn’t seem to mind, but that was normal.

She prattled on and on about her baking adventure with Mrs. O’Hare, which made me feel guilty for not paying attention. But it did give me a slight reprieve from having to speak.

My heart was hurting and for the first time since I found out I was pregnant, I felt bereft.

Penny had always been my lifeline.

My person.

In a totally platonic way, of course. But maybe I'd been wrong to think of her as family.

I mean, my own didn't want me. Maybe it was dumb to expect someone who wasn't related to me to really care.

Shit. I hated this. Hated feeling like I was less than.

But sometimes emotions needed to run their course.

Sometimes sadness needed to be felt.

I just wasn't expecting now to be one of those times.

How could she think that about me? How could she?

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“ These cookies are the perfect dessert, Rosie Posie,” I said to the nonstop chatterbox.

“Really, Danny! Yay! I wanna be a baker like Aunt Penny when I grow up,” She said, and handed me another cookie before running off to watch the cartoon movie I set up for her in the living room after we both built a blanket and pillow fort.

Avery insisted on cooking dinner. And she managed a pretty damn amazing Fettuccini Alfredo with grilled pork chops and sauteed zucchini on the side.

If I wasn't already in love with her, that meal alone would've done it.

I popped the cookie in my mouth and walked over to where she was loading the dishwasher. Reaching out for her, cause I just couldn't seem to help it, I placed my hands firmly on her hips and pulled her to me, nuzzling her neck with my lips and nose.

“Fuck, you smell so good. Sweet like honey and spicy like habaneros. I could just swallow you whole, mate,” I murmured.

She sighed and leaned back into me and the sadness that had been hanging around her like a shroud lifted ever so slightly.

“You make me feel special,” she whispered like she was afraid if she said it aloud it wouldn't be true.

I frowned and turned her around so she was facing me. My eyes roamed her

sweetheart of a face, and I felt my chest tighten. She was so damn pretty.

Her features were soft, but she had a straight nose and a stubborn chin. Her eyes were huge like doe eyes and tilted at the ends. The color was more caramel than chocolate, and fuck, but they made me dream.

Avery's lips were plump and pink, covering straight white teeth, and a wicked tongue I knew firsthand could make me see heaven.

I towered over her, but the fact she was petite only made me want her more. Being big was a burden sometimes, but with Avery in my arms, I rather liked my size.

All the better to protect her.

Women were curious things, though. I'd heard Penny, Jez, and even Avery chatting sometimes, their voices carrying through the house like a melody I couldn't quite understand.

They talked about shit like cellulite and tummy rolls like they were bad things, but it didn't make a lick of sense to me.

Avery had a body that brought me to my knees. Every time I looked at her, my chest got tight, and my Bear rumbled in approval.

She wasn't just beautiful—she was breathtaking. She was a real flesh and blood woman who deserved to be adored, cherished, and worshipped every day for as long as the Fates allowed me to walk this earth by her side.

She was perfect.

And she was mine.

But right now, she wasn't happy. And I didn't like it.

The sadness in her eyes stirred something primal in me. I hated it. Wanted to tear it out of her, banish it to the void where it could never touch her again.

My mate deserved joy—laughter, warmth, and light. Seeing her this way made my gut churn.

I stepped closer, my hands itching to comfort her, but I kept my voice steady. Gentle.

“Will you tell me about what happened today?”

Her lips twitched into a sad smile, her eyes softening as she nodded. Then, without warning, she stepped into me, wrapping her arms around my waist. Her cheek pressed against my chest, and I froze.

Shock rippled through me—Avery wasn't usually one for unprompted affection—but then my Bear chuffed contentedly, warmth spreading through my chest.

“Later,” she murmured, her voice muffled against my shirt. “After Rosie goes to bed.”

“All right,” I said, smoothing my hand down her back. “I can wait.”

She lingered for a moment longer, and I held her. Just soaking in the feel of her in my arms.

When she finally pulled away, I brushed a kiss against her temple.

“Go on inside. I'll finish cleaning up in here.”

Her brows knit together in hesitation. I just waited, letting her look, willing her to see my truth.

“You sure?”

“Yep.”

I kissed her again, this time on the crown of her head, and then gave her a playful swat on her fine ass.

“Go.”

She grinned, a spark of light returning to her face. This time, it reached her eyes, and I felt a surge of victory.

Score one for me.

I watched her retreat toward the living room, her hips swaying, and my chest filled with a sense of purpose.

I didn’t know what had caused her grief today, but I’d find out. And whatever she needed from me, I’d give it to her.

That was my promise.

My vow.

I might not understand women all that well, but I knew what kind of mate I wanted to be—the kind she could count on. The kind who made her feel safe and loved every single day.

It all started here, right now.

Because she was my mate.

My everything.

And I'd move mountains if that's what it took to see her smile again.

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“Sleepy, Mama,” Rosie murmured as Dante carried her to the bed.

I smiled and walked behind them, cooing to her softly.

“I know, Baby Girl. Sleep now,” I said in a hushed tone as he lay her down gently.

He was such a sweet man.

The way he handled my daughter—so tender and careful—was enough to make me swoon.

And I meant really swoon, like a heroine in one of those romance novels I was constantly reading. The kind who clutched her chest and fanned herself whenever the hero was in sight.

He was just so, so everything .

Dante Bianco, the enigma of a man, was surprisingly paternal for someone who'd never had a family of his own.

A single man who'd never even dated a woman, at least as far as I knew.

Well, I mean, he'd been a virgin before we slept together, so I was pretty confident he hadn't gone out with a lot of women, specifically single moms.

The thought of that—of how he'd saved himself, even unintentionally—brought a flush to my cheeks.

It didn't help that my mind immediately strayed to the things we'd done together, the kind of things that could set a room on fire.

Experienced or not, Dante was one hell of a lover. The kind that left you breathless, craving more, and wondering how you'd gotten so lucky.

But this moment, right now, was a different kind of intimacy.

Actually, the entire night had been like that.

Just doing the normal things with him, making dinner, eating, then watching TV after. Seeing him crouched on the living room floor, folding pillows and arranging blankets into a whimsical little fort for Rosie, was like a scene straight out of a rom-com.

You know, the kind of scene designed to make ovaries everywhere go off like firecrackers.

Rosie had never giggled so much. Dante had peeked into the fort, his dark hair falling into his eyes, his deep voice morphing into something playful and cartoonish as he pretended to not know he couldn't fit inside.

It was hilarious. He even had me forgetting my fight with Penny.

Dante was utterly devoted to making her laugh, his serious demeanor melting into a soft warmth I'd never seen before.

The sight hit me square in the chest.

He wasn't just playing with my daughter. He was there for her in a way that made my heart ache.

Every carefully tucked blanket, every exaggerated roar as he pretended to be the bumbling monster from the movie spoke volumes about the kind of man he was.

And I couldn't help but marvel at it.

Who would've thought Dante Bianco, the hulking, quietly intense man who walked around trying not to be noticed, would also be the kind of guy to build a pillow fort and make silly faces to delight a little girl?

It was enough to make me fall in love with him. Well, if I hadn't already given him my heart. But I had. It was done.

And I was so fucked.

What if Penny was right, and I was no good for him?

I pushed that fear away as I leaned against the doorway, watching Dante tuck her in.

He lifted his gaze to mine and the look in his eyes— soft, full of unspoken promises—made my knees feel like jelly.

Yeah, he was a sweet man.

One of the sweetest I'd ever known. And every minute we spent together, I seemed to find more reasons to love him.

"Night, Danny," Rosie whispered, clinging to Dante for one last nuzzle.

"Sleep tight, Rosie Posie," he whispered and pressed his lips to her hair before tucking her in.

I went in for the last goodnight kiss, and we both stood there until her breathing evened out.

“She’s always been a good sleeper,” I said, feeling a little nervous now because I knew what was coming.

It was time for our talk.

Dante held the door for me, and I walked through it, leading the way down the hall to the primary bedroom. Dante closed the door behind us and walked to the bed with my hand in his.

He sat down first, his back against the headboard, and I didn’t hesitate. I just crawled into his lap and sighed as his big arms encircled me.

“I got you,” he whispered, kissing my head.

His woodsy scent was so warm and comforting, I breathed it in and just let him hold me. It felt so good to have someone to lean on. Someone who I could simply be with.

No one had ever treated me like that.

I mean, I understood. I got it. I wasn’t exactly easy to get along with. Not that I blamed myself, I mean, I was young when I had Rosie. And I spent a lot of my life having to defend that choice.

My attitude reflected that. I could be rude and loudmouthed but being quiet about what made me upset just wasn’t me. Still, I never thought I would have to defend myself to Penny. And it hurt.

I knew it wouldn’t last long. I mean, usually, when we argued I just sucked it up and

went back. This felt different.

But maybe I didn't have to go through it alone.

"Today was hard," I said, taking a chance and opening up.

He hummed a sound of understanding, and I snuggled deeper into the comfort of his warm body. Dante's big hands stroked along my back, lighting fires of awareness as they went.

"Penny and I argued. It was bad," I whispered.

"What was it about?"

"You," I confessed.

"Me? What happened?"

"Sh-she said I didn't know what I was getting into. Mating you. That I wasn't right for it. That I would hurt you," I said, and God, but it broke something in me to admit that.

"What did you say?"

"I said what she thought didn't matter because you thought I was good for you, and that was all I needed."

"And is that how you feel?" he asked.

I sat up, dragging my gaze to meet his. His brows were furrowed, but he didn't look mad or upset. His dark velvet eyes were locked on mine, and inside them I saw truth

and honor, and so much depth.

Maybe Penny was right? Maybe he was too good for me. But I didn't care. At that moment, Dante was all I ever wanted. So, I nodded my head.

"Yours is the only opinion that matters in this, Dante. If you want me. If you think I can be a good mate to you, then this is where I want to be."

"You mean it? No one's opinion matters to you but mine?"

"About us? Yes, I mean it."

The air around us seems heavy with Dante's pause, then he's pushing me off his lap and standing, and I just sat there, wondering why.

"What are you doing?" I stopped talking the second his hands went to the fastening on his pants.

"Take your clothes off, Honey," he said, more bark than I was used to.

I didn't hate it, though.

In fact, I kind of liked it when Dante got all bossy with me.

"Avery. Get naked. Now," he said, and resumed taking off his pants and shirt.

I swallowed audibly. Then I got moving.

Every inch revealed of his bronzed skin sent shivers of attraction swirling through me. Desire had my clit throbbing and my panties soaked.

Fuck.

Why was I still in my panties?

The need to rush filled me and I stood on the bed, whipping off my shirt and bra, and shoving my pants down my legs. I started to tip sideways, but Dante was there, catching me before I could fall.

“You always this clumsy?”

He grinned, and boom, there went my heart.

“Clumsy? Me? I’m a goddamn sex symbol,” I snapped.

“Damn straight you are,” he growled and tossed me on the bed.

“Now let me see that pretty pink pussy of mine,” he rumbled, finishing the job of taking off my clothes.

Dante’s eyes turned black with his bear as he ran them over my body. I wasn’t perfect. I knew that. But the way he looked at me sure made me feel like it.

“So pretty, Honey. Fuck, I want you so bad.”

I dropped my eyes to his beautiful cock fisted in one giant hand, and the perfect pearl of precum glistening there had me whimpering.

“Dante,” I moaned his name, spreading my legs and willing him to me.

“Look how wet you are for me. Fucking soaked,” he grunted and fell face first into my sex.

I gasped, my mouth open as he ravaged me with his talented tongue and flexible lips.

I could feel him moving through me, his essence weaving into mine, as if we were two halves of a whole finally colliding. It was more than physical—deeper, rawer.

Like a rainstorm falling on water, each drop dissolving instantly, becoming part of something larger, something infinite.

Every touch, every breath, sent ripples through me, merging our souls in ways I couldn't begin to explain.

He wasn't just touching me. He was inside me.

Not just our bodies, but our hearts.

Our souls.

Our very beings.

The boundaries between us blurred, my edges softening, his strength flowing into every hollow space I didn't know existed until he filled them.

It was a storm, gentle yet unyielding, drenching me in him, in us.

"Dante," I moaned as my first orgasm rippled through me.

He slowed his pace until he was just peppering me with soft kisses and nuzzles. I pulled at him, wanting more, needing a deeper connection.

"Need you too, mate," he said and crawled on top of me.

I spread my legs wider, making room for his deliciously big body.

Then I felt him there, his big dick pressing into me. My mouth opened and our eyes locked. Dante's chest rumbled, and I knew his Bear was with us too.

Everything but us faded into the background.

In this sacred place, nothing else mattered. Nothing but Dante and me.

Mine. Mate.

His voice rumbled inside my mind's eye, and I welcomed it, opened myself up to the connection I was starting to feel inside my heart.

"Stay with me, Avery. Right here with me," he said.

"I only want you. Just you," I replied and meant every word.

I wasn't a fortuneteller. I didn't know what tomorrow would bring. But I understand this one very simple truth.

Rosie and I were better with Dante in our lives. Trust came hard for me, but hope was something I'd nourished secretly my entire adult life.

But I finally knew why now.

I understood why I clung to the dream of having something of my own someday.

Because Dante was right. He was my fate.

"This is right where I'm supposed to be," I moaned, hugging him to me.

“Goddamn right it is. You’re my destiny, Avery. Mine. My own. I love you so much, mate,” he said, pumping his hips and bringing me to heights I’d never experienced before.

“Show me, Dante.”

“I’ll show you. I’ll show you every fucking day. Come for me, Honey. Come on my cock,” he commanded, and just like that, my body obeyed.

I flew apart, secure in the knowledge Dante would catch me. And he did. He caught me. And he held me tight.

All night long.

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Having Avery and Rosie at my place all weekend was amazing. But Monday morning rolled around, and I fucking hated dropping them off.

“I’ll be back after school to pick you up,” I told her after we saw Rosie inside.

“Oh? I just thought you’d be back Friday,” she said, and her cheeks turned a delightful shade of pink.

“Avery, you’re my mate now. I want you at the cabin with me. Look, if you don’t like how it’s decorated you can change everything?—”

“No! It’s not that,” she said, and the smile on her face eased the sudden panic brewing inside my chest.

“I just didn’t want to assume,” she murmured, looking down at her lap.

I gripped her chin, tilting her face so she had to look at me.

“Honey, being my mate is the same as being my wife. You and Rosie are my family, I want you with me. At the ranch. I’m already seeing to your car so you can have your space, or freedom, or whatever you need. I don’t mind driving you, though. And I can work my schedule around school.”

“Oh,” she replied, eyes wide.

“I’m doing this wrong. I should have asked you, and I’m sorry for bumbling, but I am asking you now. Live with me? Stay with me? Marry me, Avery?”

“You mean that? You want to marry me?”

“I want you in every way, in any way I can get you,” I told her honestly.

“Yes. Oh yes, I want that, too,” she said, and my heart damn near beat right outside my chest.

“Okay,” I said, kissing her hard on the lips before making myself let go.

This was where she worked, and I saw one too many people stop and stare at us already. My Bear growled, and Avery pressed her hand to my chest, soothing the animal inside me.

Good mate. Mine.

“Oh, um, maybe we can get some stuff from the house after school and start moving more stuff before Rosie’s birthday this weekend?”

“Yeah, we can do that,” I said, smiling from ear to ear.

“Okay. Bye, Dante,” she whispered, still smiling as she turned away.

I stood there like a damn statue, just watching as she said hello to a few kids and their parents as she walked inside the building. She looked back at me a few times, and I nodded, letting her see I was there, making sure she was safe.

That was when I noticed a man in a suit glaring at my woman. Compared to me he had a slight build, but I didn’t care for him either way. And I sure as fuck didn’t like how he watched Avery once she was inside.

He turned back and looked shocked to see me still standing there. In fact, I’d moved

closer to the glass door.

The clear pane would do nothing to protect him from me if I chose to go through it. I wouldn't. Not yet. But if this prick looked at my woman again, he was going to get to know me up close and personal like.

I straightened my posture and bared my teeth in a snarl that was nowhere near human. He just blanched and grabbed at his tie.

I see you, fucker.

I waited until he backed away, scurrying down the hall like some rat abandoning ship. A feeling of unease crept up my spine, but this was a large, public school. Avery and Rosie would be fine.

I grabbed my phone and shot her a text though, just in case.

Dante

Honey, I want you to make sure you call or text me anytime during the day if you need me, okay?

Honey

Sure. But why do you say that?

Dante

Nothing. No reason. I love you. Have a good day.

Honey

You, too. I'll see you after school.

She didn't text that she loved me back. The silence stung, just a little, like the faint burn of a fresh scrape. But that was okay. We'd get there, eventually.

I just had to remind myself to be patient.

Love didn't always move at the same pace for everyone, and Avery had her reasons.

Going back to work on the ranch was harder than usual after drop off this morning.

The image of that creep—his leering face, the way his eyes had lingered on my girl—kept creeping into my mind, stoking a slow-burning fire in my chest.

But I trusted Avery. She'd let me know if she needed anything. She wasn't the kind of woman to shrink away from a problem.

No damsels here. Just pure grit.

Goddamn, she is something all right. Firecracker.

Hell, she'd been a nurse at Dry Creek Elementary for years before we'd even met.

That kind of work took guts, patience, and a heart big enough to handle it all.

Avery wasn't a shrinking violet. She was strong and independent.

She'd had to be.

Life hadn't handed her any favors, and she'd risen to the challenge every time. It was one of the things I admired most about her.

And there were a lot of things I admired about her.

I'd move heaven and earth to keep her safe. To see her smile. To make sure she felt the kind of love she deserved every single day.

If some asshole in a baggy suit thought he could crowd my woman, he had another think coming.

My Grizzly stirred under my skin, snarling and snapping in the back of my mind, ready to tear the bastard apart for even thinking about Avery.

It took everything in me to keep the beast at bay. This wasn't the time for claws and fangs—not yet.

Instead, I put my energy into taking care of what I could.

First stop, Lance's Auto Repair & Body Shop to deal with her piece of shit mode of transportation.

Her compact car had crapped out on her the first time we met, after the whole bat to the brain incident.

It'd been irking me for months that it wasn't up to par. Something I was going to fix right now.

Dion greeted me with a knowing smirk, grease-streaked hands gripping a clipboard. It didn't take long for him to confirm what I already knew.

Avery's car was a rolling death trap. A total piece of shit.

Still, I didn't want to be bullheaded about it.

Avery might have sentimental attachments to the damn thing, so I told Dion to hold on to it, just in case she wanted anything from it before I had it squashed into something that could pass for modern art.

From there, I headed straight to the local car dealership.

I knew exactly what I wanted for her. Hell, I was so psyched, I shivered with anticipation at her reaction upon seeing the brand-new SUV I was buying just for her.

It was top of the line, of course, with every safety feature money could buy.

Heated leather seats, automatic starter, WeatherTech mats, all-wheel drive, the works. I chose gunmetal gray for the exterior—practical but sleek—and black leather for the interior.

But I didn't stop there.

I asked the salesperson to customize the interior with pink LED lights and accents as a surprise for Rosie.

My little girl deserved to feel special, too. The custom job would take a few extra days, but they promised to deliver it straight to the ranch once it was ready.

One final stop. The jewelry store.

I didn't need anything flashy, just something meaningful. Something that would remind Avery every day that she wasn't alone anymore, that she was loved.

And I found it too, tucked away in a section marked antiques. The platinum band was shaped like a vine, tiny intricate leaves carved out of metal. I could see it now, swirled around her finger. She was so tiny, my mate. Delicate, but not fragile.

Platinum was the perfect metal for her. Strong. Timeless. And the design showed that even the strongest things needed care.

The solitary diamond that sat dead center was eye catching in its stunning simplicity. It was one of a kind.

Just like Avery.

I took that, a plain platinum band for myself, and a child-sized necklace with a small pink stone set inside a heart-shaped pendant.

With my errands done, I drove back to the ranch, feeling lighter than I had all morning.

Sure, Emmet would bitch about me taking time off, but the Demon Wolf could shove it. This was more important.

I had to get everything ready for my girls.

The past weekend felt like a dream, one filled with promises and possibilities. But today was where real life began, and this was where the true test started.

I wasn't afraid.

Because I had Avery. And for her— for both of them —I'd pass any test life threw my way.

Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 10:35 am

A few days later.

“Did I mention how good you look, Avery? Every day this week, you’ve arrived on time, no complaining about your car, and girl, you are practically glowing,” Casey remarked during our morning coffee break.

We were sneaking it in the back of the gym, avoiding a certain assistant principal who seemed to be extra attentive this week.

“ Oh stahp ,” I said with an exaggerated eye roll.

“Seriously, what’s your secret? And does it have anything to do with that super huge, super-hot guy who’s been picking you up after work?”

“Dante? Yeah, I would have to say it has everything to do with him,” I confessed, and grinned.

“I knew it! Where did you even find him?”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, I’m from the city. I only moved up here to take care of my Gramps, and it was like culture shock. I mean who even knew they had cowboys in New Jersey?”

“Oh, well, yeah. We got ‘em, for sure.” I giggled.

“Do tell. I mean, I was that little girl who used to read books and dreamed of having

puppies, ponies, and unicorns, which somehow turned into wolves and dragons, too. But anyway, I wanna know more about the cowboy stuff. Does he wear that sexy AF hat all the time ?” Casey wagged her eyebrows up and down and I almost choked on the sip I’d just taken.

“I hope you mean does he wear that hat when he’s working, cause I am not talking about smexy times with you,” I said, but the fact was she had me pegged. Or rather, Dante sure as hell did.

And yes, I got him to wear a hat once or twice in bed.

And another time against the wall.

“Judging from the fact your face is now two shades of crimson, I think I’m right about the hat,” she said, eyeing me conspiratorially.

Lucky guess.

Normally, this was stuff I’d confide to Penny, but since she was being all Miss Judgy Pants, I was currently down a best friend.

Sure, the initial sting from our disagreement had faded, but I wasn’t ready to forgive her just yet. Soon. But not just yet.

Anyway, Casey was sweet and a good work friend.

“Nope. My lips are sealed about me and Dante. What about you? Seeing anyone?”

“Me? Nah. Okay, if you aren’t going to let me live vicariously through you, let’s change the subject,” Casey said and nodded.

“Oh, I almost forgot. How’s Rosie doing in Miss Dembeck’s class? I heard after yesterday’s minor squabble they’re bringing that little boy’s parents in this morning,” Casey said, and I frowned.

My pulse started to race as I processed what Casey was saying. Fear for Rosie was at the forefront of all my other emotions.

“What squabble? And what parents?” I asked as I started to walk towards the gym doors.

I had my cell phone in my hand and was already texting Dante before I knew what was happening. Something felt wrong. My chest was so tight it was hard to breathe.

“Dammit. I knew assistant creep didn’t tell you! Apparently, Rosie had an altercation with a classmate, and Mr. Dryden said he was going to alert you and the other parents about the issue. I just assumed the meeting was for later,” Casey said, sorrow and sympathy clear in her tone.

“Rosalie!” I yelled and moved faster.

She was being led from the principal’s office and to a private room used primarily to conduct interviews.

She was too far away to hear me, but the woman leading her to the room stilled for a moment then ushered Rosie inside.

What the actual fuck?

Fury filled me, but as I reached for the doors, my boss grabbed my arm.

“Nurse Brown, what are you doing?” Principal Jefferson asked, and her eyes were

pointed with anger.

“You can’t interrupt an interview with Child Services,” she hissed.

“What? Who is that person? Is she from Child Services? What is she doing with my Rosie?” I asked, fear holding me tight in its taloned grip.

“There you are, Nurse Brown. I guess you decided not to join us for the meeting this morning to discuss Rosalind’s latest behavior,” Mr. Dryden tsked.

“You lying, delusional motherfucker. You never told me a goddamn thing about any meeting. Now I demand to know what is going on!” I said, angrier than I’d ever been in my whole life.

Fear for my daughter stopped me when I would’ve throat punched the lying douchebag. I turned my attention to the principal.

“I want Rosalie. Now!”

“Mr. Dryden? Didn’t you say you’d been in deep discussions with Avery about Rosalie’s behavior and that she was fine with you taking charge of it now?” Principal Jefferson asked him.

“What? He never told me a thing and no way would I allow him to be in charge of anything having to do with my daughter!”

“Avery, why don’t we discuss this inside my office,” Mr. Dryden said, leering at me.

I shivered with disgust. Something about this creep made all the hairs on the back of my neck stand up.

“Principal Jefferson, I don’t know what he told you, but none of it is true. Now, I demand to see my daughter right now.”

“Avery!” I whipped my head and saw Dante jogging down the corridor straight towards me.

“Dante,” I said his name, turning in time to be caught by him.

“Rosie? Where’s Rosie?” he asked, looking at me first then at the principal.

“I’m sorry, who are you?” Principal Jefferson asked.

“Dante Bianco, I’m Avery’s fiancé,” he said matter-of-factly, squeezing my hand as if to silence the gasp rising in my throat.

I knew being mates was more to a Shifter than being married, but something about hearing him say that touched me deep inside.

I supposed a lot of little girls dreamed of wedding dresses and flowers and saying I do , and I was no different. But this wasn’t the time or place to ask if he meant it.

“Well, Mr. Bianco, there seems to be some confusion here?—”

“Oh stop. You don’t have to tell this Neanderthal anything,” Mr. Dryden sneered.

“Son, I’d watch my mouth if I were you,” Dante growled.

“Enough, gentlemen. I am sorry but as far as I knew, you were engaged to him,” she said, pointing at Mr. Dryden who stood there looking like he swallowed a bug.

“What are you talking about? I would never!”

“Like hell she’s engaged to that turd!” Dante replied, and I swear, I felt his whole body ripple with power.

“It’s okay,” I murmured, and pressed my back against his front.

He placed his large hands on my waist, his touch steady and grounding. The heat radiating from him seeped into my skin, branding me in a way that wasn’t possessive but protective.

Like he was silently declaring to the universe, She’s mine, and I’ve got her .

That warmth, that solidness, empowered me.

Yes, fear still coiled tight in my chest, twisting and turning with every thought of my child.

I was still furious at Mr. Dryden and my boss, their arrogance and incompetence feeding my anger like gasoline on a fire.

But with Dante standing there, his presence a force of calm in the chaos, something else began to fill me.

It wasn’t relief exactly. It was bigger than that.

My chest squeezed with it, the sensation so intense that my heart stuttered, skipping a beat before it roared back to life, pounding against my ribs like it was trying to tell me something.

And then I realized what it was.

It was the knowledge that I wasn’t alone.

Yes, I was scared out of my mind. Who wouldn't be in a situation like this?

When your child's safety was at risk, fear was inevitable. But now, for the first time in what felt like forever, I wasn't facing that fear on my own.

I had someone beside me. Someone who wasn't just here for the good times or the easy parts.

Dante was here, solid as a mountain, ready to back me up no matter what. No questions, no hesitations. Just unconditional, unwavering support.

And it was fucking fantastic.

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A few minutes earlier.

The second I got the text from Avery, I bolted out of her old house on Willow Lane like my life depended on it.

I'd been spending my afternoons there all week packing up Avery and Rosie's things. The plan was simple.

Move them out of this place and into my cabin permanently.

It was a good plan, solid, and I'd been sticking to it. Mornings on the ranch, afternoons here, evenings with my girls.

Winter had slowed things down at the ranch, anyway. The animals were snug in their barns and milking parlors, well-fed and cozy. The construction projects we'd planned were on hold thanks to the seasonal deep freeze that had settled over Dry Creek.

Mother Nature could be a fickle old bat, for sure.

At her best, she was unpredictable.

At her worst, some Dark Witch's scapegoat.

Not that I kept up with magical politics.

Bear Shifters didn't meddle in those things. We had enough on our plates without worrying about who was messing with the climate.

With Max's permission and Emmet's grudging acknowledgment, I'd taken the afternoons off to focus on moving Avery and Rosie's lives into mine.

Permanently. And didn't that have a nice ring to it?

Lucky for me, Avery wasn't sentimental about the house itself. She cared more about the memories.

Photo albums.

Rosie's baby things.

Her grandma's old cast iron skillet.

The bits and pieces of their life that held meaning. And Avery, being the neat, practical little thing she was, had already boxed up most of it and stored it in the sitting room.

My job was just to haul it out, load it into my truck, and take it home.

But that could wait.

Stuff was just stuff, and compared to my family, it didn't matter. Not even a little.

I reread the text twice, my heart thundering in my chest, and allowed myself exactly one moment to panic.

One beat of blind, unbridled fear.

Then I moved.

My Grizzly stirred in the metaphysical realm, pawing at the ground like a caged beast, ready to charge.

Anger and vengeance rolled through me in waves, hot and demanding, as the thought of anyone daring to hurt what was mine filled my mind.

Because that's what this was. Someone was trying to hurt my family.

My mate. My cub.

And they were going to pay.

Oh, fuck yes, they would.

But this was the human world, and there were rules here. Expectations. I couldn't let my Bear loose, no matter how much he growled and snarled inside me, begging to be unleashed.

It wasn't easy reining him in.

Hell, it was one of the hardest things I'd ever had to do. But I would do it. For them. For my girls.

This wasn't about me.

It wasn't about my fury, my need to protect, or even my Grizzly's primal instincts.

It was about them.

Avery and Rosie.

They were my world, my everything. And they were in trouble.

That was all I needed to know.

There wasn't a thing in this world— or any other —that I wouldn't do to help them.

To save them. To keep them safe.

Not even the Fates could help anyone who stood in my way.

Hold on, Honey. I'm coming.

Present time.

The weight of everything didn't disappear, not entirely, but it felt lighter.

More manageable.

Because Dante wasn't just standing next to me. He was with me in every way that mattered.

He's here. He came.

I looked up at him, his steady gaze meeting mine, and a smile of gratitude tugged at my lips despite the storm raging in my mind.

He didn't have to say a word. I could see everything I needed in his eyes.

With Dante here, I wasn't just facing the storm.

I was ready to stand in it, face the wind, and fight back.

"Okay, I think I've been fed some misinformation. Nurse Brown, I do not know what is happening here, but we will get to the bottom of it. Why don't we go inside my office?" Principal Jefferson suggested.

"I think I'll take off," Dryden said, but Dante moved, blocking his exit.

"I don't think so."

“Avery? Please let’s go inside my office,” my boss tried again.

I shook my head, determined to stand right by the door where Rosie was even now being questioned.

“I’m not leaving until my child comes out that door. Now, tell me what happened. All I know is whatever this man said to you, it was a lie,” I said, pointing at the assistant creep.

“This is ridiculous. I acted within my rights as assistant principal. Your child has been a problem since the start of the school year. Acting out. Being unreasonable. Fighting with the other children. Her behavior is abhorrent. And I am guessing it comes from your own behavior, Nurse Brown. A single mother with a revolving door of men is no doubt unfit?—”

“This is the only warning you will get. Shut your fucking mouth about her,” Dante snarled.

“Look,” I said, trying to shift the focus back to my child. “I am not going to defend my behavior to this man who is obviously delusional, Principal Jefferson. But Rosie is not a problem?—”

“She has been difficult, Nurse Brown,” my boss said, eyeing a file that undoubtedly held records of incidents I wasn’t even aware of thanks to that fucking tool. Mr. Dryden.

“Rosie’s rambunctious, but she’s not mean. She’s not malicious,” I countered, tears welling in my eyes.

“She’s been having issues, Avery,” Principal Jefferson repeated, and my chest squeezed.

Had I been neglecting my own daughter?

“Surely, I would have been told if things were taking a turn for the worse. Miss Dembeck knows to email me,” I said, shaking my head in disbelief.

“You haven’t answered her last six attempts to contact you,” the principal replied, showing me printed out copies of these supposed emails.

“But that’s not the right address. Look, there’s an e at the end of Brown? This was sent through the school’s system, wasn’t it?” I asked and felt my panic turning to anger.

“There must be a mistake,” the principal said, checking the document.

“Clearly there is. This man messed with my email address in the system! Didn’t you?” I accused and felt Dante growl behind me.

“So what if the email address is incorrect? Your kid is a little monster! I did what I had to do to make sure the other kids were safe. Principal Jefferson, I am appalled that my motives are even being questioned,” Dryden said.

The creep was trying to gaslight all of us, acting like he was somehow the wronged party.

Bile rose in my throat. I could not believe it.

“Y-you called protective services because I wouldn’t go out with you. And you lied to our boss and said I was your fiancée, so you assumed permission to go ahead and have Rosie evaluated?” I asked, trying to make sense.

“No. No, she’s not being evaluated. You are! They’re going to find out what a dirty

little whore you are and take your spoiled brat away from you. Rosalind will be better off?—”

I faltered, my knees wobbling like they were seconds away from giving out.

How could this be happening?

My chest felt tight, like the walls were physically closing in on me, squeezing the air out of my lungs.

This was my fault.

The assistant principal, Mr. Dryden, had stirred up all this chaos because of me.

Rosie, my sweet girl, was probably terrified right now, being questioned by some stranger in a cold, unfamiliar room. And why?

Because I'd had the audacity to say no to his slimy invitations. Turned down all his pathetic attempts to woo me with romantic overtures and coffee dates.

I refused him, and this was his revenge.

The thought churned in my stomach like acid, my pulse racing faster with every second that passed. I couldn't move. I stood there, frozen in a cocktail of horror, rage, and helplessness.

And then, through the fog of panic, I became aware of something behind me.

A sound.

Low, guttural, and ferocious.

The terrible, angry rumble grew louder, reverberating down the hallway until it filled the space like thunder rolling over a stormy sky. It was a sound so primal, so filled with rage, it made the tiny hairs on the back of my neck stand on end.

I didn't have to turn around to know where it was coming from.

Dante.

My mate.

I barely had time to blink, let alone react, before the rumble exploded into action.

With a snarl that seemed to shake the very air, Dante surged forward, his fist colliding with Mr. Dryden's smug, unsuspecting face. The crack of bone meeting bone echoed down the hallway, followed by a gasp—maybe mine, maybe someone else's.

The force of the punch sent Mr. Dryden flying backward, his body crashing into the cement wall with an audible crack that seemed to rattle the very foundation of the building.

That creepy fuck crumpled to the ground in a heap, groaning in shock and pain, one hand clutching his now-bloodied nose.

Silence fell over the hallway, heavy and electric.

My heart thundered in my chest, but this time it wasn't from fear.

I turned slowly, my eyes locking on Dante. His chest rose and fell with heavy breaths, his jaw clenched so tightly I could see the muscles ticking under his skin.

His eyes burned with a wild fury, the kind of look that said he wouldn't hesitate to do it again if Dryden so much as breathed wrong.

And in that moment, all the fear, all the doubt that had threatened to overwhelm me, began to dissipate.

Because Dante wasn't just angry—he was furious on my behalf. On Rosie's behalf.

He wasn't just defending us. He was declaring, loud and clear, that no one messed with his family.

And God help anyone who tried.

Sexy, strong man. Christ, I love him.

“Oh my God!” Principal Jefferson said, her hands covering her mouth as she rushed to see if Dryden needed help.

Just then, the interview room door opened and a small woman with blue hair sticking out of the bottom of her braid came walking out with her hand on Rosie's shoulder.

“Oh, um, hello. My name is Sybil. Are you Rosie's parents?” she asked.

“My name is Dante. Can I speak with you?”

“Sure,” the woman, Sybil, said.

Her eyebrows went sky high when she saw Mr. Dryden sprawled across the floor, and Principal Jefferson trying to stanch the flow of his bleeding nose.

I couldn't hear what Dante was saying to the woman, and at that moment, I didn't

care.

“Rosie!” I said, crouching down and opening my arms for my daughter.

She came running into them, hiding her tear streaked face in the crook of my neck. She trembled from head to toe, and I lifted her off the floor and squeezed her tight to my chest.

“Oh, my sweet baby. Are you okay?”

“I’m sorry, Mama. Mr. Dryden said not to tell you about my fight with Lisa and Robbie.”

“Shh. It’s okay.”

“He said if I told you, I would have to go live somewhere else. He said you would send me away. But I don’t want to go, Mama! I don’t want to!” Rosie said and started sobbing and wailing.

Her tiny body was trembling in my arms, and I held her even tighter. She was hysterical and crying so hard it hurt my heart.

She was also getting hot. Like really hot.

“Rosie? Rosie, tell Mama what’s wrong?”

But she just kept on crying and squirming. Her skin was getting too hot for me to hold on to and I gasped. Dante turned to me, his eyes glittering and dark with his Bear.

“Shit. It’s happening already. Give her to me,” Dante said, reaching for Rosie.

Shock and fear or a combination of both had me handing my writhing, screaming child to him.

“What do you mean it’s happening, Dante? What is happening?”

He ignored me though and extended his arms. I looked down at Rosie. Her skin was turning colors, a mottled red and brown, and the sounds coming from her were hardly human.

Dante tossed me the keys and took her from my hands. I allowed it, not knowing what to do. Then he took off running.

“Come on, Honey. I need you to drive,” he ordered, and my feet started moving.

I met the gaze of the blue-haired woman, Sybil, and she nodded from her position crouched on the floor.

“Go on, I got this,” she said.

I thought I saw the air shimmering around her and swirls of glitter spinning, but I couldn’t bother with that right then. I was too busy chasing Dante with a grunting Rosie in his arms.

I jumped into the driver’s seat in time to see dark brown fur sprout across Rosie’s face, and her brown eyes bleed to black.

“Oh my God!” I cried out.

“Drive, Avery. Fast!” Dante grunted.

Rosie’s claw-tipped fingers raked across his forearms, and blood sprouted from his

skin.

“Dante,” I muttered, tears streaming down my face as I burned rubber.

The roads grew icy the closer we got to the ranch, outside of town where the salt trucks traveled less.

“Shit. Stop here. Let us out of the truck, then drive to the cabin. We’ll meet you there,” he grunted, struggling to contain Rosalie, who seriously was not looking a whole lot like my daughter anymore.

What is going on?

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How had this happened?

“Dante,” I managed to say his name, fear tightening my throat and choking off the rest of my words.

My hands gripped the wheel, trying to focus on driving his massive truck down the snowy road. Every second felt like an eternity, my mind spinning in a thousand directions at once.

“Look at me, Honey.” His voice was steady, calm, even though I could hear the strain beneath it.

I glanced at him in the rearview mirror. His black eyes locked onto mine, unwavering, grounding me in the chaos.

“I got her. And I got you. This will all be okay.”

I nodded, tears streaming down my face, unchecked and relentless. I couldn’t stop them, didn’t even try.

My chest felt too tight, like my ribs might crack under the pressure of everything I was feeling.

Then, with trembling hands, I pulled the truck over to the side of the road. The ranch was only about eight minutes away, but I couldn’t keep going. I couldn’t think. I couldn’t breathe.

The truck barely came to a stop before I jumped out of the driver's seat. Snow crunched beneath my boots as I yanked open the back door, my voice breaking as I murmured, "Oh my God."

I stumbled back, my eyes widening in shock at the sight in front of me.

Dante was a big man. Broad, powerful, and intimidating to anyone who didn't know him.

But I did.

I knew his strength was tempered by a gentleness so profound it made my heart ache. I had never ever worried about him with Rosie.

Not for a second.

But now, blood was dripping from him. Thick, crimson streaks seeping from deep gashes across his face, neck, chest, and arms.

It painted him, staining his skin, his torn clothes, the snow beneath him.

I muffled my cry with trembling hands, watching in horror as he tumbled out of the truck with Rosie in his arms.

My Rosie.

But it wasn't her.

The child I had carried in my womb, the sweet little girl I loved more than anything in the world, no longer looked human.

She was a mass of fur, snapping and snarling, her small body twisting and writhing as if fighting an invisible enemy.

“Rosie?” I whispered, my voice breaking.

Her head snapped toward me, and that’s when I saw them.

Her eyes.

Only they weren’t hers anymore.

The bright brown eyes I knew so well had been replaced by something darker, something feral. They gleamed in the low light, piercing through me like a predator sizing up prey.

I froze.

Fear gripped me, paralyzing me as my baby growled low in her throat.

Then she charged.

Instinct took over, and I held my arms out, trembling, ready to catch her even as my mind screamed in terror.

I didn’t know what she’d do. I didn’t know if she’d bite or claw or hurt me. But I couldn’t stop myself from reaching for her.

I just wanted to soothe her.

To calm her.

Before Rosie could reach me, Dante was on it.

He jumped in front of me, his body shielding mine, and let out a roar so loud it shook the earth beneath my feet.

The sound was primal, deafening, and every hair on my body stood on end.

And then it happened.

His clothes shredded as his body exploded outward, skin giving way to fur in a blur of motion.

The change was violent, a transformation that turned the man I loved into something monstrous.

And the sounds of it? The sounds were horrifying.

Bones snapping, muscles tearing, sinew ripping and rearranging itself in ways no human body was meant to endure. It was over in seconds, but it felt like an eternity.

Was it painful?

Did Rosie feel that, too?

And where had this come from?

Was it her biological father who had passed this on to her?

Or had it been hidden, dormant, all along?

The questions hit me like a tidal wave, one after another, until I couldn't keep up.

My sobs broke free. I felt raw as they poured from me like a river.

Because the truth was right in front of me, undeniable and terrifying.

Rosie was like Dante.

Exactly like him.

A smaller version of his enormous Grizzly form. She stood there on all fours, her fur bristling, claws digging into the ground, fangs bared.

My sweet little girl was something I couldn't begin to understand.

She was a Shifter.

And in that moment, in my most shameful, weakest moment, I was scared I would never get her back.

As if she sensed my distress, Rosie whined and chuffed, trying to get past the bigger Bear, but Dante was immovable.

Snapping his teeth and grunting, he pushed her with his snout towards the forest that lined the private road we were on that led to the ranch.

Bear Shifter. My baby is a Shifter.

I closed my eyes and sucked in a frigid breath, the icy air burning my lungs as it filled me.

I held it there for a moment, letting the cold cut through the chaos swirling inside my head.

With that breath, I gathered everything—every fear, every worry, every unanswered question.

I let the weight of it all press down on me. And damn, it was heavy.

But I didn't shy away from it this time.

I stared it down, letting myself feel every jagged edge of my terror and uncertainty.

Then, with a deliberate exhale, I pushed it all away.

Out of my chest, out of my head, out of the space where it had taken root and festered.

And as I opened my eyes, I made a choice.

It wasn't easy, but it wasn't as hard as I thought it would be either.

It was just a choice.

A decision that came with clarity so sharp it felt like it had been waiting for me all along.

I was a human in a family of Shifters.

And that was okay.

Rosie and Dante were different. Special in ways I couldn't fully understand, ways I might never fully relate to.

But none of that changed what they were to me.

They were my family.

My heart

My home.

Even Penny, despite our current rift, was part of that truth.

The second I let myself acknowledge it, something shifted inside me. It wasn't small or subtle. More like a giant switch being flipped, flooding my mind with light after so much darkness.

Every ounce of confusion, fear, and doubt that had been holding me captive was suddenly gone.

Because the truth was simple.

I had nothing to be afraid of.

Rosie was my daughter. She had always been my daughter. And she always would be.

It didn't matter what she was, or what she could become, or how her world had changed. She was mine, and I was hers, and nothing—*nothing*—could ever take that away.

The love I felt for her, the fierce, unshakable bond we shared, was bigger than fear.

Bigger than biology. Bigger than anything I'd ever imagined before this moment.

And Dante?

Well, Dante was right. He was right about everything.

Sure, he still had some explaining to do. Like how he didn't seem surprised by Rosie's shift. But I understood why he would've been hesitant to approach me with it.

I knew it was going to hurt once I thought about it, but I didn't have time for that right now.

He was out there, in the woods, taking care of our girl. And that mattered more than anything.

Thank you for bringing him into my life.

I said the prayer before I even knew what I was doing. But I meant it all the same.

From the beginning, I'd been drawn to him like no other man. He had all my attention.

Maybe it was because he fit me so well. I mean, being with him was easy as breathing.

He made everything better. Rosie sure loved him.

And so did I.

Dante was the type of man I'd always dreamed of finding. He was kind and gentle, but strong and dominant. A sweetheart with my baby. A dynamo in bed.

I mean, we lit fires between the sheets, he and I.

God, I love him.

Loving him was as natural and simple as anything.

We were going to be okay. I just knew it.

Because this was my family.

Shifter or not, Rosie and Dante were mine.

And I was theirs.

And that was all that mattered.

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A shuddering gasp ripped from me, raw and uncontrollable.

The impossible weight of everything seemed to crash down all at once.

My chest felt so tight. I couldn't think. Couldn't move.

I wanted to follow Dante and Rosie. To go with them. Into the dark, cold woods.

But that was no place for me.

It was for them. The wild, magical things that roamed the earth.

Oh, Rosie Posie, please be safe.

With everything I was feeling, it was a wonder I didn't pass out or collapse. But I knew why that was.

Rosie was with Dante, and that meant she was safe. He would bring her home to me. I just knew he would.

But even that certainty couldn't stop my heart from squeezing.

See, what they didn't tell you about being a parent, regardless of what age you were when you became one or the circumstances that made you one, was that once you had a child, your entire world changed.

Every action and reaction were no longer just yours.

Every single thing you did had consequences. Lasting ones. And those could affect your child.

I made the decision long ago to have Rosie without help from my parents or her birth father. And I would never ever regret that decision.

She was the best thing that ever happened to me. A special brand of magic that only a child could bring.

And now she was doing it again. Changing my world for the better. My heart squeezed, and I felt the rightness of it all deep in my chest.

Yes, I chose to embrace the magic, the gift that was us. But the waiting really sucked.

My thoughts were stuck on Dante. My sweet, sexy, powerful mate in all of his glorious fur as he did exactly what he said he would when he took me as his mate—took care of us.

He was out there right now with my baby, protecting and teaching her things I couldn't.

Not my baby anymore. Rosie is our baby.

I thought about my parting words to her before I'd driven myself back to the cabin.

"It's okay, Rosie.," I called out to her, smiling through my tears, "Go with Dante, Baby. It's gonna be okay! I'll see you both at home."

I'd stood there for a few long minutes and clutched my hand to my heart, watching as Dante continued to direct the small Bear's movements, nudging her towards the copse of trees.

On closer look, Rosie's fur was darker than Dante's. More black than brown, and she lacked the hump at the base of her neck.

When I couldn't see them anymore, I jumped in the truck and took off like a bat out of hell for the cabin.

Home. It's our home.

Hysterical laughter had escaped my lips as I sped down the graveled driveway and slammed on the brake, sending pebbles flying every which way. I probably alerted every Shifter on the place that I was there with all that racket.

"Avery! What's going on?" Kian came running down the path that led to one of the animal pens just a few minutes' walk away.

"It's, uh, well, there was a problem at school and um, Rosie's a Shifter. She's a Bear. Dante has her in the woods," I blabbed, sinking to my knees as I tried to absorb it all.

"Shit. Really? Okay. It's okay, Let me call Max," he said, and I nodded.

Now here I was, three hours later, standing on the porch with a blanket around my shoulders and a cup of cocoa in my hands.

My breath escaped in streaming white clouds as the temperatures dropped. The other guys had all gone out into the woods, some in human form, others in their supernatural one.

"Emmet just texted. He said they're by the stream. Little one's tuckered out, so it won't be long now," Jezebel murmured and stood beside me.

"Avery?" I turned to see Penny had come out onto the porch with her.

My throat felt tight. The kind of tight that made swallowing hard and breathing feel heavier than it should.

I didn't need to say a word to know Penny was just as worried about Rosie as I was. The concern in her eyes mirrored my own, and that silent connection brought both comfort and a pang of guilt.

She'd always been there for me, ever since we were kids. Through scraped knees and bad haircuts, through heartbreaks and hard choices, Penny had been my rock.

She hadn't blinked when I told her I was pregnant all those years ago. Instead, she'd doubled down on being the best friend anyone could ask for.

Penny stood by me through every appointment, every craving, every tear-filled night when I thought I couldn't do it alone.

And she wasn't just my lifeline. She was Rosie's too. Aunt Penny wasn't just a title. She'd filled that role effortlessly from the moment Rosie was born.

She could make my little girl laugh on the hardest days, turn the simplest outings into grand adventures, and love her with a fierceness that rivaled my own.

Penny was forever baking Rosie goodies that just knocked my baby's socks off. Making each holiday a special one for my girl.

The past couple of weeks without her had been hard.

Too hard.

We hadn't talked since our falling out.

Life had felt lonelier, harder to navigate without Penny by my side. I didn't even realize how much I relied on her until she wasn't there anymore.

And now, with everything happening, I felt that absence more acutely than ever.

I missed my friend.

I missed the easy way we could talk about anything, the way she could make me laugh even when I wanted to cry. And right now, I could really, really use her.

Actually, I could use more than just her.

Jezebel was part of the Crew now, and she'd been a surprisingly bright spot since I'd formally met her.

Maybe it was time to let her in, too. To expand my circle and embrace the kind of support I so desperately needed.

Because if there was one thing I was starting to realize, it was that I couldn't go through life alone. Rosie deserved better than that. So did I.

We both deserved the biggest, best family we could have.

That meant Dante. And Penny. And Max. And Jez. And Emmet. And all the rest of the Crew.

No, we didn't have to be alone anymore. And we wouldn't be.

Rosie and I had finally found our home.

Now, I just needed them to come back. And I was so damn glad I had company while

I waited.

“I’m, uh, gonna blame my dumb mouth on pregnancy hormones, but you think you can forgive me?” she asked.

“Oh, Pretty Penny,” I murmured, and sobbed when she opened her arms and hugged me.

“I’m so sorry I came off as a judgy bitch. I didn’t mean to be,” she cried.

“Oh, you two are gonna make me cry!” Jezebel said.

I grabbed her and turned our twosome into a three way hug. We sniffled and chuckled, and I told them both everything that had been going on.

“So, you love him then?” Penny asked me.

“Oh my God, Pen. I love him so much, it’s driving me crazy,” I said and laughed, wiping my eyes.

“Have you told him?”

“Not yet. I will though,” I said and meant it. “Right after I find out how long he’s been keeping Rosie’s secret from me.”

I still wasn’t sure how I felt about that. I mean, it was obvious to me now that Dante hadn’t been shocked like I was about Rosie’s transformation.

And yes, I went back over everything I knew about Shifters and figured out that Rosie didn’t catch it or anything like that.

She was born a Shifter. Which meant either I or her father carried that gene.

“Um, actually, I kinda knew too,” Jezebel confessed.

Penny worried her lower lip, and I had the sneaking suspicion she knew, too.

“Are you kidding me? You guys? That’s it. I am going to have to call a mandatory meeting to go over all our Girl Club rules,” I snapped and shook my head.

“Wait. Does that mean I’m in Girl Club?” Jezebel asked, eyes wide.

“Duh,” Penny said, then turned to me to add, “I’m sorry, Av. We all had suspicions, and we weren’t trying to exclude you, but we just weren’t sure how to bring it up. I mean, what could we say? ‘Hey, did Rosie’s sperm donor maybe sprout fur and turn into an animal that time he got you pregnant?’”

“Well, when you say it like that,” I murmured. “No, you’re right. I haven’t exactly been truthful about how much she’s been struggling at school either. I guess I didn’t want you to think I was a bad mom,” I confessed.

It was true. The fear of being called out for everything I lacked as a single parent was very real. Mr. Dryden had touched on a lot of my insecurities earlier that day.

The three of us moved our chat to the sturdy wood rockers on the porch. I turned on the electric heaters there, and then I told them everything.

“Geezus. What a dick,” Jezebel said.

“Wait, Dante punched him? In front of the principal and the lady from Child Services?” Penny asked.

“Well, yeah. But he deserved it.”

“No doubt.”

“No, I know that. But the secret, Av. It’s important,” Penny said.

“I get it, but it was a tough situation, Penny. Also, something else was weird. That woman seemed different. I swear she was making the air sparkle around them.”

“Um, that’s weird.”

“Yep,” I said.

We chatted for a few more minutes until the hairs on the back of my neck started to stand up.

Then I paused, and my head swiveled to the left. That’s when I saw them.

A giant, proud Grizzly was leading the way home with a smallish, little Bear following behind him. God, he was beautiful. They both were.

I didn’t really pay attention to the others. Not to the big, black Wolf with green eyes. Nor to the red-skinned Devil with huge, bat-like wings.

Kian and Zeke remained in their human skin and walked on either side of the group, bracketing them.

The big Bear slowed, turning to nuzzle the small one. Then the air around them shimmered, and Dante stood completely naked and more gorgeous than I could have ever imagined.

His dark eyes met mine, and my vision blurred at the depth of emotion I read in them. He leaned down and hoisted the cub in his arms.

He had more scratches. New ones. Some were red. Others a pale pink, from healing I assumed. But none were bleeding, which was good, right?

The furry bundle in his arms shimmered and squirmed, and suddenly, it was Rosie again. I covered my mouth to stem my gasp. But it was no good. It poured out anyway, unstoppable, as I ran down the steps with my blanket flying around me.

I took it off my shoulders as I neared them and held it out for Rosie.

“Mama?” she whispered, and I gathered her to me.

“I’m here, Rosie Posie. I’m here.”

I kissed her temple and glanced at Dante.

He seemed to be waiting for something, but I had no words for him.

Not yet anyway.

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My shoulders sagged as I watched my mate turn and walk away from me, our cub tucked safely in her arms.

I knew she had her. Knew she didn't need anybody to help her with her precious cargo. But fuck, I needed her to look at me. To see me after everything that had happened today.

To know I was on her side. That I was sorry I'd kept my suspicions about Rosie from her.

Goddammit. I fucked up.

I should have told her before that I smelled fur on her baby's skin. That I was sure Rosie had supernatural blood.

No, I hadn't known she was a Bear exactly. After all, she wasn't a Grizzly.

Yes, I had smelled the scent of other , but she could have just as easily had been a Wolf or some other large predator.

God, but she was a beautiful little Black Bear Shifter.

Rosie would be just fine now. The Motley Crewd Ranch was the perfect place to raise a cub and the rest of the guys, and their mates would look out for her, and help her learn to control her animal.

I only hoped Avery wouldn't leave me for not telling her sooner. Fuck, if she sent me

away, I didn't think I would make it.

I needed her. Wanted her. Loved her with every inch of my soul.

Desperation scratched at me. Fear made me quake. And urgency had me almost tripping over my own feet, trying to stand to follow her.

"Not yet," Max growled, using his Alpha voice to freeze me in my tracks.

"Avery," I muttered, trying to fight against his control.

"Hold," he grunted, and I gritted my teeth, trying to move.

Sweat poured down my body, trickling in rivulets along my skin as every muscle in me strained against the invisible bands of power holding me in place.

I grunted with the effort. My teeth were clenched so tightly I thought my jaw might crack. But it was no use.

No matter how hard I fought, Max's command held firm.

When he shifted, the power of his Alpha status amplified, wrapping around me like steel chains I couldn't break.

Pressure from his decree pressed down on me, forcing my Bear to submit, no matter how much we hated it.

I growled low in my throat, frustration clawing at me as the Bear roared against the confinement in the depths of my mind.

The Jersey Devil was a creature of legend, and for good reason. His power wasn't

just physical. It was inescapable, all-encompassing.

Any other time, I would have been in awe, ready and willing to obey my Alpha's decree, no questions asked.

But this wasn't any other time.

This was my family .

Please still be my family.

Fear that this was it. This was the one time I'd fucked up too much to be forgiven scratched at me.

It made me so fucking scared.

Even more terrified than I'd been when Avery had sent me that text and I hauled ass to school.

Pride filled me for an instant as I realized I was the one she called when she needed someone. My brave, beautiful mate had texted me.

No one else. Just me.

Cause she's mine.

As she should because I would do anything for her. And until Avery told me differently, I would always keep coming when she or Rosie called.

Right now, my girls needed me, and I needed them.

The thought of Rosie and Avery, alone, vulnerable, and inside our house without me, ignited something primal inside my chest.

A powerful need to protect them, to hold them, to make sure they were safe.

Mine.

My Bear's growl deepened, vibrating through every inch of me, a raw, guttural sound that mirrored my own anguish.

He paced restlessly inside my mind's eye, throwing himself against the walls of Max's command with unrelenting fury.

I couldn't submit. Not now. Not when my mate and my cub were out there, and I was stuck here, helpless and bound by words.

The need to move, to fight, burned in my veins like wildfire, but Max's power was absolute. My legs wouldn't obey. My fists remained at my sides, trembling with suppressed rage.

"Let me go," I snarled, my voice rough, desperate.

But the command held.

"I need you calm, Dante. They need you calm," he said.

And fuck, I knew he was right.

All I could do was stand there, sweat dripping, muscles trembling, and heart breaking as I fought against the unyielding force that kept me from the only thing that mattered.

My girls.

“Give them a moment, Dante,” Kian murmured, his voice uncharacteristically soft.

For once, I didn’t feel the usual itch to punch the obnoxious bovine in his dumb mouth. His expression reeked of sympathy, and I actually appreciated it.

I nodded, letting out a long breath as I sank to my knees, the damp earth pressing against me. I hung my head, trying to shake off the whirlwind of emotions tearing through me.

Today had been a rollercoaster. A wild, brutal ride of feelings and revelations. Not all of them good.

Hell, most of them weren’t good.

“Here. Put these on, man,” Zeke said, tossing me a pair of sweatpants.

I caught them, barely, my reflexes sluggish. My hands shook as I struggled to pull them on, fumbling with the fabric like I didn’t even know how pants worked.

Finally, I managed to get them over my hips, but it wasn’t the cold slowing me down.

It was everything else.

My body felt drained, my energy completely zapped. Shifting always took a toll, but this wasn’t just about the physical.

It was the emotional dragging on me—the worry, the fear, the endless questions.

Proud as I was to run after my little cub through the woods, to see her so wild and

free, I couldn't shake the knot of anxiety twisting in my gut.

How was Avery holding up with all of this?

Penny and Jezebel were inside with her, and I knew they'd be taking care of her.

That was good. I wanted that for her.

Avery deserved friends she could lean on, women who understood her in ways I might not.

Despite their squabbling and the days they'd spent apart, I knew the bond between them ran deep. They'd be there for her when she needed them, no doubt about it.

I was glad for that.

But no matter how much I trusted them, I couldn't stop wondering what Avery was thinking right now.

What she was feeling.

What she was going to say to me when we finally faced each other.

Would she be upset with me? Disappointed? Angry?

I knew through our bond that her emotions had been all over the place today. And I couldn't blame her. How could I?

Her entire world had shifted. Literally and figuratively.

Even so, she'd handled it with a kind of strength that left me in awe.

My sweet mate.

So damn brave.

So damn strong.

I'd always thought of myself as the kind of man who respected women, who appreciated my mama and understood what it meant to care for the people you love.

But Avery? She redefined all of that for me.

My breath caught in my throat, my chest tightening as I thought about her.

She'd been thrust into this crazy, impossible situation, and instead of breaking, she'd faced it head-on. She was incredible in every way, and I couldn't stop marveling at how lucky I was to call her mine.

Beautiful. Sexy. Soft. Strong woman.

Mine.

But the question still lingered, heavy and unrelenting.

What would she say to me now?

I didn't know.

And the not knowing was killing me.

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I didn't know how much time had passed since I had Rosie back in my arms.

Minutes?

Hours?

It felt like a blur, the kind of haze that comes after the adrenaline fades and reality starts to sink in.

The sky outside the big picture window in her bedroom was a moody dark gray, heavy with clouds that seemed ready to burst at any moment.

I stared at them, absently wondering if snow would fall again tonight. Winter had a way of sneaking up on you out here, blanketing the world in quiet and cold.

Rosie shifted slightly in her bed, her tiny body curled against my side like she used to do when she was a toddler.

My sweet baby girl.

She was so worn out, her breaths soft and even, her lashes fluttering against her flushed cheeks as she dreamed.

I couldn't blame her. She'd been through so much today.

My fingers moved gently through her soft hair, untangling the little knots she always seemed to collect during her wild adventures.

She'd been such a whirlwind lately, my Rosie, full of energy and curiosity that couldn't be contained. But now, it all made sense.

The outbursts and her behavior at school.

My Rosie was special. She was other .

I was just so happy to have her back home, safe and sound. And I just couldn't stop staring at her.

Penny and Jezebel had stayed with us for a while, but they left about twenty minutes or so ago. And I assumed the others followed them.

Dante was home. I could hear him ambling about the house downstairs, but I wasn't ready to face him yet.

Not until I was satisfied Rosie was okay.

The fierce, protective love I felt for her swelled in my chest, so big it was hard to breathe around it.

The memories of the day flickered through my mind—her frightened eyes, her small hands gripping mine, the way her little body had changed right in front of me.

It was too much, too fast for any child, and yet here she was.

Safe. She's home and she is whole.

For now, that was enough. I closed my eyes and said a prayer of thanks to whatever god might be listening. Rosie was my world, my heart, and I'd move mountains to keep her safe.

Outside, the wind picked up, rattling the bare branches of the trees, and sending a soft whistle through the cabin. A storm was definitely brewing.

And it wasn't just outside.

It was inside me, too.

Fear, relief, love, all tangled together in a mess I couldn't quite sort out yet.

But all that would keep.

I focused on Rosie, on her soft breaths and the way her small fingers clutched at my shirt even in sleep.

I made a vow right then. Whatever happened next, whatever challenges came our way, I'd be ready.

The brief conversation we'd had before she fell asleep played in my mind.

"Are you mad at me, Mama?" she'd asked.

"No, Baby, I am so proud of you my sweet cub."

"Danny said I make a good Bear."

"You do, Angel. The best Bear."

Emotion filled me as I kissed her temple and helped her to bed, but her skin had been streaked with dirt and mud.

Rosie had been too sleepy for a bath though and the best I could do was wash her off

with a warm, wet cloth and dry her and tuck her in.

I turned on the small shadow lamp Dante had given her a few nights ago as an early birthday present, not wanting to leave her in the dark.

The bulb was low wattage, and the soft yellow glow it gave off seemed like magic in the otherwise dark room.

But it wasn't the light as much as the shadows it cast that made it so lovely.

Of course, the lamp itself was a pretty little thing, carved wood and bent metal. Dante made it himself, which made it even better if you asked me.

He was so full of surprises. So caring and sweet.

A spin of the shade sent shadow animals dancing across the walls. And I gasped when I realized what the animals were.

Two bears, one big and one small, a hulking wolf, a giant bull, a winged dragon, and a tall figure with a long face, tucked back wings, horns, and a tail perched in a tree. And if I wasn't mistaken, there was a herd of goats being chased by a prairie dog in the background.

It was them, all the people who made the Motley Crewd Ranch the perfect place for my baby to grow up.

I knew Dante was scared right now. I could feel his nervousness and anxiety through our matebond. Of course, at first, I hadn't recognized what that was. It took Jezebel and Penny to explain it to me.

But I knew now, and yeah, I had some talking to do with that man of mine.

But first this. First, I would let myself enjoy the complete happiness of having Rosie back home, securely tucked inside her bed.

A giggle escaped my lips, along with a single, happy tear that rolled down my cheek, but I quieted myself and brushed Rosie's soft curls away from her face.

That child had my heart, and every day I loved her more. Learning how to be a Shifter was going to take some time.

We had a long road ahead, but for some reason, I wasn't scared of it— of the future.

I stood up and walked to the door, casting my gaze over my daughter one more time. Dante had been building this bedroom for her for months before we'd moved in, even though he'd tried to play it off like it was merely a coincidence.

All those pale colors and pink sheets were for Rosie. And for me.

Enough time had passed, and as I closed her door gently, I squared my shoulders and readied myself to face him.

Mine.

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There wasn't much in this world that should scare a grown ass Grizzly Shifter but put me in a room with one tiny, curvy woman who just might be about to tell me to fuck off, and I was a trembling mess of a man.

"Fuck," I growled, rubbing my hand over my face.

It had been a good half hour since all the others left and, in that time, I showered off the dirt and blood that had streaked my skin.

Most of the scratches and bites were healed by now, but I figured it would be easier for Avery to take if she didn't have to see me with all that.

It wasn't Rosie's fault. She had no knowledge that she was a Shifter, and the precautions others would have taken with their young had not been taught to her.

Her first Change happened as a result of heightened emotions and that could be pretty fucking traumatic. Lucky for Rosie, her mother was who she was. Avery wouldn't reject or subject her daughter to abuse or harm because of her dual nature.

And I suppose it was lucky that I was there, too. I shuddered to think at what might have occurred if Rosie had shifted and hurt someone by accident.

A vision of Avery covered in blood popped into my brain all of a sudden, and I shoved it away.

No!

It had happened before where a human parent found themselves with a Shifter child to raise. Unfortunately, if the first Change was a surprise, sometimes people got hurt. It was no one's fault, but tragedies did occur. Casualties, too.

Fuck.

That didn't happen here, thank fuck.

And it wouldn't.

Because I wouldn't fucking let it.

My Grizzly Bear chuffed and snorted inside me. The animal was proud as fuck of Rosie. She did so well out in the woods tonight. Even more amazing was the fact we seemed to share a bond.

Usually that only happened with mated pairs, or Shifters of the same bloodline, or pledged to the same Clan, or in this case, Crew.

Rosie was none of those things. But she was mine. My cub. That was how the Bear saw her, so maybe it wasn't that unusual after all.

Through our bond, we were able to communicate. To talk to one another, and Lord have mercy, could that child talk.

I grinned as memories of the thousand questions my curious little cub had asked when we were out in our fur.

She was such a smart little girl. And she was going to be an even more amazing adult.

I just hoped Avery was going to let me stick around to be a part of it.

Please don't leave me.

Chasing her upstairs and begging her to stay was on the tip of my tongue, but I forced myself to wait for her in our bedroom.

I heard Avery closing Rosie's door, and I braced myself.

This was it. Time to face the music.

I sucked in a breath, trying to settle the Bear and ease the tightness in my chest, but all that came out was a shaky rattle of a growl.

"She's sound asleep," Avery's soft voice reached my ears, and I opened my eyes to see her standing in the doorway.

Goddamn.

My heart seized in my chest, and for once, the Bear shut the hell up. We just stood there, frozen, soaking her in.

She looked so good.

Better than good.

Her hair was soft, falling in gentle waves around her shoulders like she'd stepped out of some dream I hadn't realized I'd been having my entire life.

And her eyes.

Goddamn.

Those light brown eyes of hers sparkled like sunlight streaming through the forest in summertime, catching on the leaves, and dancing across the ground.

Pure gold.

Just like her heart.

She was still in her scrubs from work, and they weren't anything fancy. Just a simple lavender set with dancing teddy bears decorating the fabric.

On anyone else, it might have been cute, endearing even. But on her?

She made them look incredible. Sexy, even. I never would've guessed that nurse's attire could make my pulse race, but Avery had a way of turning the mundane into something extraordinary.

Everything about her pulled me in, made me want to reach out and touch, to feel the warmth of her skin under my fingertips, to remind myself she was real.

I'd never felt this kind of pull toward another living being. Not even close.

Maybe that's why I'd been an old as fuck virgin.

I already knew that was the truth. My bear and I couldn't stand the idea of touching anyone who wasn't our mate.

I'd been waiting for Avery. See, she wasn't just someone. She was my fated mate.

That connection between us, the unshakable bond, made everything with her feel magnified.

Every glance, every smile, every laugh.

And it wasn't just physical, though God knows that part was undeniable. It was deeper, rawer, like she was tied to the very essence of who I was.

And somehow, impossibly, it grew stronger with every passing minute.

I didn't think it was possible to love someone this much, to want someone this fiercely. But here I was, standing in front of her, and all I could think about was how much I wanted her.

Not just in the way my body burned for her.

Though, fuck , there definitely was that.

But in every way.

I wanted to know what she was thinking, what kind of day she'd had. I wanted to make her laugh and hold her close and show her just how much she meant to me.

And right now, in this moment, everything hinged on whether or not she would forgive me for not telling her what I suspected about Rosie.

Would she let me in? Or push me away?

"Avery," I murmured, but she held her hand up and shook her head.

I gasped fear and hurt making my throat stick.

My gaze was locked on her standing there in her lavender scrubs, her hair curling softly around her shoulders.

She was the most beautiful thing I'd ever seen.

But was she still mine?

Please be mine.

All my hope was concentrated on that one thing, and fuck, I would have done anything she said if she just said yes.

"Rosie, uh, she barely lasted fifteen minutes till she passed out," she said, and smiled almost too brightly.

"That's good," I murmured. "She did a lot today. Should be tired."

Avery nodded, wiping at her cheeks, and I just couldn't stand to be separated from her any longer.

I went over to her and reached for her, touching her face with gentle hands, begging her without words to look at me.

"Oh, Dante," she said and leaped.

Suddenly, I found myself with my arms full of my woman.

Thank fuck.

Avery wrapped herself around me, arms and legs, and her whole body seemed to quiver as she cried into my neck.

"I'm sorry, Honey. I'm so sorry I didn't tell you what I suspected," I confessed, kissing her head and squeezing her tight.

“It’s okay,” she sniffed and shook her head, lifting up to look at me. “Why didn’t you, though?”

“I meant to. A dozen times, I meant to. But then I’d get distracted, and I couldn’t be sure, Avery. I’m so sorry. So fucking sorry, you have no idea.”

“But you knew? How?”

“Sometimes, I thought I scented fur. But you never brought up her father, and I didn’t want to seem like a jealous prick,” I growled.

“Are you? Jealous?” she asked, eyes wide.

“Of course, I’m fucking jealous. I mean, I know you had a life before me, Avery, and I love Rosie. I couldn’t love her more. And I didn’t want to make you talk about something you seemed fine forgetting about. Plus, I thought there was time. She is very young,” I murmured, sounding like a fucking idiot.

“It’s okay. I understand. And I get it. I wouldn’t want to talk about any women you’d been with either.”

“I haven’t been with other women.”

“I know. And it makes me wish I hadn’t been with anyone else either. But it was only one time, and I can’t regret it,” she said, shaking her head.

I kissed her temple and nodded. This woman had no idea how precious she was to me.

“Shit. Me either, Honey. I’m so fucking sorry I didn’t handle this all better,” I whispered, and sat on the bed with her in my lap.

Her soft curves molded to my frame, and I was very aware of her hot pussy as she settled it right over my aching cock.

Avery was my only experience with sex, but fuck, if I didn't want her all the time.

"Look at me, Dante," she said, and my gaze flew to hers.

"Avery," I said her name.

It came out like a prayer, soft and reverent, barely louder than a whisper

Maybe it was a prayer.

Because she was my only wish.

My dream come true.

Everything I had ever wanted, and the only thing I would ever need.

She remained right there, her golden eyes meeting mine, and for a moment, the world fell silent.

No sound, no movement, just her. My heart pounded, every beat echoing in my ears as I waited, holding my breath, terrified of what she might say.

"I forgive you," she said softly, her voice warm and steady.

And fuck, it hit me like a freight train. My heart slammed against my ribs, so hard it hurt.

"You mean it?" I rasped, barely able to get the words out. "You're not leaving me?"

Her face softened, and she inched closer, her light brown eyes shimmering with something I hadn't dared to hope for.

"Leaving you?" she said, her voice tinged with disbelief. "Are you crazy? I love you."

Those three words.

I love you.

They tore through me, shattering every wall I'd built, breaking down every fear I'd clung to.

That was all it took.

The leash broke.

The tight, desperate hold I'd kept on myself snapped, and in an instant, I closed the distance between us.

My hands were on her, cradling her face, pulling her closer like I could somehow make her a permanent part of me.

Fuck, but I needed to do that.

"Too many clothes," I growled, tearing at her scrubs.

"Yes. Off," she whimpered, tugging on my shirt.

My lips crashed into hers, fierce and unrelenting, every ounce of love, relief, and need pouring into the kiss.

She was mine.

And she wasn't leaving.

A low growl rumbled in my chest, my Bear echoing the raw, primal joy coursing through me.

Her hands slid up my arms, clutching at me as though she needed this just as much as I did.

I pulled back for a breath, my forehead resting against hers.

"You don't know how scared I was," I murmured, my voice shaking.

"I know," she whispered, her fingers tracing the curve of my jaw. "But you don't have to be scared anymore. I'm here, Dante. Me and Rosie are here and we aren't going anywhere."

I kissed her again, softer this time, savoring the feel of her lips against mine. Because she was my everything.

And now, I knew she always would be.

Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 10:35 am

Experience didn't make someone a good lover.

That was something I hadn't realized until I met Dante.

When I was younger and wild, I thought I needed to be with an experienced man to show me how to make love.

But all Nicky Crowden had to offer me was a rather awkward and short experience. We'd actually only had sex twice, and neither time had been anything to talk about. And that was something I'd only ever done in the safety of Girl Club.

Dante was right, I wouldn't want to talk about women from his past either, sex or not.

I'd been confused, and maybe a little upset, about his keeping things from me where Rosie was concerned. But now that we talked, I understood a little better.

And now that he was kissing me and touching me like his life depended on it, I knew there would never be another man for me as long as I lived.

Dante had simply wrecked me for anything else.

"You're mine, Avery. There is no one else can make you feel this way," he growled, and I felt his claws tearing at my pants.

His Bear black eyes held mine as he gripped the elastic waistband of my panties and sliced through one side then the other.

Then he pulled. The fabric slid across my aching clit, and shit, but I saw stars.

“Your pussy soaked for me, Honey?”

“Y-yes, Dante,” I whimpered, grinding myself on his covered cock.

“Gonna check for myself. Sit on the edge of the bed and lay back,” he commanded.

He slid me off his lap and stood, and my entire body quivered just looking at him.

Somehow, I was completely naked, and he was still in his sweatpants. The blanket felt warm and soft beneath my naked ass, but I was too mesmerized by him to move right away.

Dante stood in front of me, a pillar of a man. A sexy smirk graced his handsome face as he pulled off his sweats, revealing his long, thick erection. His muscles rippled and those thick, juicy thighs I loved so much flexed as he straightened, allowing me to look my fill.

My pussy clenched on air, flooding with arousal, and I licked my lips, desperate for his touch.

“I said lay back, honey. Now scoot down and press your legs together,” he ordered me.

Confused at first by his directions, I did as he said, hissing as he pressed his body to mine, holding my legs up in the air with one big hand.

Then he leaned forward and wrapped his lips around my calf, sucking on my skin as he slid lower and lower until he was kneeling on the floor.

“Dante,” I gasped his name as he continued to kiss, nibble, and lick at the back of my legs, my knees, and my thighs.

Then he was there, his face pressed into my bottom. Dante sucked in a breath and a flash of embarrassment hit me.

Did people really do that?

I groaned when he did it again, breathing me in deep, his chest rumbling with his Bear. His one hand remained on my legs, keeping them locked together as he grabbed my hip with the other, dragging me closer to him until my bottom half was half hanging off the bed.

Sexy, sexy man.

All my bashfulness was soon replaced by need and desire so strong, it blocked everything else out.

“Look so fucking good, Honey. You look like mine,” he said, and I cried out as his tongue flicked across my asshole.

It was impossible to move with his big hands gripping me at the hip and legs. I whined and whimpered, dying for him to fill my aching core. But Dante wouldn’t be rushed.

He licked and nibbled, dropping hot, delicious kisses on parts of me I’d never imagined a man would do. And even more, I fucking loved it.

Finally, he filled my pussy with his thick tongue, wrapping his talented lips around my clit, and I started to come.

“Dante! Fuck!” I shouted, unable to help myself.

“That’s my good girl,” he said, licking into me one more time before standing up.

I felt the fat head of his cock slap against my pussy, And fuck, was that hot.

“Dante, please,” I begged.

“Please what? What do you want, Honey?”

“You know what I want,” I said.

I’d never been a vixen, but this man had me out of my mind.

“You’re gonna have to tell me, Avery,” he said, and the fucker was smiling.

He pressed my closed legs to the side, sliding that big hand across my exposed sex and into the crease of my ass.

“That feels so good. Please. More. I want more,” I said.

“You like it when I make you come, mate?”

I nodded my head, incapable of speech as he teased one hole then the other with his fingertips, warm and wet with my slick.

“Y-yes,” I said when he didn’t reply.

“That’s right you do. And you’re such a good girl, coming for me.”

“Please, make me come again, Dante. Mate. I need you.”

“Fuck. Yes. I’m gonna make you come so many times, you won’t remember your name. Want that?”

“Yes, yes, yes!”

With a deep rumbling growl, Dante shoved his hips forward and slammed into me. And nothing ever felt so right.

I had no idea how he did this or where he learned it, but I was so fucking on board with it. He placed one knee on the bed, fucking me relentlessly as he moved us both up the mattress.

Then he was spread out behind me, lifting one leg up and back over his thigh so he could slide even deeper.

“Oh, God!”

“Not God. Dante. Say it,” he demanded, his fingers finding my clit as he flexed his hips in and out, stroking that special bundle of nerves inside me and making me keen.

“Dante. So good. I-I’m coming. DANTE!” I groaned, turning my face so the mattress could muffle the sound.

He closed his mouth over my shoulder, his fangs piercing my flesh as he filled me with his cum, claiming me as his, and pushing me to another, somehow more intense orgasm than the last.

By the time we stopped moving, I was utterly spent. Exhausted. And so damn happy.

Dante rolled me over to face him. His big hands cupped my cheeks, and he brought his lips to mine.

“Love you, Avery. So damn much.”

“I love you, too.”

He exhaled roughly and pressed his forehead to mine, eyes closed like he couldn't believe his ears.

Silly Bear.

“I never loved any man before you, Dante. You're more than I ever hoped for,” I whispered, cradling his face between my hands.

“Say it again,” he demanded, his dark eyes meeting mine.

“I love you,” I replied, my body heating at the promise in his eyes.

“Again,” he said, rolling on top of me.

“I. Love. You!” I moaned the last word, mouth wide as he pressed inside me.

“Fuck, I love you too. Love being inside you. Never wanna stop fucking you,” he grunted and damn, but I loved his filthy mouth.

Dante reared up to his knees, his eyes traveled over my body, followed by his hands. He cupped my breasts, squeezing and molding them, paying attention to the needy little buds at the end.

“Wanna fill you with my cubs, mate. Want to watch you suckle them,” he said, and my pussy quivered and clenched.

“I want that, too,” I said because yeah, I really did.

I was ready to make a home with Dante. A real home, full of love and laughter and children, or cubs.

“Do you mean that?”

“I mean it,” I said as he rolled and rocked, making me feel so good, loving on me with his big, hard body.

“Goddamn it, Avery, you give me so much,” he whispered, and his eyes glistened with unshed tears and filling with promises.

“You give me so much. You’re such a good man, Dante. You’re already a wonderful father. I wanna have more babies with you. I wish you were putting one in me right now. I love you,” I said, arching my back as he hit me in just the right spot.

“Fuck,” he roared, pistoning his hips faster, stroking in deeper.

And I felt him.

Really felt him .

Like a river running through me, his presence rushing into every corner of my being, filling me in ways I hadn’t even known I was empty.

His body moved with mine, perfectly in sync, creating a rhythm that felt primal and eternal.

God, how this man filled me.

It wasn’t just physical, though that was overwhelming in itself. It was more. Every inch of my soul felt alive, alight with awareness of him. Of us.

My mind, my heart, my very essence— all of it was consumed by him.

Dante.

Every moment of every day, he was there, a constant in my thoughts, a steady presence in my heart. He wasn't just big and strong in the physical sense.

He was important. Vital. He had become the center of my universe without me even realizing it.

Dante's heartbeat thudded against mine, steady and powerful, setting the tempo for my own.

It was like his body was guiding me, reminding me that I wasn't alone. That I would never be alone again.

And then, his voice sounded in my head, deep and resonant, the matebond between us stronger than ever.

I love you, Avery. I love you so much. Mate. Mine. Mine. MINE.

The words echoed through me, sending a shiver down my spine as I closed my eyes and gave in to the raw, consuming force of us.

I bucked against him, my body arching into his as his warm, hard form pressed me deep into the mattress.

His strength surrounded me. His gentleness, too.

Dante's heat seeped into my skin, and together, we found a pleasure so intense it felt like the world was shattering and reforming around us.

This. Right here.

This was beyond anything I had ever experienced.

Dante brought out the best in me. He knew me in a way no one else ever had. Or ever could.

Every secret, every fear, every broken piece of me, he didn't just accept them. He loved me for them.

And that love? It was like nothing else.

I got it now. Finally, I understood what it meant to be fated mates.

This wasn't just love. This was destiny.

He loved me with a fierceness that was both exhilarating and terrifying in its intensity. And I loved him, too. So deeply, so completely, that I couldn't imagine a world where he wasn't by my side.

We were better together than we could ever be apart.

And right now, in this moment, I knew one thing with absolute certainty.

I never wanted to be apart from him again. Never wanted him to doubt that.

My lips brushed against his ear as I whispered the words that had been building in my heart all along.

"I pick you, Dante. I will always pick you. Mate."

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A few days later.

Because of the inclement weather, the rodeo was canceled this month, but that was to be expected.

January and February were the worst of winter in this part of New Jersey, but today was still special. We were celebrating Rosie Posie's seventh birthday with an indoor petting zoo party for Rosie and some of her friends from her old school.

After a long, heartfelt conversation with Avery. And a pretty intense one with Sybil Harbor-Calloway. We'd decided homeschooling was the best option for now.

It wasn't a permanent solution, but it felt like the right move after everything that had happened.

Besides, it worked out perfectly. Avery had quit her job after filing a formal complaint against that absolute asshole, Dryden.

Fucker is still breathing by a miracle.

My Bear scratched beneath my skin, restless and still pissed we hadn't taken a more direct approach.

Like, say, squashing the bastard into the ground.

The thought was tempting, but Dryden was human, and no matter how satisfying it might've been, we didn't need that kind of trouble in our lives.

Letting it go was hard, though. My Bear didn't like loose ends.

Sybil, though, had turned out to be the kind of surprise we hadn't seen coming.

When she first showed up at the school, we'd both thought she was with Child Services, here to rip Rosie away from us.

It had sent me into full-on fight mode, every instinct roaring to protect my family.

But Sybil wasn't what we'd expected.

She wasn't from Child Services at all. She worked for a special branch of the government called the Division of Paranormal Creatures & Activity, or the DPCA, for short.

More specifically, she was part of their Supernatural Child Protection Services department. And when she sat us down and explained her role, her purpose, it was a revelation for sure.

She wasn't here to take Rosie away. Far from it.

In fact, Sybil had a lot of good things to say about the ranch and what it could offer Rosie as she grew into her abilities.

A Crew of Shifters was one of the best environments for a young one like her to learn control, to understand her animal side, and to grow into her strength.

But what she said that endeared her to me was that Avery was a fine mother. I grinned just picturing when Sybil had told my mate all that.

Sweetheart that she was, my Honey had broken down in tears.

Not the soft, sniffly kind, either.

Oh, no. She'd cried like a baby, and my heart ached and swelled at the same time.

Because she needed to hear it.

She deserved that much. So after Sybil assured her—over and over again—that she was an incredible mother. I did, too.

Because it was the damn truth. Avery had done an amazing job raising Rosie, protecting her, loving her.

As if my sweet Honey could be anything other than a perfect mom.

Silly mate.

She didn't even realize how amazing she was.

Speaking of my beautiful Avery, a small crash sounded from the refurbished barn up ahead, followed by a burst of giggles that could only belong to Rosie.

I smiled to myself as I walked Trixie, the little Shetland pony I'd gotten for Rosie, as a surprise for her big day, toward the barn.

The pony snorted, flicking her ears, as if curious about the commotion inside.

Whatever was going on in there, it sounded like my girls were having fun.

And honestly, after everything we'd been through, they deserved every bit of joy and laughter they could get.

“Dante!”

I stopped in my tracks and turned to see Kian racing for me. Every instinct I had gone into high alert.

Something was wrong.

“What is it?” I asked without preamble.

“There are a couple of guys here for you. They stink like fur. Say they’re here to issue a challenge,” Kian explained.

He was out of breath and sweating. His eyes glittered and rolled around, angry with his Bull.

I growled deep and low in my chest. My Bear’s immediate response to this outside threat.

“They Bears? From my old Clan? Where’s Max?”

“I think so. He’s with them now. Zeke, too.”

“Dante? Penny is coming with the cake, and the guests will be here in about ninety minutes,” Avery called out and poked her pretty head out of the barn doors.

She looked so happy, dressed in tight jeans and a pink plaid shirt that matched mine. Rosie Posie had insisted everyone wear pink, including me and the guys.

No one dared object.

Hell. Jed went as far as to deck out his goats with little pink bandanas wrapped

around their necks.

Dozens of pink balloons were tied in bunches around the barn, and glittery banners and streamers hung from the rafters.

Everyone had pitched in to make today special. Kian had even plowed and salted the road leading to the ranch just so Rosie's friends could make it.

It was going to be an awesome party. I was damn well going to make sure of that.

"You got Trixie? Let's give it to her," Avery asked, probably wondering why I was standing there like an idiot.

My chest squeezed and a moment of fear hit me that I had to go and meet that challenge. That I might be leaving her here all alone.

Fuck.

"Don't say a word about this to her, Kian, understand?"

"I got you," he said, and I nodded.

"Be right there, Honey," I said and tried to smile.

But Avery knew something was up and her brows furrowed, and her lips turned down in a frown.

"Where are they?" I asked Kian quietly.

"By the empty bull pen. Zeke is there, too," Kian said.

“Okay, let’s show Trixie to Rosie. Then I want you to stay here and watch them for me.”

“You’d ask me to watch over your family?” the Bull asked eyebrows sky high.

“Look, you might be an ass most of the time, but you’re Crew, Kian. I trust you to keep my family safe,” I said, and I meant it.

“I will. On my honor,” he replied, and then he ruined it by hugging me.

“Get. Off.”

I shook him off and walked towards the barn with the pony, ignoring him the best I could.

“Too late now, Yogi. I know how you really feel. It’s all about the love, bro!”

I growled with my Bear, making him jump. But when he wasn’t looking, I grinned.

Idiot.

But yeah, I did trust him to keep my girls safe while I went to take out the trash.

No one threatened what was mine. And these fuckers thought they could come to try to take me away from my family today of all days?

Hell no.

That was so not going to happen.

Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 10:35 am

Something was wrong.

I could feel it hanging in the air like a bad smell, thick and unsettling. And no, it wasn't the barn animal poop making me scrunch my nose.

This was something else. Something I couldn't quite put my finger on.

But it made my skin prickle and my stomach twist into tight, uneasy knots.

After Dante had come into the animal enclosure they'd set up inside the barn for Rosie's party, leading her present, a beautiful brown pony named Trixie, with pink ribbons braided into her silky mane, he'd kissed me on the cheek and said he needed to check on something.

"I'll be back before the party starts," he promised, flashing me that reassuring smile of his.

That had been ten minutes ago.

Now, Rosie was busy fussing over Trixie, her little hands stroking the pony's neck and adjusting the ribbons like she was preparing her for a beauty pageant.

Jed, bless his heart, was right there with her.

The older man had a way of making everything seem easy, like he was born to handle kids and animals alike.

He was a real Rosie whisperer. And he'd done an incredible job setting up the barn for the party, transforming the space into a petting zoo wonderland.

Portable fences divided the animal pens into neat sections, keeping the goats, chickens, ducks, and sheep in their own spaces so they wouldn't crowd each other. Or, more importantly, so they wouldn't make a mess before the kids arrived.

Rosie was happy, her laughter filling the barn as she talked to Trixie and Jed like they were her best friends. She was safe.

So why couldn't I shake this feeling?

Dante's absence gnawed at me, every second he was gone stretching out into an eternity. My mind raced with possibilities, each one worse than the last.

What is going on?

I tried to focus, to distract myself by helping set up for the party, but my nerves were making it impossible to stand still.

That's when Penny arrived, and for a moment, the sight of her made me forget my unease.

She was wearing the most adorable pink swing dress I'd ever seen, the fabric fluttering around her as she walked.

It hugged her baby bump perfectly, paired with knee-high Frye boots that made her look like a picture-perfect cowgirl.

Well, a New Jersey cowgirl, at least. Don't laugh—we exist.

“What’s up, Buttercup?” she asked, her eyebrows raised as she began arranging the dessert table with a practiced hand.

Her casual tone and the way she dove right into decorating should’ve calmed me, but the knot in my stomach only tightened.

I opened my mouth to respond, to brush it off, but the words wouldn’t come.

Instead, I just stood there, clutching a stack of party hats like it was some kind of lifeline.

My heart thudded inside my chest, and my stomach turned.

I couldn’t shake the feeling that whatever it was had everything to do with Dante.

The heck with this.

“Penny, I need you to keep an eye on things for me,” I said, grabbing my coat from the rack that stood by the big barn door.

Penny froze mid-decoration, her hands hovering over a tray of cupcakes. “Why? Where are you going, Av? Av? ” she repeated, her tone shifting from casual curiosity to full-on concern.

“Avery, wait!” Kian’s voice rang out from behind me, sharp and commanding.

I turned, already shaking my head at both of them, my resolve hardening with every step I took toward the door.

“Something’s wrong,” I said, my voice steady despite the adrenaline coursing through me.

“I can feel it. And I need to find out what. You two need to stay here and hold down the fort. Promise me.”

Penny’s mouth opened, probably to argue, but then she saw the look on my face. She swallowed hard, her big brown eyes going impossibly wide as she instinctively rubbed her belly.

“Okay. I understand,” she said softly. “But please, be careful.”

“Shit, Av. Max and Dante are going to kill me,” Kian muttered, his hands raking through his blond hair as if he could pull the stress right out of his scalp.

“No, they won’t,” I said firmly, pulling my coat on and zipping it up in one swift motion.

“You stay here, watch over Rosie and Penny, and make sure everything runs smoothly. I’ll be right back.”

There was no room for argument in my voice, and I didn’t wait for one, turning toward the door with more grit and determination than I’d ever felt in my life.

But then I stopped.

“Wait, Kian?” I called over my shoulder.

“Yeah?” he replied, his tone wary, like he already knew what I was about to ask.

“Where is he? What do you know?”

Kian hesitated, his jaw tightening, as he shifted uncomfortably from foot to foot. “I shouldn’t tell you,” he said, his voice low and uncertain.

I whirled around, planting my hands on my hips and glaring at him with every ounce of stubbornness I could muster. “You really gonna waste my time and make me wander around while something’s wrong? While Dante might need me?”

His shoulders sagged as he let out a string of curses under his breath. “Nah. Shit. Fine. A couple of Bears from his old Clan are here. They issued a challenge, Av.”

“Is that bad?”

“It’s not good. They’re in the empty bull pen. The one out by the far pasture.”

I nodded, already moving toward the side door where the 4-wheelers were parked.

“Take the back trail,” Kian added, following close behind and shoving a set of keys into my hand.

“It’ll get you there faster, and no one’ll see you from that path.”

“Got it,” I said, gripping the keys tightly.

I’d become pretty familiar with the ranch over the last few months, since Penny had moved in. With the way Rosie loved to explore, it was no wonder.

But I wasn’t going out for a pleasure walk. The winter wind whipped through me, but I hardly felt it.

Dante was in danger, and I had to help him.

“And Avery,” Kian growled, his voice suddenly serious, his blue eyes locking onto mine.

“What?”

“Don’t you dare get hurt. If you do, your mate really will kick my ass.”

I smirked despite the tension in my chest.

“Noted.”

I didn’t wait for another word, bolting for the 4-wheeler and starting it up with a determined twist of the key. The engine roared to life, and as I sped toward the back trail, my mind was already racing ahead, focused on one thing.

Dante.

Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 10:35 am

“ I don’t give two fucks what your Alpha told you to do. Dante Bianco is with the Motley Crewd now. I am his Alpha, and you two can get the fuck off my land,” Max snarled at Reginald Lewis, Enforcer for my former Clan.

Two massive Grizzly Shifters paced back and forth behind the hulking male in front of me, their movements predatory and deliberate, like wolves circling a wounded deer. The tension in the air was palpable, crackling like a live wire.

The hair on the back of my neck stood straight up, and my chest rumbled with the sheer force of the growl building inside me. It vibrated through my entire body, a warning to them and a reminder to myself to stay in control.

Barely.

The Willow Creek Clan didn’t play fair. They never had, and as far as I knew, they never would.

Niall Tiegs ran his Clan like it was his own personal kingdom, a place where his word was law, and his desires came before anything else.

Like a fat, greedy toddler screaming for snacks and toys, he used his Enforcers as a personal police force to intimidate, manipulate, and destroy.

He took what he wanted, leaving devastation in his wake, and didn’t give a single damn about the people he hurt in the process.

He was a tyrant. A bully. A cruel excuse for a leader.

And not worthy of a single thought, never mind the time I was wasting on this ridiculous challenge.

But here we were.

These men had come here. They tried to intimidate my Alpha. And now they were threatening my mate? My cub?

Hell. No.

Niall's voice boomed through the clearing, cold and cruel, his words sharp enough to scrape against my nerves.

“Like I told you, Dante Bianco is still beholden to our Alpha,” he declared, his tone dripping with arrogance. “He owes us his kin. Birthing numbers are down, and if he's found a breeder, we want her! So this challenge is for his mate and cub?—”

A snarling roar tore out of me before he could finish, the sound ripping through the air like thunder.

Breeder? This motherfucker.

My entire body shook with fury as I stomped the ground, my Grizzly clawing at the edges of my control, desperate for release.

“Don't you fucking talk about them!” I shouted, my voice raw and filled with unrelenting rage.

The ground beneath me seemed to vibrate with the force of my anger, my fists clenched so tightly I could feel my nails digging into my palms.

My Grizzly roared inside me, demanding I tear Niall apart, that I tear them all apart. Make them pay for even daring to speak about my family like they were property.

My mate. My cub.

They weren't theirs to take.

They weren't anyone's but mine.

I took a step forward, my muscles coiled and ready to strike, my voice low and deadly as I locked eyes with Niall.

"You want a challenge? Fine. But let me make one thing clear. You will regret every word that just came out of your mouth."

The pacing Grizzlies froze, their eyes darting nervously toward their Alpha, but Niall's smirk didn't waver. That only stoked my rage further.

Because this wasn't just a challenge. This was a threat.

And I was ready to show them what happened when someone threatened what was mine.

"Traitor Bear! You want some of this? You know the laws! Your breeding bitch and her cubs belong to Willow Creek now!" Reginald shouted, his voice a venomous snarl as he backed out of the pen like the coward he was.

His arrogance didn't mask his fear. Not from me. It smelled worse than bull shit.

"Back off!" Max roared, his voice splitting the air like a whip.

Power pulsed around us, the weight of it crackling like static electricity. But even a Jersey Devil's strength had its limits.

One Devil, no matter how powerful, was no match for the fury of four fully grown Grizzly Bear Shifters.

Before Max could shout another warning, the two Bears behind Reginald charged.

I didn't think.

I acted.

My Grizzly tore through me, ripping free in an explosion of muscle, fur, and raw power.

My clothes shredded to tatters as the transformation consumed me, my human skin replaced with the bulk and fury of my beast.

The earth shook beneath us as I met the two charging Bears head-on, our collision reverberating through the ground like a small earthquake.

Reginald was next to swap skin for fur, his hulking form bursting forth, but I barely registered him.

My focus was locked on the two in front of me, their teeth bared and claws slicing through the air as they attacked.

I blocked their strikes with my own, swiping and slamming into them with the force of a battering ram. Three against one wasn't a fair fight, but I didn't care.

My Grizzly didn't care.

This wasn't about fairness. This was about survival.

About protecting my family.

Max's Devil dove in then, a fiery blur of black and crimson as he tackled the third Grizzly. Reginald, that prick.

His snarl echoed through the air, and I roared my approval, my beast recognizing the ally in the chaos.

Max's magic surged, wrapping around Reginald like invisible chains. The Enforcer's furious growls turned to human shouts as Max compelled him to shift back, his power too strong to resist.

"You will not interfere again," Max snarled, his voice laced with raw fury as he twisted his hands in a gesture that lifted Reginald clean off the ground.

I didn't have time to revel in the sight, my focus locked on my attackers. One Bear lunged for me, his claws aiming for my flank, but I was faster.

I twisted, kicking out with my back legs. My claws connected with his snout, the impact sending him stumbling back with a pained roar.

The other came at me from the side, but I met him head-on, my powerful jaws closing around his snout. I bit down hard, ignoring his whines and cries as the coppery tang of blood filled my mouth.

He struggled, thrashing against me, but I refused to let go. Pain flared in my hindquarters as the first Bear clawed at me, his strikes slicing through my fur and skin, but I didn't care.

My Grizzly roared in defiance, unyielding in the face of their combined assault.

“You’re going to fail, Traitor,” one of the Bears snarled out at me in a terrible voice that was too animal to be human.

Fury and desperation laced his words and his scent, and I snarled back, unwilling to make a mockery of myself by speaking in my Bear form as he had.

“The bitch and cub will be ours and I will breed her myself?—”

I roared at that, cutting him off with my own unimaginable anger. The sound of my ire shook the ground, and I allowed it to grow. I wanted rage to consume me.

Zeke paced just outside the enclosure, his Dragon form held in check for now, waiting until it was absolutely necessary to intervene.

I appreciated his restraint.

This fight wasn’t his to take—it was mine.

This threat was against my family.

And it was on me to defend them.

And I would. With every last breath in my body.

I attacked then, and by the time I stopped there was nothing left of the two Bears who’d threatened my mate but fur, blood, and gore.

My chest rumbled with my growl even as I swapped fur for skin, falling to one knee on the snow covered ground as I tried to catch my breath.

When did it start snowing?

The sound of a 4-wheeler roaring to life had my head snapping up. Max and Zeke both turned as well, their eyes narrowing in confusion.

Then I saw her.

“Avery? Avery! NO!” I shouted, my voice raw with panic as my gaze locked onto my mate speeding down the path on the 4-wheeler, heading straight toward us.

And was she holding a frying pan?

My lungs seized and I couldn’t breathe.

She looked like some kind of avenging angel, her golden eyes blazing with fire and determination, her hair wild around her face.

My heart lurched in my chest as I took in the sight of her, equal parts awe and terror coursing through me.

She was glorious.

But my admiration quickly turned to dread as everything started happening at once.

I roared in warning, the sound echoing across the clearing. At the same time, Max, distracted by the commotion, loosened his hold on the third Grizzly.

Reginald.

The bastard dropped to the ground and shot up like a spring, his body contorting as he shifted mid-charge. Fur erupted over his skin as his massive Grizzly form exploded

outward. His focus wasn't on me, though. Or Max.

It was on Avery.

He barreled toward her with horrifying speed, a half-ton of rage and muscle aimed directly at my mate.

“Avery! No!” I shouted, my voice breaking as I watched her stop the 4-wheeler and dismount, grabbing the frying pan with both hands like it was Excalibur.

She raised it high over her head, standing her ground like a warrior ready to face down a monster.

Except this wasn't that kind of fairy tale.

This was real, and the monster charging her was not easily defeated.

My muscles burned as I launched forward, every ounce of power in my body focused on one thing. Getting to her in time.

I saw Max running too, in the periphery of my vision, but we were both too far away.

Reginald leaped, his hulking Grizzly form soaring through the air, his claws extended, aiming straight for Avery's throat.

Time seemed to slow.

And then, something incredible happened.

A shadow darkened the sky, enormous and impossible. An enormous purple Dragon soared overhead, its wingspan covering half the clearing.

The beast was massive. Bigger than an eighteen-wheeler and easily three times as heavy.

With a bone-shaking roar, the Dragon opened its draconian maw and snatched Reginald out of the air as easily as an owl plucking a mouse from the ground.

It was Zeke. And he was right on time, too.

Just before the Grizzly could connect with my sweet, fearless Avery.

My heart stopped.

Avery screamed, her eyes squeezing shut as the Dragon tossed Reginald into the air like a rag doll.

I reached her just as the Dragon roasted the Grizzly with a blast of fiery breath, the flames engulfing him in a matter of seconds.

The smell of scorched fur and cooked meat filled the air as the beast snapped its jaws around the charred remains, swallowing Reginald whole like a toasted, bite-sized Bear snack.

My lungs burned, but I didn't stop.

I caught the frying pan as it slipped from Avery's trembling hands, plucking it away and tossing it to the ground.

Then I pulled her into my arms, wrapping her tightly against my chest and shielding her from the sight of the carnage above us.

Her body shook against mine, and I murmured soothing words into her hair, my

hands running up and down her back.

She clung to me like her life depended on it, her breaths coming in short, panicked bursts.

“Shh, I’ve got you,” I whispered, pressing a kiss to her temple. “You’re safe. You’re okay. I’ve got you, Honey.”

She looked up at me, her wide, tear-filled eyes searching my face. “That was a, a Dragon.”

I couldn’t help the small, strained laugh that escaped me.

“Yeah. Zeke’s Dragon.”

Her jaw dropped, but she didn’t say anything else, just buried her face in my chest again. I tightened my hold on her, silently thanking every deity I could think of for getting me to her in time—and for Zeke’s impeccable timing.

Because Avery was my everything.

And nothing— not Grizzlies, not tyrants, no manner of beast or man —was ever going to take her away from me.

Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 10:35 am

S ix weeks later.

The snow was melting, and New Jersey seemed to finally be getting over the deep freeze of winter.

But I didn't quite believe it yet.

March was just beginning, and everyone knew it was a fickle SOB of a month. But that didn't matter here.

Our home was always cozy and warm, filled with laughter and love. Rocky starts didn't matter when happy endings ran amuck.

And Dante definitely turned out to be mine. He was my happily ever after. The kind of man I never dreamed existed.

He was everything I could ever want in a mate and a husband, and the father of my children.

"How are you feeling, Honey?" Dante's warm breath brushed across my cheek, and I snuggled into him as he held me in the warmth and safety of our bed.

"Sleepy, but that's to be expected," I said and sighed against him.

"I can't believe you're making me a father again. Good mate. Perfect wife," he said, holding me close and kissing my temple.

Again? Could you believe this man?

Dante had accepted Rosie so readily, claiming her as his own cub to the point that when I announced my pregnancy the first thing he said was “I’m gonna be a Daddy again!”

As if I hadn’t loved him more than I thought was possible already.

But I supposed he proved me wrong, cause every time he said that I loved him a little bit harder.

“I’m not perfect,” I whispered, kissing his chest.

“Agree to disagree, Honey,” was all he said, rubbing his big hands over my back and shoulders, then back down to my hips in slow, comforting motions.

It’d been a few years, but I didn’t remember being so tired when I was pregnant with Rosie. Could be worse, though.

Poor Penny was still puking her guts out every day. Lucky me, I seemed to have been blessed with an iron stomach.

As for Rosie’s party, well, it went off without a hitch. Though she had questioned why Danny didn’t wear the pink flannel shirt she’d picked out for him.

I simply explained there was an accident, and to make it up to her, he let her paint his nails bubblegum pink just for the party.

Not one of the Crew made a single joke.

Except for Kian, who was still sporting a full set of pink glitter on his fingers and

toes.

The Crew was good like that, though. Always looking out for each other and holding one another accountable.

Since we were homeschooling Rosie now, Max allowed me to set up a sort of classroom in the barn we'd been using for impromptu weddings and parties. I was also in the process of growing my website to a real brick and mortar toy shop in town next to Penny's Devil's Food Bakery .

Avery's Care & Repair for Dolls & Precious Things was going to be a one stop shop for antique toys and models. Dante was thrilled and promised to help any way he could, as long as I didn't work too hard. With his wood carving skills, I was eager to ask if he would offer some custom made toys for me to sell, as well.

Life sure was good, and the future looked even better from where I was sitting, or laying down, as it were.

"What are you smiling at, mate?" Dante asked, giving me that sexy crooked grin that made my ovaries go off like the fourth of July.

"I was just thinking if I wasn't knocked up already, I'd be begging you to put a baby in me," I said.

"Is that right, Mrs. Bianco?"

I nodded, loving it when he called me by my married name. Our ceremony had been a small and private one. We hopped on a plane and tied the knot on a little island not so far away called Moongate Island.

Rosie was thrilled with the resort and the crystal clear waters that surrounded the

island. And since we took Jed with us as our babysitter, it worked out to be the perfect honeymoon and family weekend vacation.

Penny was bummed about not being able to come, but I promised her we could all go again together after the kids were born.

As for Zeke, I thanked him for what he did the day Dante faced off against his old Clan mates, but I still gave the Dragon Shifter a wide berth.

Dante assured me he would never hurt any of us, and I knew that. But he was the scariest thing I'd ever seen. Plus, he ate someone right in front of me.

But I owed him a lot since he saved me that day. Zeke was partially responsible for my still being here. I owed him a lot.

Because here was the only place I wanted to be.

“What are you thinking about now, Honey?”

“I’m thinking, I love our life. I love you.”

“I love you too.”

His dark eyes found mine as he cupped my cheek and brought his lips down to mine. I sighed into our kiss, opening my lips so he could lick into my mouth with his long, talented tongue.

“Love you so much, Honey.”

“Show me, Dante.”

He nipped my lip and growled, sliding his hand between our bodies, and testing my arousal with his long fingers. I whimpered as he delved inside my pussy, stroking me exactly right.

“Did you soak this pussy kissing me, mate?”

“Yes. Please,” I moaned when he brushed my clit with his thumb.

“Put your leg over my hip,” he commanded, and Christ, I loved it when he told me what to do.

It was hard to believe this man had been a virgin when we started. He was everything I could ever want in a partner and more.

I felt Dante’s hard length push into me, and we both moaned at his sweet invasion. He kept his thrusts shallow at first, barely moving as he claimed my mouth in a kiss.

“Your pussy is so tight, Honey. So hot and wet. You feel fucking perfect,” he grunted, his chest rumbling with his soft growl.

I clutched at his shoulders, rubbing my aching nipples against his hair roughened chest. I needed him so badly.

“Easy, mate. I got you.”

Then he started moving harder, faster, in long, deep strokes, brushing my G-spot and making me see stars.

“Come for me, mate. Now,” he commanded, his thumb circling my clit, and goddamn, if I didn’t start to come immediately for him.

His name spilled from my lips, over and over, a desperate litany that I couldn't stop even if I tried.

It was as if saying his name kept me tethered to reality, kept me from being swept away entirely by the overwhelming sensations coursing through me.

Dante roared his completion against my neck, the sound reverberating through my body like a thunderclap, raw and primal. But he didn't stop.

He kept moving, his powerful body sliding against mine, igniting every nerve ending, setting me ablaze.

Each movement was deliberate, each touch sending shockwaves of pleasure so intense it was almost too much to bear.

Then it happened again.

My body tensed, every muscle coiling as pure, unrelenting bliss tore through me, leaving me gasping. I cried out, my voice raw and unrestrained, as I shattered once more in his arms.

It was too much.

It wasn't nearly enough.

I clung to him, my arms wrapped tightly around his broad shoulders, holding him like my life depended on it.

He was my anchor, my grounding force, the only thing keeping me from flying apart into a million tiny pieces and scattering to the wind.

Dante didn't stop, didn't let go, didn't ease up until he had wrung every last drop of pleasure from both our bodies.

The intensity of it left us trembling, our breaths coming hard and fast, mingling in the intimate space between us.

Finally, we stilled, our bodies pressed together, damp with sweat and heat.

And nothing had ever felt so right.

I rested my forehead against his, my fingers threading through the hair at the nape of his neck.

My heart thundered in my chest, but for the first time in what felt like forever, it wasn't from fear or uncertainty.

It was love.

Dante was everything I had ever hoped for, everything I had ever dreamed of. He was my safe harbor, my greatest joy, the love of my life.

My husband.

My mate.

And I was his.

"Mine," he said, his voice a low, possessive rumble that sent a delicious shiver down my spine.

"Yours," I whispered back, my voice trembling with the weight of the truth.

Because that's what we were.

Two halves of the same whole, bound together by something far deeper than fate or chance.

We were us.

And nothing had ever felt more perfect.

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Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 10:35 am

Waking up every morning with my mate wrapped up in my arms was just about as close to heaven as a Bear like me could ever hope to get.

I still couldn't believe she was mine.

Lucky, that's what I was.

We'd had a rocky start, but every trial and tribulation had been more than worth it.

Avery snuggled closer to me and I nuzzled her neck, breathing in her sweet scent, and that of the cub growing in her belly.

My Bear pawed at the ground, chuffing happily at the thought of our young. We already had one healthy cub who was growing like a weed and making my heart so full, but to be blessed with another so soon after claiming my mate?

Well, I used to think the Fates hated me, but now I know better.

Making things tough only meant you had to work harder before you could reap the benefits.

I came from a Clan that was backwards and cruel, but my mother had done her best by me.

There were times when I feared I would be nothing more than a monster for that uncouth prick, my former Alpha and his Clan of fucking filth. I heard he got his, and really, it couldn't have happened to a nicer guy.

Sarcasm intended.

My path had been different, and I couldn't be happier.

Finding this place, answering Max's ad, and working my ass off were what turned the tide for me. Still, I was lucky. And I wouldn't forget it.

I would spend every day for the rest of my life taking care of my girls, and our other cubs, boy or girl, and making sure they were safe and content, blissfully happy.

My mother used to tell me hope was a powerful thing. It kept people loyal even when times were tough.

I never gave out hope that Avery would accept my claim, and look at me now.

"What's that smile for, Baby?" she asked, and i felt her eyes on me.

I looked down at her, adoration blanketing me like something tangible, love for her heating me from inside like a furnace.

"I was just thinking," I said, kissing her nose.

"Yeah? What were you thinking?"

"That Rosie might like a wagon for Trixie to pull. Something she could sit in and hold her new brother or sister. They could go for rides together," I said, liking the idea more as I said it.

"Oh Dante, that would be so sweet. But this baby isn't going to be here for a while," she said.

“I know. Meanwhile, she can help me build it.”

Avery’s entire face seemed to glow with her happiness, and I felt ridiculously proud to be the man who made her feel that way.

“Dante Bianco you are without a doubt the best man, the best mate, and the best father I ever saw,” she whispered, her voice breaking at the end.

Pride filled me. And love. So much love, I thought I might burst.

“You make me a better man. I love you, Honey,” I said, kissing her sweet lips.

Her body warmed beneath my hands, and the heady scent of arousal, hers and mine, permeated the air.

“I love you, too,” she moaned as I kissed her neck, licking over the first mating mark I’d given her.

She shivered in response and I grinned. My cock hardened , aching to be inside her soft, wet heat. I growled as I licked and kissed, exploring her gorgeous body.

Oh, but I liked being mated.

“I like it too, mate. Now are you going to claim me again or what?”

“Yes. Right now,” I said, and I thanked the Fates for gifting me this woman right.

Then I claimed her again, just because I could.

Mine.

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Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 10:35 am

“ Welcome to the Cow Country Valentine’s Day Rodeo!”

The announcement was all broken up over the sound system because of the wind and static. My sensitive ears hurt, so I hunched in on myself and waited for it to end.

February was cold as fuck in Barren County, but since we missed the January rodeo, I was actually looking forward to this one.

But it would have been better without all the noise.

My inner Bull bucked and snorted, the monster inside me was eager to fight.

This was the first time I planned on entering the ring in my Shifter form. A little project Dante and I had been working on.

See, as Shifters we had to keep our secret, but performing in these mostly human events was tricky.

We couldn’t give ourselves away, but that got more and more difficult.

Ever since the Bear had gotten mated his animal had been particularly gnarly. Usually, he was great with the normal critters on the ranch. But not when he was riled.

So, I came up with a solution.

The ranch still needed help to get the word out about our dairy products, and with

spring coming, our produce.

Folks sure loved seeing cowboys do their thing. So, in order to help Dante get some airtime, I volunteered to be a real live bucking Bull for the behemoth.

Then afterwards, I'd do the bareback riding contest in Max's stead, since Penny was too ill with morning sickness to come today, and the Jersey Devil was too anxious to leave her alone.

I couldn't blame him. Plus, I was hoping this plan would work to quiet my own animal.

See, he's been rather ornery since everyone on the ranch started pairing up. Silly critter was dumb enough to think we could settle down.

But I knew better. It was why I went into town every weekend and spent the night with faceless, nameless strangers, just to work out that anxiety.

No sane woman would want to settle down with a guy like me. Didn't matter what the animal thought.

I looked around, making sure I was alone, and whipped my shirt off. I needed to be in my hide and ready for Dante in the next couple of minutes.

Next came my pants, but fuck, I forgot my boots. Bending down, I was hopping backwards on one foot, trying to get the fucking thing off when two things happened all at once.

“Ooof!”

First, I crashed into something sweet-smelling and soft. My chest was bare, and my jeans were caught around my hips, so her warm hands landed flat on my chest, and

the rest of her was pressed up against me in the most delicious way.

That alone was enough to make me thank God, I agreed to come today.

But that wasn't all.

See, the second thing that happened was our gazes locked. Pure heat and adrenaline poured into me as I stared into this sexy soft woman's big blue irises.

Hell, the moment our eyes met my entire life changed. Like the whole world went topsy-turvy.

That was when I knew I'd found the one.

My fated mate.

And she was pretty as a Pixie too with her pale skin, rosy cheeks, and petal pink lips.

Oh, fuck.

"What on earth?" Pixie gasped.

"Marry me, Pixie?"

"Pixie? Boy, did you hit your head?"

"Head's just fine. now, how about a drink after the rodeo?" I asked, still staring at the gorgeous blonde haired beauty queen sprawled out on top of me.

"Easy, Romeo. Let me get up and I'll see what I can do to help," the Angel whispered.

For a minute, I thought she was going to kiss me. But that really would have been something, and I didn't have good luck like that.

"Who are you? What's your name?" I asked because I needed to know.

"My name's Arliss. Are you alright?" she asked, standing up and wiping the hay off her clothes.

"I'm Kian, and I've never been better." I said, scrambling off the floor.

"I know who you are. You're something of a legend the way you move through ladies. So, Romeo, are you competing today?"

"Uh," I said, wanting to explain myself, but feeling all tongue-tied.

She looked at me like I had three heads. You know, because I was so fucking articulate.

Obviously.

"Cool. I'll see you out there, but I hope you'll keep your clothes on," she said and winked.

"Will you go out with me after?" I asked, all smiles.

"I don't think so, Cowboy. Good luck though."

"Wait! Why not?"

My heart was beating me to death. I just had to get her to agree. But how?

"Have a good ride, Romeo!"

She just laughed and kept on walking away, swinging that fine ass as she went.

“Yo, Kian! You ready?” Dante asked, poking his head inside the barn.

“Not hardly,” I replied.

“What? Get shifted, will you?”

“Uh huh,” I said, only half paying attention.

I’d just met the woman of my dreams, and she wanted nothing to do with me.

The end.