







# Her Beary Spicy Valentine (Welcome to Bear Mountain #2)

**Author:** *Theodora Taylor*

**Category:** Fantasy

**Description:** Hi, I'm Holly, and about six weeks ago, I realized I was a side character in one of those cheesy Christmas movies where a naive, pretty heroine visits a small town, falls for some rando she just met, and decides to stay forever.

Yeah, that sappy romance cliché? She's my little sister. So when she stops answering my calls and texts, I take time off from my big-city job to track her down and drag her out of the cult—I mean, charming small mountain town where she's decided to settle for good.

But when I arrive, instead of finding my sister, I meet three very large, very intense men:

An insanely handsome but ridiculously stern Canadian Mountie who orders me to go home immediately—before it's "too late." (Too late for what? No clue. He just glares at me when I ask.)

A rough biker outlaw who keeps audibly sniffing at me like I'm his next meal.

And a huge guy who looks like a modern Viking in lumberjack flannel. He actually seems super nice...until he punches the outlaw for getting too close.

Things only get weirder from there:

A bar fight. A bear mauling that I'll never unsee. Then suddenly, I'm waking up naked in a jail cell with a strange, tingling bite on my arm—and three guys throwing around words like "claim," "mate," and "cubs."

So, yeah... I don't think I'm a side character in a cheesy Christmas movie anymore. In fact, I might have stumbled into my own...

Beary.

Spicy.

# Page 1

*Source Creation Date: August 5, 2025, 4:16 am*

12 hours earlier

holly

“ H i, my name is Holly, and about five weeks ago, I found out I was the side character in one of those cheesy Christmas movies—no, you can’t say that,” I muttered to myself, cutting the engine of my rental car outside a quaint, snow-dusted building with a perfectly maintained RCMP sign gleaming in the fading light of the setting sun.

I stepped out into one heck of a biting wind. This wasn’t Vancouver or even the subzero winter temps of Minnesota, where I grew up. No, this mountain cold was sharp. Unforgiving. I shivered, instantly regretting my choice of scrubs and sneakers under my winter coat, but I trudged through the fresh snow toward the station’s glass door anyway.

I was here for a reason, and the sooner I got answers, the sooner I could find food and a bathroom.

The door emitted an unexpected high-pitched buzz as I stepped inside, making me jump—then glance around the one-room station self-consciously.

Okay, why did a place this tiny even have a bell? It wasn’t like they needed one to announce visitors. The reception desk was right there, and beyond it, the entire space was visible from where I stood—a single high counter near the entrance, a plain desk pushed against the far wall, and a holding cell tucked into the back corner.

The station did have one cool feature, though...

An animatronic Mountie!

Dressed in the ceremonial scarlet red jacket and high brown hat I'd only ever seen the Royal Canadian Mounted Police wear during parades or prime minister speeches, he was absurdly handsome—clean-shaven, with sharp cheekbones and piercing brown eyes. Large, sinewy hands, lying flat on the counter.

And what a skin job! If not for his rigid posture and utter stillness, I might've mistaken him for someone who lived and breathed—a sexy, square-jawed Mountie straight out of some clueless American's fan-fic.

I reached out to touch his face, wondering aloud, “But why would a small mountain town spend so much money on a hot Mountie animatronic?—”

“May I help you?”

“Holy stuffing!” I squeaked, yanking my hand back. “I didn't think you were real!”

The Mountie just stared back at me. Coldly.

Prompting me to carefully ask, “Are you real?”

“May I help you?” he repeated, tone flat, as if confirming his humanity was classified information.

“Sure, I mean, hi.” I awkwardly tried to recover from that painful first impression. “My name's Holly Winters. I'm an American working in Vancouver. And I'm looking for my sister, Noelle. She's also an American, but she was coming to visit me from Minnesota—where we both grew up before I moved away for a stupid, stupid

reason that I totally lived to regret—but you don't need to know all of that..."

The Mountie stared at me so blankly that I had to ask one more time: "Seriously, are you the right person to be talking to about this? Should I wait for an..."

I scrambled for a less insulting phrase than actual human.

But the hot animatronic Mountie barked, "Continue!" before I could come up with anything.

"Okay, well, she lost her job, and she was supposed to come visit me in Vancouver in hopes of getting another one. But a few days before Christmas, she texted me saying she'd crashed her car in Bear Mountain, fell in love, and decided to stay here forever after knowing whoever this guy is for less than ten days. And when I pressed her for details, she texted back, 'I've got to go radio silent for a while, but I'll give you a call in the spring to explain everything.' Then nothing. She hasn't returned any of my calls or texts since New Year's Eve."

I paused, waiting for him to jump in with a bunch of questions.

But he didn't react. No polite nod. No flicker of surprise. He just stared back at me with a blank expression that made me wonder if his skin really was made of plastic. Really well-defined and impeccably sculpted plastic.

I pressed on. "So I cleared my schedule for the week and drove all the way up here from Vancouver to see if maybe you could help me locate her."

"She's already been located," the possibly animatronic Mountie answered without blinking. "You said she texted you and explained her plans to stay here. Forever."

"I mean, yeah, but..." I shook my head. "Surely you can see how crazy that sounds?"

Apparently, he could not. His expression remained a cold, completely unmoved blank. “She’s fine. Like she told you.”

I glanced to both sides. What kind of Get Out -meets-Hallmark movie was this?

“Thank you for that reassurance, but I’d like to see her with my own eyes. You know, just to confirm she’s not being held hostage in some weird Deliverance mountain cult or something.”

His lips twitched. Slightly. But then his face snapped back into its default setting of icy indifference with a side of I don’t have time for this .

“She’s fine,” he repeated, his voice devoid of any emotion. “She’s found love, and she’s... busy.”

“Busy?” My eyes narrowed. “Too busy to answer a single call or text from her sister? This is literally the longest we’ve ever gone without talking since the day she was born.”

The Mountie blinked. Once. In a way that made me suspect some automatic bodily function timer had gone off. "So, you've decided to go against her wishes and disrupt her life because you miss your previous relationship dynamic?"

“Yes!” I blurted... then cringed when I heard how that sounded out loud. "I mean, no. Not exactly. I’m not here to ruin her love story or whatever this out-of-the-blue decision is supposed to be. I just..." My voice cracked under the weight of the worry I’d been carrying around for weeks. “I just need to know she’s okay.”

“She’s okay,” the Mountie replied, his tone clipped and mechanical. “You can return to Vancouver.”

“Seriously? That’s it? That’s all you’re going to tell me?” I never cried. Not even when my ex announced, two weeks after my last miscarriage, that he’d found someone else—someone who could, and I quote, “actually give me the children I deserve.”

But at that moment, tears of frustration welled in my eyes as I pleaded, “Can you please just act like a human and tell me where I can find my sister? Let me make sure she’s actually okay and not being held here against her will. Please .”

Desperate, I reached for one of the possibly plastic hands resting on the counter.

“Don’t touch me!” The Mountie recoiled—I mean, actually backed up several steps. Like I was a cobra about to strike.

“I’m sorry!” I pulled my hands back and held them up in the air. “That’s on me. I should never have tried to touch you without consent. I was just trying to get through to you. Make you hear me.”

“I hear you.” His jaw tightened, and he looked away. “Now, hear me. Your sister is fine.”

“Unbelievable! Do you seriously expect me to...” I started to ask. But then I trailed off, noticing a detail I hadn’t before.

What appeared to be a very human sheen of sweat had broken out across the Mountie’s forehead.

“Is something wrong?” I asked. I squinted at him. “What aren’t you telling me?”

He stiffened, his fingers flexing at his sides. “No. There’s nothing wrong. And I’ve already told you everything I know about this non-case.”



“Non-case? Really?” I glared at him. “Because not only are you being real flipping dismissive right now, you’re acting like the world’s most suspicious animatronic Mountie.”

He frowned back at me, his cold stare softening. Just a little. For a moment, I thought he might actually crack. But instead, he abruptly came around the high counter and grabbed me by the arm.

“What are you doing?” Apparently, he had absolutely no problem touching me without consent.

“The station is closed, and this conversation is over,” he told me, his tone final. “Go home.”

“But—”

Before I could finish, he shoved me through one of the station’s doors, and the cold mountain air hit me like a slap to the face.

Arghh! I spun back around. Forget trying to be nice. I was about ready to go Ugly American on this guy and get myself arrested for assaulting a member of law enforcement.

But before I could even get my fingers around the door handle, the unmistakable clunk of a lock closing sounded.

The Mountie scowled at me from the other side of the left door’s window. Then flipped a sign that said Closed in Canadian-red cursive.

I didn’t cry. And I no longer cursed—it wasn’t a great look on a midwife. But several choice words banged against my teeth as I watched the Mountie disappear out of

sight.

He probably expected me to run back to Vancouver like a good little dismissed dog.

But forget that noise! As the sun dipped lower behind the peaks of the Great Claw Mountains, I turned to face the town beyond the detachment station. The streets were eerily empty, the buildings dark and shuttered, like the entire place was hibernating.

Save for one sign of life. In the distance, a neon sign buzzed faintly, casting a warm glow onto the snow-covered street.

Bear Mountain Bar & Grill.

I squared my shoulders against the biting wind and started walking. If the animatronic Mountie wasn't going to help me, I'd find somebody who would.

## Page 2

*Source Creation Date: August 5, 2025, 4:16 am*

holly

I 'd thought I'd stumbled into some kind of weird Christmas movie, but it turned into a Western when I walked into the Bear Mountain Bar & Grill.

Every single person in the bar turned to look at me the moment I stepped through the door.

Actually, I should say every single man —they were all men.

Three rough-looking guys occupied the booth closest to the door, their leather jackets adorned with patches I couldn't quite make out in the dim light. But their energy was unmistakable. These weren't dentists blowing off steam with a weeknight ride. No, they were outlaws—rugged, clad in a Johnny Cash level of head-to-toe black, and radiating unapologetic 1% triangle patch pride.

A huge lumberjack of a guy with Viking-blond hair tied back in a messy bun swiveled on his bar stool, narrowing his eyes at me. Even squinting, his blue eyes practically glowed, their vivid color standing out even from across the room. Menace or suspicion? I couldn't tell.

The bartender behind the counter was the only one in the place who looked remotely Christmas movie-ready. With fine features and coppery hair, he could have easily been cast as the male lead in one of those Netflix shows where nurses like me go to heal their emotional wounds.

The other four guys, though? Not so much.

However, all five bar patrons had one thing in common: they were staring at me. Silent and unblinking.

All conversation—if there had been any—ceased the moment I appeared, like someone had flipped an off switch.

Signs plastered everywhere advertised breakfast, lunch, and dinner specials, but nobody seemed to be eating. Just... staring.

I swallowed hard, adjusted the strap of my purse over my shoulder, and raised my chin—before promptly lowering it again to dash toward the bathroom in the back corner of the bar.

Listen, top five rule of midwifery: Pee First. Basically, if you're going to do something difficult and slightly scary—like convincing a first-time mom to push something the size of a watermelon out of her vadge—you empty your bladder first.

Without daring to make eye contact, I ducked into the door marked by a cartoon brown bear wearing a pink bow and matching summer dress.

The women's room was shockingly clean. After taking care of business and washing my hands, I grabbed a paper towel from the fully stocked dispenser and tossed it into the wastebasket.

It landed with an echoing plunk . The bin was completely empty, but its edges coated with a thin layer of dust—like it hadn't been used in days. Maybe weeks.

Where are all the women?

My chest tightened with unease. Sure, Canada's murder rate was way lower than America's, but had I just stumbled into the Canuck version of some horror movie?

The kind where random American women are kidnapped and kept by scary Canadian mountain men?

“Okay, Holly, no. Don’t go there,” I commanded myself, pushing back against the rising tide of panic. “You’ve dealt with worse than this.”

Actually, I hadn’t. But now was not the time for truth in encouragement.

“They’re just a bunch of guys in a creepy mountain bar,” I assured the wide-eyed woman in the mirror. “You’re here for Noelle, and you’re starving. So you’re gonna walk out there, get some food, and figure out what’s going on with your sister.”

The pep talk worked—sort of. My heart was still racing when I stepped out of the women's toilet, but at least my feet were moving in the right direction.

I kept my eyes trained on the copper-haired bartender as I crossed the room.

Don’t look at anybody else. Pretend like you don’t see the other four. Don’t look at anybody else. Pretend like you don’t see the other four.

The mantra repeated in my head, but I could feel the other men’s eyes burning holes into me as I beelined toward the bartender, who was still polishing the same glass.

“Where did you come from, baby?” a gravelly voice asked out of the blue. “And where are you headed?”

I stopped dead in my tracks. Dangit!

I’d been so focused on pretending not to see the other guys in the bar that I didn’t notice one of the bikers slide out of the booth. By the time I realized, he was already standing in my path, grinning like he’d just claimed a prize.

Grizzled, with flecks of gray in an otherwise black beard, he loomed over me, his amber-brown eyes gleaming with a mix of amusement and something sharper, more intense.

Danger .

It radiated off him in waves, setting off all my “girl, run!” instincts—but other than that, he wasn’t entirely unattractive. My eyes caught on the chiseled jawline framed by the perfect amount of scruff and the broad shoulders filling out his leather jacket like he’d just stepped out of one of those old-school motorcycle movies.

Still, I took a huge step back. “I’m just... heading to the bar to order something to eat.”

He stepped with me, blocking my path again. When I tried to cant to the left, he shifted, too, cutting me off. “How do you smell this good?”

“Um...” My voice cracked. “Because I showered?”

“Like a whole box of chocolates.” To my absolute shock, the hard-edged biker leaned in closer, inhaling audibly.

“Fuck me...” His eyes fluttered, like he'd just taken a hit of some kind of drug. "I'd happily eat you for supper, baby.”

“For supper?” I echoed weakly, my voice threatening to give out.

“Hey, leave her alone.”

The command came from behind me, low and firm.

When I turned, the hulking blond from the bar was standing there.

He was even taller than the biker, his giant frame blocking out most of the room behind him. And those blue eyes I'd spotted all the way across the bar? Even more vivid. Seriously, they could've landed him an automatic extra role on any Viking show.

But to my surprise, they were filled with what appeared to be genuine concern for me.

"Hey, what are you doing here?" "The town's closed." He hunched down the near foot it took for us to be at eye level, his gaze worried. But then he audibly sniffed at me, too.

What in the world?

"But the bar is open," I carefully pointed out, doing my best to both step away from him and his flaring nose while not bumping into the biker whose amber stare was currently burning a hole into my back. "I was hoping to grab some dinner—and ask about my sister. Noelle Winters."

"Noelle?" The Viking's expression flickered with recognition. "Hold on, you're the sister of the Tuk'mara's new mate?"

His entire face lit up. "Does that mean you're planning to stay?"

"What? No! I have a whole life back in..." I started to answer—before thinking better of letting these guys know where I lived.

"What's a tookmahra?" I asked instead, carefully repeating the title he'd use in association with the guy Noelle had decided to stay with after knowing him for less

than a week. “And what’s his actual name so I can find him and my sister?”

“Who cares?” Before the Viking could answer, the biker’s hand clamped around my wrist, pulling me to face him. “What’s your name, baby?”

“Um... none of your business!” I snapped, trying and failing to pull my arm out of his grip.

“Hey, take your dirty hand off my mate!”

The Viking’s voice boomed through the bar—right before he grabbed the biker by the shoulders and made him unhand me.

By lifting him in the air and body slamming him into the nearest table.

I gasped and slapped both palms over my mouth as the wooden table crumpled under the biker’s weight.

“You’re going to have to pay for that, Constable,” the bartender said somewhere in the background, his voice bored, like bar fights were a regular Tuesday occurrence.

Constable? Wait, was this the actual human officer I’d come to the RCMP station looking for—right before my confrontation with the animatronic Mountie?

Before I could follow that realization thread, the biker launched himself to his feet. He spat out a mouthful of blood and grinned at the Viking like this was all just part of some violent foreplay. Then he lunged, fist-first.

The Viking fought like a linebacker—all brute strength and sheer power—but the biker was faster. Sharper. For every ham-handed swing the Viking took, the biker landed two. Precise, vicious punches aimed at the most vulnerable spots on the larger



guy's body.

I stood frozen, unable to move or speak.

This wasn't... this couldn't be real. I was a chubby, 34-year-old divorcee who couldn't be bothered to wear makeup or anything nicer than a pair of scrubs most days. Random strangers—huge, hot random strangers—didn't get into fistfights over me. Heck, they didn't even ask me out.

What is even happening?

As if to answer, a sickening crack echoed through the bar as the biker's fist smashed squarely into the Viking's nose. Blood sprayed, and the blond stumbled back, cupping his face with both hands.

“Enough!”

The voice cut through the chaos like a whip cracking, and I turned to see him—the Mountie from the station.

His uniform was pristine against the backdrop of the rustic bar, and his expression was ice-cold as he strode over to the two fighters.

Within seconds, he had both the Viking and the biker zip-cuffed.

“I'm sorry, sir,” the Viking said, his voice whistling as he spoke. “She smells so good. I lost my mind when this Iron Claw tried to talk to her, touch her...”

“I had every right to touch her,” the biker growled. “She's my Valentine's Day box of chocolates.”

“Bear up, both of you.” The Mountie’s glare snapped between the two men like a switchblade. “I don’t care what her scent is doing to you. You need to get yourselves under control. And you...”

His cold, dark eyes landed on me.

“Go home before you wreak any more havoc here!”

“Okay, that’s a little dramatic,” I answered, jerking my head back. “I was just about to order dinner before these guys started, like, literally sniffing at me—and fighting for reasons I still don’t quite understand!”

“You hungry, baby?” the biker asked, grinning through a bloodied mouth. One of his eyes had already swollen shut. “I’d be happy to cook you something good.”

“Not from a holding cell, you won’t,” the Viking cut in before I could respond, blood still streaming from his nose. His voice was muffled and thick, like speaking through a layer of cotton.

“Shut your mouths, the both of you,” the Mountie gritted out. Then he pointed at the bartender. “And if you feed her or tell her anything else, I’ll throw you and your twin in the station jail, too.”

The handsome bartender raised his hands in nonchalant surrender. “You got it, Takoda.”

“Wait, but what about—” I started to ask, only to flinch when the Mountie the bartender had called Takoda scowled so hard it felt like a physical shove.

“Go home,” he repeated between clenched teeth. “Before it’s too late.”

I shook my head at him. “Too late for what?”

A dark shadow crossed over his face. And instead of answering, he just turned back around to drag the two men out of the bar.

Leaving me standing there in stunned silence.

Save for my stomach, which growled again, loud enough to echo in the high-ceiling Bar & Grill.

But the bartender avoided my gaze like he could neither hear nor see me.

“Well,” I muttered, woefully regretting not stopping for a sandwich at the mountainside Barrington Super Center I’d passed on the way up here. “I guess dinner’s not happening .”

But that didn’t mean I wouldn’t be getting what I came for.

I straightened my coat and headed for the door, my mind racing.

Okay, tookmahra. I had one clue about where my sister might be and who she might be with.

I pulled out my phone as I stepped outside, only to groan in frustration. Not a single bar of reception, and all the WiFi options needed passwords.

Great .

Maybe heading back down the mountain would help—at least I could look up this “tookmahra” thing or figure out where to go next.

I unstrung my scarf to rewrap it tighter around my neck for the hike back to the RCMP station.

But it slipped from my hand when I spotted a row of signs strung across a path leading further up the mountain. Like a fence.

The flickering glow of the Bear Mountain Bar & Grill sign illuminated the words:

Ayaska Village.

DO NOT PASS.

Only Bear Mountain Residents Allowed Past This Point.

VISITORS NOT ALLOWED.

I wasn't a Bear Mountain resident.

But my father died less than a year after I was born, my mom had gone back to my evil stepdad and was no longer returning my calls, and my beloved little sister that I used to talk to near daily was somewhere in this town.

Maybe in the Ayaska Village I wasn't supposed to visit.

Go home!

The Mountie's voice echoed in my head as I stepped past the row of warning signs. And fear prickled through a nervous system still shaken by the chaotic bar fight.

But I squared my shoulders. I wasn't going home. Not yet.

I strode up the dark, snow-covered road, my jaw set with determination. If my baby sister was in that village, I was going to find her.

## Page 3

*Source Creation Date: August 5, 2025, 4:16 am*

3 /

for whom?

12 hours later

takoda

A nest. My bear had built a nest. Blankets and pillows were piled in the center of the den, arranged like a haphazard altar of soft things. But why? And for who?

For whom, not for who.

Zion's voice echoed in my mind, as patient and exacting as ever. My maul father continued to correct my grammar—even though I hadn't spoken to him since he stood by and let my mother exile his birth daughter and my womb twin, Mara, five years ago—just two years before she betrayed me by handing my legacy off to our little brother, then dying without ever telling me why.

Bitterness leached into the confusion swirling around my chest, the one friend I could always count on to show up no matter the circumstances.

I rubbed my temples, scanning the den for my shredded uniform. But there was nothing. No clothes, no clues. Just the nest, sitting there like a quiet accusation in the middle of the den that I'd refused to accept as a gift from Mak. My bear, apparently, had other ideas last night, though.

What the hell had happened here? I grabbed onto that question, holding it tight to keep my mind focused as I looked around for clues. But...nothing.

No memories. No smells. The only thing of use I could spot was a pair of Mak's old work boots sitting near the stairs leading out of the den. They were at least two sizes too big—courtesy of my younger brother's polar bear genetics—but I shoved my feet into them anyway. A fleece blanket draped around my shoulders was the best I could do to cover my nakedness. Fashion wasn't a priority anyway. Just getting back to town.

I clomped up the stairs, exiting the den my human side still refused to accept as home. Even after that blond grizzly constable moved into the detachment timber log cabin with me, crowding the space with his oversized body and overeager personality, I hadn't relented.

It was flurrying when I got outside, but bright sunlight lit up the snow-dusted trail, glaring off the pristine white landscape. Each step clunked awkwardly, the boots dragging through the cold powder, reminding me that it was easier to walk a fur-covered bear through the Ayaska Village than an underclothed human.

But I pressed on in my current form because, for the first time in my life, it felt like I couldn't trust the animal inside of me.

Shifting wasn't supposed to be random. My bear wasn't supposed to—and never had—acted without me. Yet here I was, with no memory of the night before and a sinking feeling that something had gone wro?—

I stopped cold.

A motorcycle lay on its side in the middle of the trail, its massive bulk jarring against the softly falling snow.

Twisted handlebars and deep scratches told a story of violence. The Iron Claw MC logo, frosted over but unmistakable, gleamed on the side.

What the hell were those criminals doing in the Ayaska Village? The Iron Claw kept their distance from the rest of us, rarely crossing the boundary from Bear Mountain proper into the hidden town where most of my tribe lived—especially not in the dead of winter when everyone was sleeping. Yet here was one of their bikes, abandoned like a discarded toy.

Then I saw it: bright red dots staining the snow.

I crouched, tracing the edge of one crimson droplet with my finger. Its warmth was long gone, and much of the blood splatter had seeped into the snow, with a layer of morning frost covering the entire possible crime scene. Whatever had happened here wasn't ancient history. But it had happened more than a few hours ago.

The wind shifted, and a waft of caramel and chocolate floated out of the forest, hitting my nose. And memories.

“Please... please don't,” she whispered as I sniffed down her body.

She smelled so good, but her leg—it was broken. I had to help. Protect her.

“What are you doing? No... no... no!” She crossed her arm over her face, blocking the sight of it from me. She didn't understand. I clamped my teeth down on her forearm, pulled it away from her head as she screamed, and then?—

The wind shifted before I could see her face, taking away the smell of chocolates filled with caramel. Cutting off the memories like a light switch flipped.

Who was she?



I stood back up, scanning the road as more questions piled up like snowdrifts, heavy and suffocating.

The bike?

The blood?

The Iron Claw MC?

The nest?

The missing memories?

But one question howled through my mind louder than the rest as I continued walking down the trail back into Bear Mountain proper.

What the hell happened last night?

## Page 4

*Source Creation Date: August 5, 2025, 4:16 am*

4 /

you're making a mistake

12 hours earlier

takoda

“Sir, c'mon. Please. You can't put me in here! I just fell in love at first sniff!”

Constable Leif Bjorn's voice cracked, desperate and pleading, as I shoved him and Hawk—the Iron Claw cofounder—through the station toward the holding cell in the back.

“I didn't even get her name!”

Only years of training myself never to show emotion kept me from rolling my eyes. This was the bear they'd sent to serve under me at the detachment station?

It didn't matter that the fight had taken place during his off-duty hours. An official arrest on the brand-new constable's record would mean automatic suspension from the RCMP—and his probable removal from the Bear Mountain detachment.

Truth be told, I wouldn't mind that last outcome at all. I'd been just fine running the detachment alone before command decided to send this overlarge, blond grizzly to “assist” me by asking too many questions, eating way too much food, and taking up way too much room in the timber-log cabin we'd been given as sleeping quarters.

Getting into a fight during denning season was a good thing. For me.

So why did irritation prickle at the back of my neck as I listened to him whine about the human woman he'd just met?

"Get in the cell," I growled, shoving him into the space behind Hawk. The metallic clang of the barred door echoed through the small station as I slid it shut, ignoring the constable's kicked-puppy expression.

"You're making a mistake," Bjorn insisted, wrapping his large hands around the bars. He and Hawk had beared out their heads on the walk over, so his face was pristine now, the fight damage healed, leaving behind the patrician features I'd been forced to grow familiar with since the RCMP saddled me with another officer at my detachment. But his desperation remained wild and frantic. "She's my scent match. What about this are you not understanding?"

I ignored the uncomfortable twinge in my chest and focused on changing the lock code on the holding cell's keypad to one Bjorn didn't know.

"She's my scent match too, Goldilocks," Hawk said from behind Bjorn, his gravelly voice steady and unbothered.

I looked up from the keypad to find the town's second-largest black bear—after me—leaning lazily against the far wall, smirking at Bjorn, and a flicker of unease went through me.

It had been over a decade since I'd last seen Hakan—or Hawk, as everyone in the village and his motorcycle gang called him. Ten years ago, I'd personally escorted him to the shifters-only jail in the Yukon for one of my first assignments as the Bear Mountain detachment officer. Back then, I'd felt a pang of guilt handing over someone I'd once respected and admired—right up until he pleaded guilty to a long

list of criminal charges.

When I got the message about his early release, I'd even debated waking his family to tell them the news.

But now? That familiar smirk was just one more thing to set my teeth on edge. I clenched my jaw to keep from saying anything.

Unfortunately, the new constable wasn't nearly as skilled at masking his emotions.

"You? You're joking, right?" Bjorn whipped around, taking Hawk's bait like a giant yellow fish. "You seriously think she'd pick someone like you over me?"

"Someone like me?" Hawk pushed off the wall, his amber eyes gleaming with a predatory edge. "You think you're better than me, Goldie?"

Bjorn didn't hesitate. "Yeah, I know I'm better than some criminal who could never offer her a life filled with stability and love like I could."

Stability and love.

I punched the last number into the keypad with more force than necessary, bitterness bubbling just beneath the surface. The new outsider constable didn't even have a maul—or the faintest idea what taking on a mate in Bear Mountain actually meant. Yet here he was, squabbling with a full Ayaska over a human who didn't even belong here.

A human who...

My bear stirred, and I shoved him down hard before that thought could unravel—both him and me. Tonight was already a mess. I wasn't about to make it worse by letting

emotion—or anything else—get in the way of doing my job as a Peace Officer.

But Hawk had no interest in keeping the peace.

“If you’re such a great match for our mate, why are you in here with me?” Hawk’s smirk sharpened. “Why aren’t you out there with Koda, trading maul bites and going to get our girl?”

Bjorn’s condescending expression faltered, confusion flickering across his face. “Sergeant Takoda doesn’t have anything to do with my scent match.”

“Sure he does.” Hawk’s sharp amber gaze shifted to me, his grin twisting wider. “He’s just better at hiding it. Aren’t ya, Koda?”

Only friends and family called me Koda. I was estranged from most of my family, and after Ash, I no longer did friends.

“I don’t know what you did to get your sentence halved.” My voice was tight as I glared at Hawk. “But they should’ve buried you under that jail.”

“Bet you’re wishing that had happened. Then you’d have our cute little box of chocolates all to yourself.”

The silence that followed was heavy, a third presence in the room, watching and waiting.

“That’s not...” Bjorn’s words trailed off, his sea-blue eyes locking onto me. “That’s not true, sir... is it?”

My throat tightened, but no words came. My silence was damning.

“Told ya,” Hawk said to Bjorn, his smug look cutting into me. “We’re tucked away in here because his bear’s nose is open, but he doesn’t want to make a maul. Especially with us.”

“Maul,” Bjorn mumbled, glancing to the side. “That’s all the Ayaska stuff with the three guys having to date one woman.”

“One female,” Hawk corrected, his gaze refusing to leave me. “But other than that, yep.”

A troubled look crossed Bjorn’s face, confusion battling shock. But then he regripped the bars and directed his plea at me. “Listen, I don’t know—well, anything about this maul stuff the Ayaska are into. But if this is true—if she’s ours—both of ours—then you’ve got to tell me what to do. And you’ve got to let at least me out of here.”

“There is no ours,” I replied, voice tight. “She’s human, and you’re both delusional.”

Hawk chuckled low, the sound curling in the air like smoke. “Delusional, huh? Same kind of delulu that’s got you clenching your fists and refusing to look either of us in the eye?”

I hadn’t realized my hands were balled into fists until Hawk pointed it out.

“C’mon, sir.” Bjorn’s knuckles turned white against the bars. “If we’re supposed to be in some kind of three-way together, you’ve definitely got to let me out. I’ll do whatever you want. Follow whatever orders you give me. I just want to be with her. I’ve never felt anything like this in my life. It’s like my heart is about to explode out of my chest!”

“Enough!” My voice came out harsher than intended. But I couldn’t take this

anymore.

I turned on my heel and headed toward the station door, gritting out, “You’ll get a phone call and the opportunity to post bail tomorrow during official station hours.”

That quieted them. For a few seconds.

Just as I reached the door, Hawk called out, “Can’t outrun your nose, Horse.”

I hated that nickname that the Iron Claw MC had pinned on me just because I preferred to use my horse, Sentinel, as my main mode of transportation. But I let the station’s heavy winterized door slam shut behind me without responding.

Outside was quiet. Too quiet.

It gave me too much time to think—about what Hawk had said.

And about that human’s scent.

It had hit me like a freight train the moment she walked into the station, freezing me in place. Sweet, warm, maddeningly tempting.

I’d never been one for sentimental holidays, but Hawk had described her perfectly: an entire box of Valentine’s Day chocolates had walked into my station without warning.

Big brown eyes, dark, creamy skin, a self-deprecating smile, and curves that defied the confines of her wool city coat. She was heavier and chattier than her younger sister. Still, I’d recognized the connection even before she introduced herself as the sibling of the female my brother and his maul had taken as a mate last December.

However, Holly Winter's effect on me had been much, much different than Noelle's.

That scent.

Talking to her had felt like trying to keep my composure while quietly drowning.

After I'd sent her away, my mind flickered back to Cody parading Noelle around the Bar & Grill on New Year's Eve, just before hibernation began. Supposedly, he wanted to show her the businesses he co-owned with his grizzly brothers—this place and the Bear Mountain Inn, the town's only hotel, which was located a little further up the road. But really, it had been a trophy display.

Noelle had reeked of Ash and Mak, as if they'd marked her all over before letting their third maul take her to a place just a couple of kilometers down the road.

I'd burned with indignation before Cody even brought her over to the booth I was sharing with Bjorn. And when I'd looked up to issue a terse hello, I'd felt... nothing. No jealousy. No anger. Just mild annoyance at the interruption. Her scent had done nothing for me.

But Holly? Whatever she stirred in me wasn't cold. And it wasn't indifferent.

Also, her car was still parked outside the station.

Goddamnit .

Instead of heading straight to my sleeping quarters behind the station, I retraced my steps toward the bar, teeth gritted with determination.

If I had to shove that curvy box of chocolates back into her rental car myself, I would. I most definitely would...



Big mistake. Just the thought of touching her again made my stomach cramp with need and my heart static like something electrocuted.

"I've never felt anything like this before! It feels like my heart is about to explode out of my chest!"

I wished to Ursa I had no idea what Bjorn was talking about. But that was exactly how it felt when I'd physically shoved her out of my station house earlier. How could one person—one completely unwanted and unexpected human—smell that good?

My normally reserved bear clawed at my chest, growling, threatening to rise if I didn't track her down and...

A series of lewd, obscene, completely wrong images filled my head. Both of them. My mind swam, drowning in carnal thoughts, while the head below my riding breeches stirred to life despite being eight days away from my next scheduled "hand release."

I stopped in my tracks and squeezed my eyes shut until the pictures subsided. Until my bear backed down enough for me to regain control.

But it had been close— too close for a lone bear who no longer desired a mate or a maul.

I had to get her out of here.

Get her on the road and out of my life so that I could get on with pretending she'd never walked into town.

But something caught my eye halfway to the bar: a scarf. Bright red, lying in the snow.

I bent down and brushed white powder from the soft fabric. Her scent hit me instantly. Caramel wrapped in rich chocolate.

Holly .

I'd never had a sweet tooth, but my bear growled low, rolling around in the scent like it had just claimed some great prize. The smell of her wrapped around me, tugging at my hunger receptors. And my teeth.

I should have left it there. Dropped it in the snow and kept walking. But my hand clenched tighter, betraying me.

More dark, unwanted thoughts uncoiled before I could stop them. Taking the scarf back to my apartment. Pushing down my pants. Wrapping her sweet scent around my?—

No.

Shame twisted in my gut as I ground my teeth and shoved those thoughts away. But I still couldn't let go of the scarf. Instead, I looped it around my neck in an automatic, helpless motion. My bear rumbled in approval, but I hated it.

This was pathetic. Weak.

If I didn't find her and get that human-shaped blizzard of temptation out of town, then?—

I froze, the thought falling away.

Next to the Ayaska Village boundary sign, a trail of prints broke the pristine snow.

Small, shaped like those ridiculous trainers Holly had worn into the mountains.

But they weren't alone.

Two sets of motorcycle tracks accompanied by much larger impressions in the snow followed the same path. Precise. Deliberate. Predatory.

The other two Iron Claw bikers from the bar.

They'd followed her. Quietly walking their bikes up the Ayaska Village path so they wouldn't be heard. By the sleeping villagers—or the prey they were stalking.

Holly hadn't gone home like I'd told her.

And those criminal MCs? They were right behind her.

My bear snarled inside me, and that deduction was the last clear thought I had.

Before I could stop it, my bones swelled, and the sound of ripping fabric tore through the cold air as fur erupted from my skin. Every muscle in my body surrendered to the shift, and my snarl turned into a roar as I charged up the trail.

## Page 5

*Source Creation Date: August 5, 2025, 4:16 am*

5 /

a super-bad idea

holly

Within less than five minutes of walking, all the light from the main part of town disappeared behind me.

You know how every other reel around the holidays is some dude with a beard dressed up like a woman to parody how stupid it is for so many Christmas movie girllies to give up their former lives and boyfriends to move in with some rando small-town guy she met over the holidays?

Yeah, well, I'd like to submit an entry for what's even stupider: Her grown, oughta-know-better sister following some vague instructions up a pitch-black road farther into the creepy mountain village where that sappy holiday movie cliché relocated.

Like I just wanted to live the stereotype of being the first person to die in one of those counter-programming holiday staples, the Christmas horror movie.

As much as I loved Noelle, this search to find her suddenly felt like a bad idea. Like, a super-bad idea. Look, I wasn't the outdoorsy type. My happy place always featured a thermostat and reliable Wi-Fi. This? This was the opposite of that.

But I'd chosen my (scary, cold, forest-lined) path, and if it led to my sister...

Doing my best to suppress my growing unease, I brought out my phone. If it wasn't going to give me even a bar of reception or Wi-Fi access, the least it could do was act as a flashlight.

However, the phone light didn't help with the total horror movie vibes this scene was throwing off—like, at all. If anything, the little bit of light made it worse.

The shadows between the trees became even darker somehow, squeezing like a coffin around me. And the crunch of snow under my Hoka Ones sounded unnervingly loud in the eerie quiet. Yet not loud enough to drown out the feeling that the forest of barren winter trees was holding its breath. Watching me.

Also, the waterproof spray I'd doused my shoes with for Vancouver's notoriously rainy winters completely noped out on this unexpected trek up a frosty mountain trail.

The snow seeped in, leaving my feet cold—both literally and figuratively.

I heard a scraping sound behind me. Like a car shifting into neutral to roll over winter snow. But quieter. And accompanied by the soft, menacing crunch of booted feet.

I froze.

Then slowly turned with my heart pounding in my ears. The wheels and boots came to an abrupt stop with my movement. Maybe I'd just imagined them?

Please let it be my imagination, I prayed as I completed the turn. Please let it be my—my ...

My thoughts stuttered, then gave out when I saw two shadowed figures beside shapes I could only just make out as motorcycles.

It hadn't been my imagination.

It was the other two bikers from the bar—the ones who hadn't fought over me and gotten arrested. I couldn't make out their faces, but I knew it was them. They stood between me and the road back into the main part of town, their eyes catching the dim light with an eerie gleam, almost like an animal's night shine.

On their side of the path? Size, double my number, and an f-ton of silent menace.

On mine? One flashlight app, a pair of shoes better suited for walking than fighting, and a dimly remembered self-defense workshop I'd taken during nursing school—over ten years and twenty-five pounds ago.

Okay, no more horror vs. holiday movie comparisons. This had officially turned into one of those films where every Black woman in the theater starts yelling, “Run, girl, run!!!”

So I ran—ran like a plump rabbit that had just spotted two wolves in the forest.

“Where you going?” one of them called out, his voice a nasal whine behind me. “You didn't even give us the chance to invite you back to our clubhouse!”

“Yeah, we're always looking for girls like you,” the other one added, his voice sharp and gleeful like he was holding back a cackle. “Don't you wanna keep us warm through the long winter?”

No, thank you! —I thought but didn't say because I was too busy hauling butt to get away from them.

“Aw, guess you're gonna make us do this the hard way...” the nasal one drawled, his tone only mildly annoyed.

Then came the clomp-crunch of their boots. Closer and closer. Too close.

Oh, God...

The snow wasn't deep, but it was just enough to slow me down. My breath burned in my chest, and the icy air stung my eyes, blurring my vision. I didn't dare look back.

Some primal instinct screamed at me to turn right, so I veered off the path and plunged into the forest. The shadowed depths might swallow me whole, but that felt safer than being run down in the open.

However, the open re-found me when I burst through a copse of trees into a snow-covered meadow overlooking a frozen lake. It would have been beautiful beneath the half-moon if not for the whole running-for-my-life situation—speaking of which...

A heavy weight slammed into me from behind. My phone flew out of my hand, and my leg twisted under me with a sickening CRACK as I hit the ground hard. Pain—blinding, excruciating pain—exploded up my thigh.

I screamed.

"Told ya not to run," the nasal-voiced biker said, flipping me over with a jerk that wrung another shriek of pain from me. He just laughed as he climbed to his feet. "That's what you get for making us do this the hard way."

The half moon and the phone's pitiful flashlight cast his face in harsh relief. A sharp widow's peak and a thin, smirking mouth made him look like a cartoon villain brought to life.

"It's gonna be a hell of a painful ride for her back to the clubhouse with that leg," the other biker said somewhere beyond my sightline, his voice more amused than sorry.

“Maybe one of us should bite her.”

Bite me? Pain and confusion swirled together in my brain, blurring his words.

“Fuck no,” Widow’s Peak growled. “I’m not risking a bond bite on club meat.”

Club meat? That didn’t sound good.

I propped myself up just enough to see the damage—and instantly regretted it. Even that small movement sent a sharp jab of pain screaming up my leg, and the sight of my limb bent at an unnatural angle turned my stomach.

Pain and nausea wrestled for control. My head swam, my throat tightening as I fought the urge to throw up.

“See? Look at the way her eyes are rolling,” the biker above me said with grim satisfaction. “All we gotta do is wait. She’ll pass out. Then we’ll strap her onto the back of my bike. By the time she comes to, you, me, and the rest of the club will already be having fun. I was getting tired of hookers anyway.”

The thought of being strapped to the back of a motorcycle like some kind of trophy kill sent a fresh spike of terror through me. And whatever “fun” he was implying... My stomach cramped nearly as much as my leg throbbed.

No! I wanted to scream, but pain locked the sound in my throat. All I could do was gasp silently as I clung to consciousness.

And then it happened.

A roar shattered the still night air. Deep, primal, bone-rattling.



“Who’s that—” Widow’s Peak started to ask.

Before he could finish, something black and massive streaked into my periphery. And suddenly, Widow’s Peak was gone. Yanked out of my line of sight. The disturbing gurgle that followed was paired with wet, squelching sounds I couldn’t place.

Not until something landed beside me with a flat thunk . Like a ball. But... my breath hitched.

It wasn’t a ball. It was a head.

The metallic scent of blood filled my nose as I stared into Widow’s Peak’s lifeless, wide eyes. His face was twisted into the same smug expression he’d worn seconds ago, frozen in death.

Seconds. That was all it had taken for the thing—whatever it was—to eviscerate him and rip his head clean off.

“Oh, fuck, you killed our vice prez!” the second biker screamed, his voice pitching high with panic. “The Iron Claw’s gonna make you pay for this, Horse!” Horse?

Was that thing a horse? Beneath the terror and searing pain, my muddled brain struggled to piece together what was happening beyond my field of vision.

A male scream tore through the air, followed by the sound of retreating footsteps—fast and frantic. The second biker had clearly decided he wasn’t sticking around to keep fighting whatever had just decapitated his buddy.

The sound of his boots faded into the distance, leaving only me.

And it .

The beast stood just out of my sightline, its breath coming in quick, snarling pants.

Like it was angry. Looking for something else to kill.

Someone else to kill.

Oh God! Oh God! Oh God!

I held my breath and squeezed my eyes shut, literally playing dead like some cartoon must have taught me when I was a kid.

More crunching snow under what sounded like extremely heavy feet. Then came a hot snort of breath, so close it brushed over my closed eyelids. I waited for the claws, the teeth—whatever terrible thing was coming next.

Instead, the beast... licked the entire length of my face. Its tongue dragged across my skin, soft and weirdly sticky, leaving a streak of warmth against the biting cold of the night.

What in the...

My eyes snapped open, and there it was. Hulking. Black as midnight. Glowing red eyes glared down at me. The beast was so large, it blotted out the moon.

It stared at me, unblinking.

I stared back, my breath hitching as I tried to process what I was looking at.

Not a horse.

And definitely not a human. It sounded too feral, too primal.

A bear.

That tiny iota of deductive reasoning fought its way through the fog of pain and panic to insist that the creature standing above me—the one that had taken out the biker in seconds—was one of the ursine predators this mountain town was clearly named after.

The beast pressed its wet nose into my face, then dragged it down to my neck.

My heart hammered against my ribcage as my mind scrambled for some response—any response. But all I could do was lie there, helpless, as it audibly sniffed along my body.

Like I was something it planned to savor... before eating for dinner.

“Please,” I whispered, though I didn’t even know what I was asking for. “Please don’t...”

Some last-minute burst of adrenaline let me start to sit up, despite my mangled leg—but the bear’s massive paw pressed against my chest, pinning me back to the ground with terrifying ease. Its razor-sharp claws pricked my skin through my coat as it raised its head to freeze me in place with its glowing red stare.

A beat of cold, suffocating quiet.

Then...

Its jaws opened to reveal a mouth of gleaming white teeth.

“What are you doing? No... no... no!!!”

I instinctively threw my arms over my face—only to have all those teeth close around my forearm.

Not a random mauling, but a precise, purposeful bite. Like it had chosen this particular place to start its meal.

A spin on an old adage suddenly dropped into my panicked mind: What's the best way to eat a human? One bite at a time.

A new pain shot through me like lightning, sharp and electric. It lit up every nerve in my body.

I screamed. The sound broke into a sob as the world tilted and darkened around me.

This was it. This was how it ended.

Not in a hospital. Not even at the hands of those bikers.

A bear.

I was about to be mauled to death by a bear on Bear Mountain.

Well, I guess that tracked .

Darkness clawed at the edges of my vision, but even as the world tilted, the pain and terror suddenly faded away, and a new scent overwhelmed me. Sweet, warm, and comforting—like hazelnuts.

On a dessert I'd never get to finish.

## Page 6

*Source Creation Date: August 5, 2025, 4:16 am*

6 /

let's do this!

leif

When I was turned three years ago, I discovered a shocking truth: my grizzly wasn't hard to put up with at all. Unlike my human, he didn't care what others thought of him, kept quiet when I decided to quit my job and sign up with the RCMP, and even let me keep my love of hot Bikram yoga without too much grumbling. All in all, he'd been a surprisingly chill dude.

Until now.

Have to find her. Have to get to her. Have to make sure she's safe.

I stalked the length of the station's cell, back and forth, like a wild animal trapped unfairly in a cage.

"Stop pacing. You're giving me a fucking headache," the Iron Claw MC growled.

He smelled like a much rougher version of the cognac my dad preferred for his last drink of the night. And though I hadn't seen him before today, there was something faintly familiar about his scent—an undertone that reminded me of one of the Bear Mountain residents I'd met during the whirlwind of pre-denning season introductions. But I couldn't quite place who.

He was probably a full Ayaska black bear like Takoda, judging by the similar light umber tint of his skin and the way he'd dared to speak to my hard-ass boss. And though he was just as stuck in here as I was, he leaned casually against the wall with his arms crossed, watching me with an annoyed expression. Like I was overreacting.

He obviously didn't understand.

"I can't just sit here!" I shot him a glare without breaking stride. "She's out there—my mate is out there—and I'm stuck in this stupid cell!"

The Iron Claw arched a dark eyebrow, his amber eyes glinting. "We've got a name, don't we?"

"What?"

"She said it back at the bar. She's got a sister. First name, Noelle. Last name Winters—until the Tuk'Mara's maul wives her in the spring. That's enough to go on for a Dudley."

The implication in his tone made me stop mid-step and turn to face him. "What the hell are you suggesting?"

The Iron Claw just smirked and nodded toward the computer sitting on top of the station desk I shared with Takoda. "You've got access to the right databases. All we have to do is track her down as soon as Horse lets us out of here."

Horse . Takoda had pretty much stabled Sentinel—or Senty, as I called him when I snuck him apples behind my superior officer's back—for the winter. Senty wasn't the only horse in the stable we were responsible for during hibernation season—one of my more enjoyable duties in a dead mountain town. Takoda, however, was the only person I knew, in, well, life, who still used a horse as his primary mode of

transportation. So it didn't take much to figure out who the MC meant.

My heart tripped over his suggestion: that I go behind Takoda's back to get the information I needed to track down Noelle Winters' sister. The bone-deep need to see her clashed with the undeniable wrongness of misusing RCMP resources—especially after getting myself arrested.

“That's—that's not just unethical,” I reminded him. And myself. “It's illegal!”

The Iron Claw shrugged. “And?”

“You're basically talking about stalking her.” I wanted the words to taste sour in my mouth, but my no-longer-chill grizzly growled in complete agreement with the criminal who'd broken my nose and probably ruined any chance I had of staying in the RCMP with an arrest on my record less than four months into my first assignment.

“If stalking's what it takes.” The Iron Claw's tone held a calm pragmatism that didn't match the coiled violence radiating off him. “Like Don Quixote said, ‘Love and war are exactly alike. It is lawful to use tricks and slights to obtain a desired end.’”

“Wait.” I held up a hand. “Are you seriously quoting somebody who was known for swinging on windmills at me?”

A loud roar rumbled through the station before he could answer—so deep it reverberated in my bones.

The sound snapped my head up, and the Iron Claw pushed off the wall, his smirk twisting into something sharper.

“Who the hell is that?” he asked, his fists clenching for a fight.

The growl came again, this time louder, right before the station door slammed open.

My eyes widened as the largest black bear I'd ever seen in a village full of them barreled into the station, dragging something limp behind it.

No, not something.

Someone . Another black bear, but much smaller. And wearing a pair of Hoka runners of all things.

The scent of the two of them hit me before my brain could process what I was seeing. Caramel encased in chocolate and toasted hazelnuts. Sweet, rich, and overwhelming.

I recognized the hazelnut scent as Takoda and the other as...

“Holly!” The Iron Claw’s gravelly voice cut through my confusion. “He turned our girl!”

No, wait, what? Takoda had bond bitten a human out of the blue? That didn’t sound like him.

But the faint rise and fall of the unconscious bear’s chest was exactly what the Bear Mountain manual from the nineties said would happen for what it called “Tourist Bites”—highly unethical cases of a bear resident turning the humans that came to visit Bear Mountain on holiday.

It looked like I was no longer the only constable around here in violation of the town’s law, which meant Takoda would have no choice but to let me off the hook.

However, my relief at that realization died when I saw the state of her back left leg, bent at an unnatural angle.



She's hurt!

My bear reared up inside of me, and I grabbed the bars, a growl ripping out from my throat.

“What did you do?” I snarled at Takoda.

The large black bear didn't answer. Just let go of Holly's bear body and lumbered over to the station desk to reach one of its massive paws underneath it.

There must have been a button there I hadn't seen before—or hadn't been told about when I reported for duty back in November. The bars of the cell swung open with a groaning whine of metal.

I lunged forward to get to Holly, but the Iron Claw barred an arm across my chest.

“Wouldn't if I was you. See that bite on her front leg?”

I froze, my gaze fixed on the crescent-shaped indentation on her foreleg. A bond bite.

Rage, sharp and unfamiliar, flared through me, and my bear surged toward the surface, clawing to break free for reasons that had nothing to do with healing my broken nose this time. “He hurt her—then he bond bit her, even though she's mine!”

“Not just yours.” The Iron Claw's voice was steady, but his amber gaze stayed locked on Holly. “And he might not be the one who broke her leg. Let's see what he does next.”

“Next?”

The bear's glowing red eyes lingered on Holly's limp form, a low growl rumbling

deep in his chest.

Then his gaze snapped to us—sharp, deliberate, and full of intent.

My heart seized. What was he going to do?—

He lunged, cutting my wondering thought short.

Fast, with his maw gaping wide.

Before I could blink, he had the Iron Claw pinned to the cell floor with one massive paw.

I expected a fight, some kind of resistance. But the Iron Claw didn't struggle. Didn't even yell out.

Instead, he pulled up the sleeve of his leather jacket to expose his forearm.

“What the hell are you doing?” I demanded, my voice rising in pitch.

The Iron Claw didn't answer. Just grinned as the bear's teeth sank into his exposed arm, drawing blood.

“Yeah, Koda. That's right.” To my shock, the Iron Claw let out a low, approving growl, his chest practically purring. “Let's do this!”

I stared, horrified, but then the bear finally released him. A thin line of blood trailed from the bite.

“Well, that's one way to say, ‘Welcome to the family.’” The Iron Claw sat up, his smirk returning as he flexed his arm. Then he grinned at me. “Your turn, Blondie.”

“What in the actual fuck?” I shouted, backing away as the bear turned his attention to me.

The growl deepened, reverberating through the cell as he stalked toward me.

For the second time that night, I reached for my bear outside a full moon. But it stayed back, refusing to resurface. In fact, it hummed inside me, happily thrumming with an emotion that felt a lot like... anticipation.

“No, no, no—” I raised my hands in a futile attempt to ward off Takoda’s bite-happy bear.

But he was on me in seconds, his clawed paw pressing me to the floor.

I was 6’6” and nearly 300 pounds, yet he held me down like I weighed nothing. Goddamn bear magic! I thrashed, adrenaline screaming through me, but his weight was unyielding.

“Stop fighting it,” the gravelly Iron Claw called out from somewhere in the distance. His tone was aggravatingly unbothered. “I surrender to it, and by surrendering, I control it.’—That’s some Robert Jordan for ya.”

“Who?!”

“Robert Jordan, one of the founding fathers of modern epic fantasy.”

“Okay, this bear is trying to take a chunk out of me, and you’re quoting—ahhh!”

My question dissolved into a yell as the bear’s jaws locked onto my forearm. Sharp teeth pierced through skin and muscle, sending lightning bolts of pain shooting through me.

And then?—

It tingled.

Not in a bad way, but in a way that made my head spin—then abruptly clear with a strange sense of... Brotherhood?

The word floated into my only-child brain like a bright red, heart-shaped balloon.

But yes— brotherhood . That was what I felt when I stared into the glowing eyes of the bear with its jaws locked around my arm.

The connection was instant. Primal. Raw. Something ancient and feral unfurled in my chest, snapping into place like a puzzle piece I hadn't even realized was missing.

The bear released me, and I scrambled back, clutching my arm. But when I looked down, the bite mark was already fading, replaced by a spreading warmth that defied explanation.

“What the...” My voice trailed off as I stared at my arm, then back at the Iron Claw, who was watching me with a smug expression. “I thought he was going to kill me.”

“Nah, he didn't kill you.” The Iron Claw held up his arm to reveal a now completely healed crescent-shaped bite mark of his own. “He made you.”

“Made me what?” I asked. Warily. The last time a bear attacked me, I got a very furry surprise at the next full moon.

But this bear didn't stay to try to claw me to death like the last one did. It dipped its head and suddenly retreated. As if its job was all done here.

I watched in wide-eyed shock as he used the front of his head to nudge Holly's bear body into the cell with us.

"What are you...?"

Takoda let out a deafening roar before I could finish. First at me. Then at the Iron Claw.

"Alright! Alright! Don't get your fur in a knot," the Iron Claw grumbled, raising his hands in mock surrender.

He peeled off his jacket, which was confusing enough. Until both he and Takoda turned to me with twin looks of expectancy in their amber and glowing red eyes.

Making me ask, "What?"

"You don't speak Bear?" The Iron Claw shed his black t-shirt, revealing an impressive set of prison abs.

"Bears have a language ?" I glanced at the animal on all fours, who somehow managed to regard me with as much disdain as Sergeant Takoda would have in his human form.

Meanwhile, the Iron Claw standing beside me gave me a look I had no problem translating as, Are you a fucking idiot?

Short answer: Yes.

Slightly longer answer: "I'm not a born bear, like you two." And seemingly this entire town, I added with an internal eye roll. "I was only made three years ago."

The Iron Claw stared at me, then glanced back to Takoda's bear. "You sure about this, Koda? Yeah, he smells like maple fudge, but if you kill him now, we can find another third."

The black bear tilted his head, as if considering the Iron Claw's suggestion. Then growled something long and low that was definitely some sort of communication.

I instinctively took a step back and threw up my fists since my grizzly had apparently decided to abandon me. "I'm not going down without a fight."

"Relax, Blondie." The Iron Claw dropped his t-shirt on top of his coat and unbuckled his jeans. "Our first is saying you can stay. But if I was you, I'd start stripping before he changes his mind."

"Stripping?" I repeated, blinking.

Another roar came from Takoda's bear, so fierce I swear I felt the wind of it blow back my hair.

"Before he changes his mind!" the Iron Claw repeated, shoving down his own jeans.

"Okay! Okay!" I quickly removed my flannel shirt. Then the waffle-knit layer I had underneath.

"Put them under her," the Iron Claw instructed. He was now completely naked save for socks and a pair of boxer briefs with a picture of a bear skeleton in a leather jacket throwing up devil horns. "Our first wants us to build her a nest."

"Our first? A nest?" I repeated.

"For fuck's sake."

The Iron Claw snatched my shirts from where I'd let them fall and started arranging them underneath Holly's sleeping form.

As he worked and I started taking off my joggers, the black bear lumbered out of the cell and over to the station's closet.

By the time I joined the MC in constructing the so-called "nest," Takoda's bear had come back with a hanger bearing a red-and-black uniform that smelled faintly of hazelnuts.

"Good idea," the Iron Claw said, taking it out of the bear's mouth. He handed the uniform to me. "Here, put that under her head like a pillow while I make sure her leg's in the right position to heal nice and proper."

I did as instructed, folding the pants and jacket before gently tucking them beneath her head.

I'd never gotten this close to a female bear before. Especially one who'd been made, like me.

My hand lingered for a moment, brushing against her soft black fur as I wondered what I'd say to her when she woke up. My mate.

Our mate . The Iron Claw's reminder echoed ominously in my ears, along with the weird brotherhood sensation on my arm. But would she pick me or truly be okay with?—

Another metallic groan interrupted my thoughts of the future. I looked up just in time to see Takoda's bear on the other side of the bars.

Right before he slammed the cell door shut.

The lock reengaged with a final, ominous clunk .

“Wait, you’re just going to leave us here?” I rose to my feet and ran to grip the bars.

But the bear didn’t even bother to growl an answer. He just lumbered out of the station, letting the door close shut behind him.

“What the hell?!” I yelled into the now-empty station. “What the hell just happened?”

“I’ll tell you what happened.”

I turned to find the Iron Claw grinning at me, his white teeth gleaming under the cell’s fluorescent light.

“The guy who supposedly didn’t want to eat that Valentine’s Day box of chocolates that strolled into Bear Mountain just turned the three of us into her motherfucking maul.”



## Page 7

*Source Creation Date: August 5, 2025, 4:16 am*

7 /

like a frigging celine dion song

12 hours later

takoda

“Rough night, Takoda?”

The low growl pulled me from my tunnel vision just as I was about to pass the row of KEEP OUT signs marking the boundary between Bear Mountain and the Ayaska Village.

I glanced up to see one of the three outsider grizzly brothers who ran the bar while Cody hibernated with his new maul ambling toward me in his grizzly form. One of the identical twins. Nobody in the tribe could tell them apart, so we called them the Rekaikhanuk Nakai behind their backs—“the red outsider twins.” But to their faces, we simply called each of them...

“Twin.”

Stopping in my tracks, I gripped the edge of my makeshift toga and greeted him with a stiff nod. “Something like that.”

The red outsider twin tilted his massive head, golden eyes flicking over my outfit. “Night become more wild after bar fight, hugrrh?”

“Bar fight?” My voice came out sharper than I intended.

“Grrrugh! Your bear gave you true black sleep!” The twin snuffled, the grizzly equivalent of a laugh. “You no remember? New constable and Hawk get into fight. Over human. Looking for your brother’s maul mate.”

No... no, I didn’t. Twin was right. My bear, who’d never turned outside of a full moon, had truly blacked me out.

I’d assumed Hawk would show up in town any moment now. But I hadn’t known he was actually back in Bear Mountain—and apparently getting into fights with Bjorn, the additional constable I didn’t need and never asked for. Also...

“Human?” I asked the red twin. The word felt foreign, like it didn’t belong to me.

“Yes, human. Her car outside station. I thinking you allow her to stay. Maybe she new mate. You and her smell right together.”

New mate? Smell right together?

Unintentional turns came with a certain amount of amnesia, the shifter equivalent of getting blackout drunk. I knew this because my mother had beared out at first sight over Zion, a Jamaican-Canadian tourist who’d been in town with his then-fiancée.

She’d woken up with him in the cave she shared with my father, her then un-mauled boyfriend, with no idea of what happened the night before. But she’d said the three of them had “smelled right together,” so that had been the beginning of their unplanned maul.

But I’d only heard about unintentional turns. Those were things that happened to other shifters—ones way more impulsive and far less responsible than me.

I couldn't believe my bear had not only lost control like that but had also completely blacked me out. As if he'd intentionally decided to act behind my back.

Do something truly terrible behind my back. But my bear would never...

The sight of my brown hat lying in the snow, alongside my boots and the shredded remnants of my clothes, told me he had, though.

Among the scraps, something red stood out—something other than my jacket. A scarf.

It was hers. I didn't know how I knew that, but I did. This scarf belonged to the woman my bear had built the nest for—despite everything I'd sworn after Ash chose my brother over me.

Kneeling, I picked it up and brushed snow from the fabric. The moment I touched it, the scent hit me: sweet and warm, like caramel dipped in chocolate.

Flashes of memory followed: blood, chocolate, maple, cognac. Teeth sinking into flesh. "Don't fight it," a gravelly voice advised.

I blinked hard, trying to make sense of the jagged images. But they slipped away, leaving behind emotions I couldn't reconcile. Or shake.

MATE! OURS! My bear growled low in my chest, a primal claim that made me clutch the scarf even tighter.

The thought of my bear claiming a mate behind my back unsettled me—almost as much as the possessive growl I couldn't suppress.

"Memories coming back to you, hugrrh?" Twin asked behind me.

Yes and no.

“I’ve got to get to the station,” I muttered, brushing past the red grizzly without explanation.

What explanation was there to give? I couldn’t remember enough to make sense of anything, and the fragments I did recall only confused me more.

What the hell did my bear do? The question echoed in my head as I made my way down main street to the station.

Despite the too-large boots and my blanket toga, I crossed the distance in record time.

Unease coiled tighter in my gut when I spotted the bright red rental car with Vancouver plates parked outside the RCMP detachment. Pulse racing, a cold prickle climbed up my spine. This wasn’t good. The bear had definitely done something—something I would never approve of.

Hand frozen on the door handle, alarm bells blared at me to stay outside as my chest tightened, possibilities racing through my mind—each worse than the last. But I was the chief officer of Bear Mountain. Running from responsibility wasn’t an option. Even when my brother claimed the life that should have been mine, I’d stayed at the post I’d sworn to maintain.

I took a breath, steadying myself, and pushed the door open.

And immediately wished I hadn’t.

The scent hit first—maple, cognac, and that unmistakable chocolate-caramel warmth. It was overwhelming, filling every corner of the space, like it had been waiting for me.

But it wasn't the scent that made my stomach drop.

It was the sight of what was happening inside the station's holding cell, illuminated under harsh fluorescent lights.

And that was when the events of last night all came flooding back to me. Like a frigging Celine Dion song.

Every. Single. Moment.

## Page 8

*Source Creation Date: August 5, 2025, 4:16 am*

8 /

you are definitely my human

less than an hour earlier...

holly

“ W hat are you doing? No... no... no!!!”

I threw my arms over my face, shielding myself from the bear’s attack—a pitiful excuse for self-defense.

The black beast just clamped down on my arm, its sharp teeth tearing through my skin, bear-murdering me with ease.

Except I didn’t die.

When I opened my eyes again, I was lying in a meadow bursting with flowers: red, yellow, and various shades of pink.

Normally, this would have been a nightmare—meadows were my kryptonite, thanks to my seasonal allergies. But instead of sneezing my head off, I climbed to my feet, disoriented and stunned. Also, surprised to find my left leg, which had been broken before the attack, now fully healed.

I glanced around. The meadow overlooked a crystal-blue lake and was encircled by

lush, green trees—nothing like the bare, wintry forest I remembered. Even stranger, the scene was filled with bears. Grizzlies, polar bears, and black bears dotted the meadow, their presence oddly serene.

One of them, a black bear, lumbered toward me. Her gentle brown eyes met mine, and a strange sensation came over me—like looking into a mirror. Her lips didn't move, yet I heard her voice, raw and familiar, inside my head.

Hello. Are you my human?

“Um, I don't think so,” I answered, my voice shaky. The flower-strewn meadow and lack of sneezing made me ask, “Is this heaven?”

No. Her voice snuffled—almost a laugh. And yes, you are definitely my human.

Her human? I blinked, trying to process the impossibility of what was happening. Not only was the bear talking to me, but her voice sounded like mine—only deeper, rawer, stripped of the soft cadence I'd developed over the years.

The bear suddenly turned, nostrils flaring. What's that delicious smell?

I sniffed, catching the sweet, decadent aroma. It was intoxicating, like walking into an artisan candy shoppe. “Are you sure this isn't heaven?” I asked.

No, it's... The bear shuddered, her body quaking as her voice rasped out, Mates!

“What's going on with you?” As confused as I was, I step forward with my hands out, my nurse brain trying to figure out how to help her, even though she was a separate species. “Are you okay?”

Mates! Her voice dropped into a guttural growl. She turned back to me, her gaze

locking onto mine. This time, her voice roared, filling my entire body with its vibration. MATES!

She lunged at me, and I?—

I jerked awake, gasping.

The cold reality of a jail cell replaced the meadow, and I found myself lying on a random pile of clothes that smelled like maple, hazelnuts, and some dark liqueur I couldn't name. My coat and scrubs were gone. So was the pain that had consumed me before I passed out.

“What am I doing here?” I sat up, taking in the bare metal bars, the concrete floor, and the two men—wait. What?!

My heart stuttered.

It was the two men who'd fought over me for zero reason. The Viking and the biker whose names I still did not know.

The Viking was knelt in Hero's Pose, his expression open and eager, while the biker crouched nearby, arms draped over his knees, vibe calm—like he'd just been waiting patiently for me to wake up.

They didn't look anything alike, but they both wore nothing but briefs, which barely concealed the ridged outlines of two rather impressive erections.

I swallowed hard, my brain short-circuiting as I tried to process being locked in a cell with the two guys who'd fought over me—two guys who looked (and were hung) like they were auditioning for an adult film. And would definitely get the part.



“What happened?” I demanded, trying to scramble to my feet—only to plop right back down again when I realized how strange my body felt—heavy, foggy. A slickness between my thighs made me pause.

Had I... peed myself? Wait. No....

A flush of heat swept through me, leaving confusion and something far worse: red-hot, clawing need. It rose inside me, fierce and insistent, a burning desire I didn't understand but couldn't ignore.

“What... what's going on?” I gasped, barely able to speak.

“I'm sorry. I know you're probably confused,” the Viking said, his expression apologetic and concerned. “You're safe, though. We just need to explain and help you.”

“Help me?” I choked out. “Help me with what?”

Before he could answer, the bear's voice reappeared inside my head: Mates! Mates! Mates!

The inner growl locked my gaze on the two men in front of me, dragging my attention down their bare chests to their straining erections. I tried to look away—desperately—but I couldn't. My body wouldn't obey.

Mates! Mates!

The word snarled in my head, feral and commanding, as my hand moved on its own. Sliding down. Lower. Between my legs.

I wasn't just touching. I was gathering. Gathering slick, undeniable proof of my

body's sudden eruption of arousal. What am I doing? No... No!

Something primal—something I didn't understand—had taken over. I was a passenger in my own body, forced to watch as my trembling hand lifted and smeared the arousal I'd gathered...

Across the biker's face.

"No!" The cry ripped from my throat, raw and broken, as I watched myself do the unthinkable. "Oh my God, I'm sorry! I'm so sorry!"

Shame ripping through my chest and curdling my stomach, I tried to yank my hand away, but the biker caught my wrist, his grip firm and unyielding.

"Mmm, yes, baby, mark me," he growled, his voice rough, gravelly, and dripping with satisfaction.

He drew my fingers into his mouth, sucking hard. A shockwave rippled through me. My body clenched in places I didn't know could clench, and the ache inside me deepened.

"What's... what's wrong with me?" I whispered, unable to stop watching him.

He released my fingers with a lewd pop. "Nothing. Nothing at all. You're perfect, baby."

He pressed my hand to his cheek, nuzzling it as if I hadn't just smeared my need on him.

"But you're also in estrus," he added—as if it was just an afterthought.

“Estrus?” I rasped. My nurse brain struggled to translate the unexpected bit of Latin.  
“Do you mean... like a dog goes into heat?”

“You’re definitely not a dog,” he said with a lazy grin. “Or a wolf. But yeah.”

“You’re confusing her,” the Viking said sharply, shooting him a glare before turning to me. “Let me explain?—”

A sharp pain knifed through my stomach, and I doubled over with a cry.

This wasn’t period pain. Period pain didn’t come with feverish heat or waves of slickness. I was pulsing, trembling, so wet I could feel it coating my thighs.

Mates!

“Look at her,” the Viking groaned. “She smells so good, but we can’t mate her. Not until we?—”

The voice won.

I tackled him, knocking him flat onto his back. And this time, it was me growling out loud, “Mate!”

## Page 9

*Source Creation Date: August 5, 2025, 4:16 am*

9 /

mate! mate! mate!

holly

I didn't mean to lunge at him. I swear I didn't.

One second, I was clinging to my last thread of self-control, and in the next, it just... snapped. I tackled the Viking, knocking him flat onto his back.

"Mate..." My voice came out raw, animalistic, scrabbling inside my chest. I sat astride him, desperately dragging my pussy over his torso. "MATE... please!"

Yes! Mark him! Mark him! the feral voice inside me commanded, while my human side begged brokenly, "Please! Please!"

"See, Blondie? She's not up for a rational conversation right now," the biker said, his voice calm but laced with an almost clinical authority. He must have stood up—I could feel him looming over us. "We gotta take care of her first."

"Stop. Please stop." The Viking gritted his teeth and grabbed my hips, gently but firmly stilling them with his superior strength.

"I can't stop!" My body fought his hold like a broken toy, helpless against the wildfire raging inside of me.

“She can’t stop,” the biker said coolly. “Her bear’s taken over.”

“She has to.” The Viking let out a frustrated snarl. “She doesn’t understand what’s happening to her. We can’t just?—”

“She ain’t asking for an explanation,” the biker interrupted, his tone razor-sharp. “She’s begging for relief.”

“I don’t know what’s happening to me.... Why I can’t... I can’t...” My voice trembled, but my body didn’t care. The ache was unbearable, the need consuming me in waves that expelled more slick. The Viking’s ridged abs were glistening at that point. He could barely hold me still, I’d made his skin so slippery.

I turned to the biker, tears pricking my eyes as I gasped, “Please... make it stop.”

The biker’s face hardened, his jaw tightening as a new kind of anger flickered in his amber eyes. “She’s in pain. If you don’t give her what she needs, I sure as fuck will.”

His gaze snapped to the Viking. And we both stared at him, waiting.

The Viking’s throat bobbed, like he was swallowing down a piece of Eve’s apple. Then he said, “This is wrong. Takoda’s not here. We can’t just?—”

The biker ripped me from the other man’s grip, lifting me into the air like I weighed nothing. His amber eyes burned as he growled, “Fuck your first and third, baby. You’re second will take care of you himself.”

Suddenly, my back hit the cell bars. I was chest to chest with the biker, sliding down a cock even larger and thicker than it had looked behind his briefs.

“Here’s your help, baby.” The biker pulled my legs around his waist, his amber gaze

adoring as his gravelly voice washed over me, hypnotic and soothing. He gripped one hand around the bars, the other digging into my bottom as he began to thrust with deliberate, driving strokes. “Take this medicine. Take whatever you need.”

I should have said no. I should have slapped him, screamed, done anything to stop what was happening after so many years of feeling the opposite of erotic. But instead, I clung to him, sobbing into his shoulder with abject relief. He felt so good inside me. Yes, medicine . That was the exact right label for this.

But... “I don’t even know your name!”

“It’s Hakan,” he answered, his voice strained as he continued thrusting. “But everyone calls me Hawk.”

“Hawk,” I repeated.

The predator name fit him perfectly. Yet, as his powerful body moved against mine, I felt completely cared for. He kept stroking into me, administering my medicine, until something inside me began to uncoil.

“Hawk! Hawk!” I cried out, my voice breaking.

“Aw fuck... I can’t take this, baby. You feel so good. Better than I ever imagined lying on my cot at night.” His lips trailed down my neck, lingering. What felt like sharp fangs grazed my skin.

“Don’t,” a voice warned, low and firm. “Don’t do it, bro.”

The Viking. He was back on his feet, standing close, his expression torn and censorious—even as his hand rubbed over the bulge in his briefs.

Hawk froze, his entire body going rigid as he grappled for control.

“I’m sorry, baby. I’m sorry.” His voice was raw as he pulled back, lifting his mouth from my neck. His amber eyes locked onto mine, burning with frustration and a hunger I couldn’t name. “Kiss me,” he whispered, almost pleading. “Kiss me so I don’t?—”

I swallowed down the rest of his plea with the kiss he’d requested. He was giving me what I needed, and something inside of me didn’t question giving him whatever he asked for, too.

What was I thinking? Letting this obvious criminal take me against the bars of a jail cell?

The answer was I wasn’t thinking . I wasn’t thinking about anything at all.

My ex, my entire history of men who’d never made me feel anything near this, faded away as I kissed the guy I’d only met minutes ago. Hawk .

Hawk was everywhere. Everything.

This was all sorts of wrong. But I didn’t want to be right.

It felt good. So good. I couldn’t stop, not even if I wanted to. And, I really, really didn’t want to. The ache swelled and radiated a warning.

Something was coming for me. A storm that made me scratch at Hawk’s chest and whimper against his mouth.

“It’s alright, baby, it’s alright.” Hawk pulled back just enough to speak, his breath warm against my lips. “I’ve got you. You don’t have to keep holding on. You can let

go, baby. Come for me. Come all over this dick. Your dick.”

Mine!

The word snarled through my mind, but still, I tried to hold on. I sensed that whatever came after I released would resemble sanity, and I didn’t want that. I loved it here. I wanted to stay inside this madness forever.

“You have to do what he says, okay? Okay, sweetie?” The Viking leaned in beside us, even closer now. His thick wrist curled under my chin, pulling the side of my face to his mouth. He laid his forehead against my temple, his lips brushing my cheek softly. “I know you’re confused and scared, but you have to let go.”

If Hawk minded having another man speak to me and kiss my face as he thrust between my legs, it didn’t show.

“Come like a good girl,” Hawk commanded, driving into me harder. His amber eyes glittered with madness, his control fraying at the edges.

“Yeah, come,” the Viking whispered into my ear, his voice a husky coax. “Then we’ll explain everything. And I’ll take my turn.”

His turn . It was obscene—being told to come by one man while another held me so tenderly. But their words pushed me closer to the edge. I felt the storm building, rattling through me like a freight train barreling toward impact.

Then Hawk snapped his hips. Hit a spot I’d believed to be a myth.

Until now.

“Hawk!” I cried out one last time.



Then I shattered, my body convulsing as wave after wave of relief and something far deeper crashed through me.

Mine! The voice inside me sighed, contented, as I floated over a meadow filled with flowers, high and happy as a balloon.

“What did you do? What the hell did you do?”

The balloon popped. I dropped back down to earth with a thud, my euphoria replaced by an icy dread.

The Mountie stood on the other side of the bars, dressed in nothing but a fleece blanket, his expression murderous.

## Page 10

*Source Creation Date: August 5, 2025, 4:16 am*

10 /

this is all your fault!

takoda

H olly .

I remembered now. I remembered everything. Her name was Holly. My bear had bitten her, then left her inside a cell with the two shifters I'd arrested for fighting over her.

And now Hawk had her pinned to the bars, her sweet, chubby thighs wrapped around his waist.

A green-tinted rage, unlike anything I'd ever felt before, rose in my chest, strangling my words as I choked out, "Stop this. Stop this now."

They didn't stop. Didn't even appear to hear me.

Bjorn had his entire face pressed into the side of her head, murmuring low.

But I had bear ears. I heard every word he said, urging her to come all over an ex-con's dick.

And that spoken encouragement made my own cock swell, even as I repeated, "Stop. No, stop."

She was already in estrus. The entire station reeked of chocolate, maple, and cognac—sweet, rich, and overwhelming. They couldn't hear me over their combined thrall.

But I could hear them. Through the maul bites, their minds were wide open.

Too loud. Too clear. Their thrill. Their anticipation. Every single moment, until...

Hawk snapped his hips hard, hitting something deep inside her.

Holly came apart with a scream, and her ecstasy rushed through me, flooding my mind. It bore no resemblance to the scream she'd let out when my bear bit her. This was pure euphoria.

Her climax was followed by Hawk's elated pride and Bjorn's abject delight, even though he hadn't bitten her. Her pleasure was already his pleasure.

I wasn't nearly so honorable.

Jealousy tightened my stomach, hot and angry as I roared, "What did you do? What the hell did you do?"

This time, they heard me.

They froze at the sound of my voice. At least Holly and Bjorn did.

Hawk just looked me straight in the eye. Grinned.

And kept going.

"Welcome back, Koda," he said—right before he released with a rough shout.

Hawk had been with plenty of women—shifter and human. I knew that even before my bear bit him. But now his maul bite told me those other females might as well have never existed.

To Hawk, this felt like coming for the first time ever. No more baiting me. No more games. He nearly blacked out, his mind blurring as he shot rope after rope of his seed into her.

The surging pulses of his extended release were too much for Holly. Just moments ago, she'd felt guilty and ashamed when she saw me standing on the other side of the bars. Now, her mind collapsed, and her eyes went glassy as another orgasm ripped through her.

“Another orgasm. Another...” Hawk’s thoughts echoed in my head like they were my own. Holly wasn’t supposed to have another climax. Its unexpected arrival pushed Hawk to the edge. “Another ? —”

“No! No!” I shouted, surging forward.

But it was already too late.

Hawk mawed out, his bear teeth descending to administer a bond bite before I could even get to the keypad.

Holly cried out, her body quaking as Hawk’s teeth sank into her right shoulder.

And that was when I learned the terrible truth behind the Ayaska law against bond biting in public.

“Why is it against the law?” I’d asked my father, the former Bear Mountain RCMP detachment before he retired. I’d been curious back then, assuming Ash and I would

soon maul with a worthy third.

“Because bond biting can be catching,” he’d answered simply.

I hadn’t understood his reasoning at that time.

But now...

Bjorn’s bear instincts overrode his human reason in an instant. Like a male possessed, he followed Hawk’s lead, his maw sinking into her left shoulder.

The traditional place for a third maul to bond.

Before I could finish punching in the code, they were both biting her. Binding her to them, just as my bear had done behind my back.

“No,” I snarled. My fists clenched so hard my nails bit into my palms, but I didn’t move. Separating them mid-bite was dangerous, and stopping them now could trigger the two other males into shifting.

Holly’s cries echoed through the small space, but they weren’t cries of pain. They were cries of something else entirely. Something raw and consuming.

Mates! Mates! Mates! her bear chanted inside her.

And then, suddenly, I was falling over the cliff, too.

I shouted, and my legs nearly buckled as my untouched cock unexpectedly erupted.

The jet of cum rocketed down my shaft, white-hot and remorseless. It left nothing behind but shame, the destruction of my worldview, and a huge dark spot on the

fleece blanket wrapped around me.

This was... This was utter chaos. All protocols had been shattered. Every ritual for this process, completely forsaken.

But my bear didn't care. It reveled in the chaos, took pride in the bond forming before my eyes as Holly's orgasm crested again and again, its length extended by her second and third mauls' magical bond bites.

Ours! Ours! Ours! her second and third mauls cried as they savagely bonded her.

By the time Bjorn and Hawk lifted their mouths from her shoulders, Holly had gone limp in Hawk's arms. Her head lolled to the side, her body trembling from aftershocks of her bondgasm.

To Bjorn's and Hawk's credit, the primal satisfaction radiating from the bites faded as their bears retreated. Awareness returned to their eyes.

"Fuck, what did I...?" Hawk rasped, his voice thick with regret.

Bjorn opened his mouth but said nothing, his jaw working like he was trying to find words that wouldn't come.

It didn't matter.

In the end, all fault laid with one person. Her!

I'd stoically nodded when Zion and my birth father broke the news about my mother's deathbed decision. I'd walked away without a word when Ash confessed his bear wanted to form a maul with Mak instead.

But now...

Now, I staggered forward, rage snapping my last thread of control. I ripped open the cage door.

“You!” I snarled at the female who had upended my entire life in less than twenty-four hours. “This is your fault.”

All three of them blinked at me, like the humans at the “mind-expansion retreats” Ash’s alternative healer mother occasionally hosted.

“Takoda...sir...” Bjorn began, his voice cautious.

“Let me handle this,” Hawk said before he could finish. He set Holly down with deliberate care, then positioned her behind him. Shielding her from me like he had the right.

Meanwhile, Holly pulled on Bjorn’s shirt and flannel in hurried movements, her eyes darting toward me like I was the monster.

Not that ex-con who’d fucked her against the bars of a jail cell.

“I told you to leave,” I snapped at her over Hawk’s shoulder. “Why didn’t you listen?”

“I’m sorry,” Holly stammered, stepping forward. Her chin wobbled, but she squared her shoulders and bravely stood beside Hawk, not behind him. “I was just trying to find my sister!”

“If you’ve got second thoughts about this maul, Koda, take them up with me. Not her,” Hawk growled, his amber eyes sharp. Then, softer, to Holly: “You’ve got

nothing to be sorry for, baby.”

Lies.

“You’ve got everything to be sorry for! I told you to go home! And you didn’t!” The words tumbled out on an rage-filled wave of regret and frustration. “Now you’ve ruined everything. I didn’t want this. I didn’t want you. You’ve ruined my life!”

The knife twisted as her expression shattered. And suddenly, I saw it.

The fights with her ex-husband. His cruel accusations after her miscarriages. His lawyer painting her as a deceitful harpy for not disclosing a medical condition she couldn’t help.

Her pain. All the pain she’d been carrying since her divorce sliced through me. Sliced through all of us.

But she didn’t know we could see it. Didn’t understand that her bond bite was sharing everything.

She just pressed her lips together, gathering herself the way she did when she made the call to rush one of her birthing mothers to the hospital for an emergency C-section.

“I’m sorry,” she said again. “I don’t understand what’s happening here. But I know I’m not what you envisioned. And I wasn’t trying to... I just...” Her voice cracked, but she kept going. “I didn’t mean for any of this to happen. I’ll leave now. I promise.”

I’d think about this moment a lot in the weeks to come.



Maybe things would have turned out different if she'd made that declaration and calmly walked out of my detachment station. Maybe she'd have gotten in her rental car and driven out of my life—actually gone home, like I'd ordered her to. Twice.

But she didn't walk.

She ran.

Her runners slapped against the concrete floor as she fled—not just out of the cell but out of the station entirely.

So many signs. We had so many signs hanging on nearly every building in town, giving instructions about what to do if a tourist encountered a bear.

The number one rule on every tin post: DON'T RUN!

Written all in caps.

But Holly had come into my life—our lives—at night. She hadn't seen any of those signs.

Instead of walking, she ran.

Which in bear country was the equivalent of striking a match in a room full of gasoline.

“Wait! Don't ru-rrrawwwrr-n!” Bjorn's warning wasn't fast enough. His predatory instinct took over before he could finish, and his blond grizzly surged forward as fur sprouted.

Hawk's black bear soon followed, curling over onto all fours as his body convulsed

with the shift.

Before they could fully turn, though, I scrambled to the cell's entrance and slammed the door shut, locking them back in.

"Stay here," I snapped, my voice low and commanding. "Both of you. Don't make this worse."

Bjorn's huge grizzly roared, frustrated, while Hawk's bear stared at me with baleful amber eyes.

"If she leave Bear Mountain, I kill you," Hawk growled, his ursine voice heavy with menace. "No cage strong enough to hold me if our mate gone."

My human rallied to defy him.

But my bear?

It was stronger.

And she'd run.

My human knew better, but the beast inside me had already been triggered.

That was when I realized—I should have locked myself inside that cage, too.

My skin burned, my muscles twisted, and before I could stop it, my black bear forced me into a shift—unstoppable, primal, and intent on the hunt.

11 /

so what you're saying is that you've basically ruined my life

holly

Mates! Mates! Mates! The new voice continued to growl inside of me. But...

No. I had to find my coat. Find my keys! Get out of this town!

One moment, I was in ecstasy, and the next, I was running blindly up the trail to Ayaska Village, searching for the place where I'd veered into the forest. Trying to escape the nightmare I'd left behind in that jail cell.

I'd barely been able to run the night before, but I was weirdly stronger now. My Hoka's slapped against the snow-packed ground, each step bounding me farther up the white road. I only wore a shirt and flannel that smelled of maple, but the below-freezing weather didn't slow me down. The cold didn't matter. Nothing mattered except getting away.

Away from the humiliation. You've ruined my life!

Away from that animatronic Mountie.

There—there it was! The motorcycle lying in the road, marking the spot where I'd run into the forest earlier. I cut right again, and branches clawed at my arms as I stumbled through the trees. Their sharp scrapes felt like physical manifestations of

the words battering my mind.

You've ruined my life!

The Mountie's accusation whirled like an electric drill into my brain, unlocking memories I'd spent over a year trying to bury.

So what you're saying is that you've basically ruined my life.

Corey had spat the words at me like venom.

At first, I hadn't blamed him for his anger. After using his dual visa to move to Canada and getting married, he'd wanted to start a family when I was twenty-eight, but I'd insisted we wait. Corey called himself a "muralisto"—his term for pursuing a career as a muralist—and I respected his art. But as his newly emigrated wife, it didn't feel like a strong foundation to build a family on with me as the most likely breadwinner.

It felt reasonable at the time to wait until I'd established a robust client list for my specialized homebirth midwife practice and a strong enough reputation to be brought on for shifts at my partner hospital when business was slow. But I was thirty by the time I felt ready to go off birth control, and he was already bitter.

After nearly a year of trying, we finally got pregnant—only for it to end two weeks later in miscarriage. That's when I decided to consult a fertility specialist, who suggested I address the fibroids I'd been ignoring for years.

When I told Corey I'd most likely need surgery for the fibroids that were making conception difficult, his reaction was devastating. "So what you're saying is you've got a medical condition that you didn't tell me about? And that's why we've been having so much trouble getting pregnant?"

I'd tried to explain, "Honestly, I've been living with painful, monster periods because of fibroids since my teens. It never occurred to me to talk about it with anyone, especially you. They're not exactly sexy. And I didn't know they'd make getting pregnant so hard! I thought I could just deal with it until the doctor suggested surgery."

"How could you not know?" he retorted. "You're a midwife! You do this for a living."

"I deliver babies," I argued, my voice breaking. "I don't help women conceive them. That's a completely different field of medicine."

Corey just shook his head, his eyes filling with tears. "But you knew about the fibroids, and you withheld them from me." He threw himself down on the couch with a dramatic sigh. "You've basically ruined my life!"

"No, Corey, that's not it at all," I assured him, desperate to explain my side of things. But nothing I said mattered.

By the time I had the fibroids removed and we tried IVF, I was thirty-three. And Corey had already emotionally checked out.

He left after my second miscarriage. Quietly, at first. He was eager to move on with his new girlfriend and I was too tired to fight for the marriage he clearly no longer wanted. We promised to let each other go without a fuss.

But his version of a no-fuss divorce had turned into a courtroom spectacle when his lawyer painted me as deceitful, a woman who'd intentionally wasted years of her husband's life.

"My client was clear about wanting children, but she knowingly hid her condition

from him, costing him precious years.”

The judge had believed his slick lawyer, and Corey smirked as the gavel fell. Then he'd walked out of the courtroom with his new girlfriend. Leaving me behind like trash. Trash I'd suspected no one else would ever want.

Until today.

For a few glorious moments in that jail cell, I'd felt treasured. Wanted. Needed in a way I never had before.

But then the Mountie came in and popped my balloon of delusion. You've ruined my life. His words gutted me, leaving me raw and hollow.

Now, I was here, running blindly through the forest, my chest heaving, my vision blurred by tears.

Shattered. And raw.

What was wrong with me? Why had I let that random biker take me like that? Why was I so desperate and out of control?

Finally, I reached the meadow. Thank goodness, my red coat was right there, lying in a pile with my scrubs, sports bra, and underwear. Torn clothes. But not exactly.

I frowned, crouching over the pile. I'd thought that weird bear had shredded them off me with his claws or teeth, but the remnants weren't jagged or bloodied. They were torn apart at the seams—like someone had pulled an angry Bruce Banner and Incredible Hulk out of them.

A sharp snap behind me cut off my thoughts, and my entire body froze. Slowly, I

turned my head. Then my heart dropped.

A black bear loomed near the forest's tree line, its eyes locked on to mine.

The bear from last night. I didn't know how I knew that, but the bite on my arm tingled strangely with a pulsing sensation I could only describe as knowledge. Letting me know...

It was him.

He'd come back to the meadow to finish the job.

Oh, God.

I bolted.

Darting to the left, I sprinted toward the trees, but the bear was faster. It moved with terrifying precision, cutting me off and forcing me to stumble backward. My heel caught on a root, and I hit the ground hard, the impact jarring my entire body.

I tried to scramble to my feet, but the bear stepped closer, roaring in my face and blocking my forward escape with its massive frame.

"No," I whispered, my voice trembling as I scooted backward on my hands. "Please, no."

But the bear didn't advance.

Instead, it stopped. Its red gaze held mine, steady and almost... human. Familiar, somehow.

Then the bear began to tremble, its entire body quaking as if it were coming apart. A shiver ran down my spine as the air around it shimmered, twisting like heat waves over asphalt.

And then, the bear wasn't a bear anymore.

It was him .

The animatronic Mountie stood where the beast had been, his dark hair disheveled, his chest heaving as though he'd just run a marathon.

Naked.

Muscles rippled beneath his gleaming skin, his broad shoulders and chiseled chest made him look like some kind of myth come to life—equal parts terrifying and breathtaking.

Mate!

The strange, growling voice sighed inside me, filling up my chest with an unnatural longing.

I didn't understand.

But I didn't have to.

Run! You need to run!

My sense of human preservation kicked in, and I scrambled to my feet to take off again.



“Don’t run, Holly,” his voice called out behind me. Strained and tinged with warning. “Don’t trigger my predator instinct and make me chase you again.”

It wasn’t a request, as it turned out.

Before I could get more than a few steps, his arms closed around me from behind like steel bars, unyielding and immovable. He pinned me against his chest, his hard erection pressing into the lower curve of my back as my feet dangled helplessly above the ground.

“I’m sorry,” he murmured into my ear, his voice rough. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean what I said back there.”

“Bull hockey, you didn’t mean it!” I snapped, twisting inside his hold. I knew the truth. I’d felt his rage. His utter disgust.

“It wasn’t disgust,” he said as if I’d accused him out loud. “It was the opposite of that. I swear. My bear set all this up behind my back, and I just didn’t know how to react.”

His words rang true.

The bite on my arm tingled again, an otherworldly lie detector confirming his sincerity.

But it didn’t matter.

I needed to get out of there. Before I got hurt again.

I struggled, but it was useless. He was too strong, and I was too drained—from all the running, from all the remembering.

“Please don’t fight me,” the Mountie said, his voice low and strained. “I can feel your fear, but I would never hurt you. Never.”

The words made my chest ache, and I shook my head, voice breaking. “But you already did.”

His grip loosened just enough for me to catch my breath, but he didn’t let go. “I didn’t mean it,” he said, his tone raw and halting. “I promise you, I didn’t mean it. I... I was scared. I didn’t know what to do. I didn’t... I didn’t expect this.”

More truth. The bite on my arm tingled, confirming his sincerity. But his words felt like a flimsy patch over a gaping wound. I turned my face away, blinking more tears that I’d never let fall before stepping foot on Bear Mountain.

“Then why did you say it?” I whispered. “Why did you...” My voice faltered, the rest of the question dying on my lips.

He exhaled shakily, his breath warm against my temple. “Because I’m a coward,” he admitted. “Because I was terrified of losing control. Terrified of losing you.”

That caught me off guard. “You don’t even know me,” I said softly, disbelief lacing my words.

“I know enough,” he replied. “I know you’re strong. I know you’re kind. I know that after deciding to go it alone for the rest of my life, The Great Bear Forest delivered you to me. For reasons I still don’t understand.

“I know...” His voice wavered, like he was learning the truth of his own words as he spoke them. “I know that no matter what I said back there, my bear chose you. And because of that, I won’t be able to let you go.”

“But why?” The question slipped out before I could stop it. “Why me? What explanation could there possibly be for someone like you wanting someone like me?”

A pause. Then, he gently set me on my feet and turned me to face him.

I blinked up at him. Instead of the hard-edged, unyielding Mountie I’d faced before, I saw someone with soft, dark eyes. Someone who looked just as confused as I felt.

“Because...” he said softly, reaching up to brush a stray tear from my cheek. “Because you’re mine. And I guess I’m yours now. Whether we wanted this or not, it’s done. My bear bonded you.”

“Bonded me?” I shook my head, trying to make sense of what he was saying.

“I’m not sure how to explain this,” he admitted, glancing to the side. His expression grew pensive, his brow furrowing like he was wrestling with his thoughts.

It was kind of a crazy look, considering he was 100% naked in the snow. Like a light umber-brown marble version of The Thinker had come to life and decided to have an existential crisis in the middle of a frozen meadow.

“I think I’m going to have to show you,” he said finally.

“Show me what?” I asked, still reeling, still trying to wrap my head around all of this—up to and including how neither of us was getting frostbite while having this argument in the snow.

“Your sister,” he said, his jaw setting with new determination. “I believe I need to take you to her. That might be the only way to explain what’s really going on here in Bear Mountain. So how about it, Holly?”

To my utter shock, the animatronic Mountie, who'd been trying to send me away since the moment I arrived in his strange mountain town... held out his hand to me.

“Will you come with me to see your sister?”

12 /

thank your big sister

holly

Message to all the younger siblings of big sisters in the world: If you've ever doubted the lengths your sis would take to find you, consider this your sign to call her and thank her for being one of the most dedicated and crazy loyal people in your village.

Case in point: Me

Less than ten minutes after taking the Mountie's hand, my dogged and harrowing search for my sister ended with me standing in what I could only describe as a high-end cave home—like a designer reboot of The Flintstones.

The walls were a mix of smooth, polished stone and natural rock formations. Huge windows let in loads of sun, casting the entire front room in warm light. And the one-of-a-kind furniture screamed handmade by someone who actually knows what they're doing. There was even a chef's kitchen carved into the back wall, with copper pans hanging from the stove's hood and a gorgeous island made out of logs and slate.

But none of that fascinated me as much as the home's four inhabitants.

One male slept in full bear form in front of what looked less like a bed and more like a fur-lined nest, ringed with smooth stones instead of metal rails like the sad IKEA

bed that barely fit into the Vancouver studio I'd moved into after Corey got our suburban two-bedroom in the divorce.

And in that nest, I finally found my sister. She was sleeping soundly between two men with ink-black hair. One was lean and the same light umber color as the Mountie. But strangely, the other lighter one looked like a bearded, burlier version of the man who'd brought me here. Because he was his brother, Mak.

My sister was married to the officially not animatronic Mounties brother. And a doctor named Ash. And also, Cody, the huge Kodiak bear sleeping at the foot of her bed nest. Until spring.

They were hibernating .

That's what the Mountie had called it when he led me, hand in his, through the Ayaska village—what turned out to be a neighborhood of totem-carved mountainside homes.

Now I stood inside one of those carved-out homes, staring at my sister. Except she wasn't just my sister anymore. She was... a bear shifter.

Living with not one but three mates.

And even though two of those mates were in such a deep sleep that they hadn't stirred since we entered, their bodies told a different story. Despite their hibernation, they clearly still desired her.

My gaze caught on the crescent-shaped bites on Noelle's wrist and shoulders. The marks matched the ones I now carried on my body.

"We should go."

The Mountie's voice startled me. He'd appeared beside me, now dressed in a t-shirt that read Bear Mountain Construction and a pair of sweatpants. The hazelnut warmth of his scent was still there, but it was laced with marshmallows—a cloying sweetness that didn't suit him.

Not his! Make him take it off!

The growling voice inside my head—my bear—rose in protest. Because I was a bear shifter now, too. Just like Noelle and her mates.

The Mountie had been right to bring me here. Seeing my sister like this made everything he'd told me on the walk up click into place. The bites. The bond. The instincts that had started to take over. It all made sense now.

But that didn't mean I didn't still have questions. Like, so many questions.

“Since you grabbed new clothes for yourself, can I grab something else to wear from my sister?”

His jaw clenched. Then: “No.”

He grabbed my hand again, cutting off any further debate.

And that's when I realized: We should go wasn't a suggestion. It was a command.

The Mountie tugged me up the stairs and out of the den with a single-minded efficiency that made arguing seem pointless.

“Were you afraid I'd wake them up?” I asked as he led me back down the hill. “Why couldn't I at least grab something warmer to wear?”

No answer.

“You don’t have to hold my hand anymore,” I said, glancing toward the distance. “I can see the town from here.”

Still, no answer.

Then, instead of heading downhill, he cut left, leading me down a narrow trail lined by more totem-carved caves.

My very human alarm bells went off again. “Where are you taking me?”

Still, silence.

“Koda, stop!” I yanked back, using all my weight to halt his momentum.

He stopped. Slowly, he turned to face me, his expression annoyed. But he didn’t let go of my hand. Or answer my questions.

“Koda... That’s your name, right? What that...” I scrambled for a signifier less harsh than guy whose dick you watched me climax on. Three times. And remembered, “Hawk. That’s what Hawk called you.”

Again, no answer. He just stood there, as if waiting for an unruly child to get over her temper tantrum. But I wasn’t a child. Or asking anything I didn’t deserve to know.

“Seriously, what’s going on here?” I demanded, standing my ground. “Why won’t you let me grab more clothes before I leave? Or have my hand back? Or?—”

“Because I can’t,” he bit out, cutting me off before I could finish my growing list of or -fronted questions. “My bear won’t let me. My bear won’t let me do anything right



now but put you in a nest where you belong.”

“Where I belong?” I repeated. And then, like a lightbulb flickering on, realization dawned. “Oh my gosh. Do you think we’re mated—like Noelle and her three partners?”

“My bear does,” he answered from between clenched teeth. “My bear wants me to throw you over my shoulder and carry you to the den nest he made for you. My bear needs you somewhere warm and safe so I can claim you and fill your belly with a cub. Right now, I’m...”

Another grinding clench of his jaw. His hand tightened around mine. “I’m barely holding him back.”

“You’re barely holding him—” My voice gave out, too many questions piling up at once. But one outshone the rest, sharp and dangerous, like a glass shard still lodged in my heart.

“Your bear wants to put a baby in me?” My voice cracked. “That’s why you’re dragging me to another den?”

He didn’t respond right away. The silence stretched, heavy and taut, before he gave one terse nod.

“No.”

“No?” Now it was his turn to repeat, his brow furrowing. “After what happened with your ex-husband, do you no longer want to be a mother?”

“No, I want that,” I answered reflexively, the words spilling out before I could stop them. “I want that more than anything. I was even trying to figure out how to make

IVF work on my own. But I can't..." I shook my head, the glass shard twisting deeper into my chest. "I can't get pregnant—not without medical intervention."

This was the bombshell. The big reveal. But Koda just looked down his long nose at me, and said, "That's not what your bear is telling my bear."

Mate! Mate! Mate! The voice inside me chanted, relentless.

"I doubt my less-than-day-old bear has a good grasp of human anatomy," I snapped at his terse dismissal. "Or understands how a complicated fertility cycle works—aaahhh!"

The sharp retort cut off as a cramp suddenly doubled me over.

Except, it wasn't pain.

I recognized it now for what it was. A pulsing ache. Pure, unfiltered need. Trying to bring me to my knees.

"Holly. Holly, look at me," Koda said urgently, his large hands steadying me as I doubled over. His voice was low, strained, but somehow grounding. "I can feel it. I can feel everything you're going through."

"You're in estrus," he explained, his tone walking the thin line between patience and urgency. "Even if you're right about your chances of a viable pregnancy without medical help, neither your bear nor mine will let you go home until your cycle is done."

My nurse brain scrambled to keep up, tangling what I knew of human biology with the crash course in shifter reality I'd been force-fed. "So this is, like, the most obnoxious form of ovulation ever?"

“Exactly.” His face softened, though the strain lingered around his eyes. “Both our bears want you in a nest, taking my seed, no matter the outcome.”

“How long?” I gasped out, clutching his shoulders as another wave of estrus thundered through me. “How long does this last? A day? Two, tops?”

“Sometimes,” he admitted with a grimace. “But sometimes it takes up to a week.”

“Oh, God.” My stomach dropped, panic bubbling up as my body betrayed me again. The slick heat of arousal dripped down my thighs, utterly unbidden.

MARK HIM! The voice inside me roared, louder and more insistent.

I once again felt that weird smearing urge rise inside of me, clawing its way to the surface. Oh no! Oh no! No! No!

I desperately dug my nails into Koda’s shoulders, holding on to him like an anchor against the slather-your-pussy-juice-all-over-his-face storm raging inside me. I couldn’t let it take over again. Not now. Not like this.

“Holly, let me help you.” Koda's grip on my arms tightened, firm but not harsh, as if he understood the urge I was fighting not to fingerprint my essence onto his sharp, way too handsome face. “I know you’re not ready for this. I’m not either. But we don’t have a choice. Our bears won’t let us stop until this cycle runs its course.”

He actually wanted me to do this. To try. To see if together we could create something I’d stopped believing in.

The question rose in my mind, like that red heart-shaped balloon I thought he’d popped: What if?

What if everything I thought was impossible wasn't anymore? What if this could work? Could I trust it? Could I trust him ?

My breath hitched as I stared into his dark, steady eyes.

What if?

The shard of hope in my chest pierced through the panic, daring me to imagine a different ending for myself. One where I wasn't broken. Where I wasn't alone.

I didn't have an answer. Not yet. But it was the possibility—the tiniest sliver of hope—that led me to my final response.

Clutching that fragile hope, I whispered, “Okay.”

13 /

ready or not

holly

Koda wasn't ready for me. And I most definitely wasn't ready for him.

But I said, "Okay," anyway.

"Okay?" He cupped my face, his dark eyes somber as he asked, "Are you sure?"

"No." The need coursing through me like a runaway train made my words come out shaky and desperate. Practically a sob. "But okay, anyway—at least until this weird bear estrus lets me think straight again."

His gaze searched mine. For what felt like an eternity. Then he finally said, "Okay," too.

Keeping our eyes locked, he lifted me into his arms like something out of a cheesy romance film. If romance films ever featured Mountie bear shifters with raging hard-ons. Agreeing to service you because you were both caught up in some weird ovulation thrall.

Okay, actually, nothing like a cheesy romance film.

Nonetheless, my heart couldn't help but thrill at the obvious rush he was in as he

ferried me up the narrow totem-den-lined road into...

Whoa. My eyes widened when he carried me across the threshold of a cave home that I could only describe as the exact opposite of my sister's cozy Flintstone's setup.

A bright red carpet anchored a space that seemed to be designed to answer one specific question: How many death traps can I fit into one den?

To one side, a near-Olympic-sized swimming pool loomed ominously, with no guardrails, no warning signs like the ones lining the village roads—hell, not even a raised lip to stop a toddler from wandering in.

The staircase he carried me down descended in a steep drop from the front door. It was a floating, sharp-edged work of art with no banisters on either side. None. Just a gleaming K-Horror-level dare, lying in wait for some unfortunate side character to misstep and plummet to the stone floor below.

If that wasn't enough, a floating spiral staircase in the middle of the front room led to a second floor with a balcony-free ledge jutting out above. Basically, a visual advertisement for accidental childhood deaths: Want to make sure your toddler snaps their neck if they fall? Have we got the death cliff for you!

Also, every single piece of furniture was white.

This place was the opposite of baby-proofed. The only thing missing was a neon sign declaring: No children wanted here.

This was where Koda lived?

It confirmed what I'd already suspected: even if he managed to get me pregnant, I'd be raising the baby alone. Back in Vancouver.

Which was fine. Exactly what I'd been planning prior to my arrival—minus the bear shifter part.

I shoved down the weird ache of disappointment in my chest. I didn't need him. I'd be fine.

Just fine.

"I don't really live here. You can have the den after your estrus is done," Koda said suddenly, cutting into my thoughts, which must have been written all over my face. "I'll fix this. All of this."

With that promise, he stepped down from the final floating stair, his expression resolute. "But first, we need to deal with your estrus. Here..."

He set me down in a pile of pillows and blankets I hadn't even noticed while I was cataloging the hazards of his hedonistic bachelor pad.

I wasn't sure what to make of being placed onto a large pallet as opposed to a normal bed.

But my bear's response was ecstatic.

Nest! she cried out, seeming to forget all about the rest of the space's death-trap décor.

So that's what this was.

The makeshift bed wasn't nearly as formal as the one I'd found Noelle and her mates in, but it didn't appear to matter.

Nest! My bear thrilled inside me, and though the estrus cramps didn't entirely disappear, they ebbed, softening into a suggestive ache instead of a relentless biological imperative.

Warmth spread through me, as comforting as the softest blanket.

Here. My bear let out a happy sigh. Here is where we belong.

"I'm glad your bear approves."

I looked up to find Koda watching me from just outside the nest's border. As if he knew exactly what my bear was thinking.

"May I join you?" His tone was stiff and formal, but his eyes gleamed with a dark heat.

My thighs pressed together at the thought of him inside the nest—inside of me . But there was one problem.

"Could you...?" I wrinkled my nose.

I wanted him. With a pride-killing desperation. But I couldn't stand the cloying marshmallow scent that clung to him, laced into what should have only been the rich warmth of hazelnuts.

"Could you take off your clothes first?"

Surprise flickered across his face, but it quickly softened. "You want me and only me," he said, understanding my request without explanation.

He stepped back from the nest's border. "Give me a minute," he murmured,



disappearing behind one of the alcoved walls of his perilous home.

Moments later, the marshmallow smell was replaced by the sound of running water, followed by the quiet hum of a dryer.

Then Koda returned, wearing nothing but the carved planes of his marble-statue body.

My breath hitched. How had his bear possibly chosen me ?

Yet the hunger in his gaze left no doubt.

“Now?” he asked, his voice rough with restraint. “May I join you?”

I nodded wordlessly, the tension in the air crackling between us. His desire—well, at least his bear’s—was palpable as he settled onto the blankets beside me.

His dark eyes roamed over me, lingering. I wondered if he’d ask me to take off the shirt and flannel I’d borrowed from the Viking. I didn’t want to for reasons I couldn’t quite name, but I’d do it if it meant moving this possible baby-making show along.

Instead, he said, “Please present in the standard position for a claim.”

Another request that turned out to be a command. Before I could ask what he meant, he flipped me onto my stomach and pulled my hips back, positioning me on my hands and knees.

Presenting.

His meaning became crystal clear as I dripped estrus, waiting for what came next.

“You’re drenched,” he observed, his tone devoid of inflection.

The mushroom tip of his cock pressed into, but didn’t quite penetrate, the entrance of my core. “Are you sure? Sure you want this?”

Technically, he was verifying my enthusiastic consent. But it felt like teasing—a cruel reminder of how very clearly I did want him. Wanted this .

“Yes!” I whined, too far gone to care about pride.

Did I say my estrus had ebbed? It reignited back with a vengeance, a wave of desperate heat flooding me as I shamelessly rocked my hips, trying to draw him inside.

“Yes, please, please give it to me,” I begged.

Panic clawed my chest, primal and irrational. My body trembled, and my heart hammered like I might actually die if this bear shifter didn’t take me right now.

“Please!” I cried again when he didn’t move.

Unfortunately, Koda didn’t seem to share my sense of urgency.

He trailed a hand down my shoulder blade before reaching underneath me to cup my breast over the Viking’s borrowed flannel. Like he was considering the ripeness and weight of a covered melon.

Regret joined the panic. Why had I kept the shirt on? I arched my back with a whine, desperate for the feel of his skin on mine. But he only said, “Patience, Holly.”

But his hand trailed lower, sliding beneath the shirt’s hem to grip the crease where

my leg met my stomach. Giving me the skin-to-skin contact I'd been aching for. My body quaked at the rough warmth of his palm.

"You're sure you're ready, Holly?" he asked, nonetheless. "You wouldn't lie to me about that... Like you lied about going home."

"I didn't lie," I snapped, disliking him immensely even as I squirmed beneath him, desperate for more. "I just didn't do what you commanded. Is that why you're torturing me instead of helping me, like you said you would?"

"This isn't helping?" he asked, faux innocence seeping into his monotone. "Only one thing will do for the female who turned my life upside down?"

He rocked his hips against me, the thick heat of his hard length sliding along my folds but not inside them.

"Now?" I groaned, frustration spilling over into a growl. "Now is when you decide to show me you've got a sense of humor?"

"Where's the joke?"

He moved his hand away to line himself up—but instead of entering me, he pressed the tip of his cock against my clit, sending an electric jolt of pleasure through me. But it wasn't enough. And he knew it.

"Jerk!" I hissed, not holding back the venom in my tone. "Cruel, mean, jerkity jerk."

He didn't respond, but I felt the bite mark on my arm pulse. Somehow, I could sense the laughter he wasn't letting out, silent and maddening behind me.

He was pissing me off.

So, I turned my head and nipped his arm—not hard, just enough to send a message.

Hurry. The. Hell. Up.

But instead of moving faster, he froze behind me, going completely still. It was so sudden, I worried I'd done something wrong.

“Koda?”

No answer. No movement.

Had I gone too far? Maybe the bite had been too much, a boundary line unintentionally crossed.

“Koda, I didn't mean to?—”

Before I could apologize, he thrust into me, driving deep with one powerful motion that took my breath away.

Holy stuffing—in more ways than one.

His cock... his cock was even larger than Hawk's. The sheer size of him was a total invasion, stretching my wet pussy to a razor-thin point between pleasure and pain.

I collapsed onto my forearms under his sudden thrust, and he followed me down, his broad chest blanketing my back.

“Is this what you wanted, Holly?” he growled, his stubbled cheek pressing against mine as he pushed deeper into the space straining to accommodate him.

Was it?

I didn't know! My hands bunched in the blanket, and my feet flutter-kicked uselessly on either side of his thighs. But even as my mind spun, my body betrayed me, instinctively pushing back, wanting more.

"Impatient Holly," he murmured, his voice rough with accusation.

One of his hands slipped beneath the Viking's waffle shirt, cupping my aching breast. He seized the pebbled bud he found there and squeezed it with a cruel, hard twist. I cried out with... what? Pain? Pleasure? The line was so blurred now, I couldn't tell anymore.

"Never can just do as you're told," he growled in my ear, punishing my nipple with another twist. "First you run. And now you're making me teach you what happens to naughty little vixens who dare to bite a bear."

With that declaration, he began to move, his hips slamming into mine with a relentless, punishing rhythm. My bear cried out inside me, ecstatic, even as my knees buckled under the onslaught.

Had I thought him robotic before? Dispassionate? No.

This wasn't a machine. This was wild . Overwhelming.

We sank fully to the floor, his large hand still clutching my breast as he took me, withdrawing, then filling me again with each demanding thrust.

"This is your fault," he growled, his voice rough and accusing. "I tried—tried to be kind. Tried to take it slow. But you didn't let me. So now you get the animal. This is your fault. All your fault. "

His words were fire, scorching me even as they drove me higher. Then he captured

my mouth in a fierce, all-consuming kiss, his tongue plunging deep before I could even think to defend myself against his accusation.

Having him inside both my body and my mouth—the sensations were unbelievable. I moaned into his kiss as sparks of electric pleasure coursed through me, and the air filled with the intoxicating scent of chocolate and hazelnuts.

I'd been blamed for so many things in my life.

Births that hadn't gone as planned. The demise of my marriage. Ruining a certain Mountie's life.

But this...

This was the first time I was happy to be blamed. Happy to be punished.

Despite my submissive position beneath this out-of-control Mountie, something powerful swelled within me, rising alongside the orgasm that was about to crash over me.

"Oh, oh, I'm coming!" I gasped, pulling away from his kiss as the pleasure overtook me. This time, I didn't fight it. I let it sweep me away, reveling in the male claiming me with such ferocity.

"Ahhh! You're gripping me so tight—Vixen! You're killing me! Stop... no!"

Koda's words tumbled out in a harsh spray of accusations, commands, and then—suddenly—something raw and broken.

"I can't... I can't hold on—ahhh!!!"

Hot cum flooded into me, filling me completely and finally satisfying the bear that had driven me to this point.

This .

This was what my bear wanted. It rolled inside me, happy and sated.

Until Koda abruptly pulled out and rose to his feet.

I barely had time to turn my collapsed body over before he was on the other side of the nest, disappearing behind the alcove wall.

“Where are you going?” I demanded when he returned, fully clothed. He no longer smelled of marshmallows, but still...

“There are rules, Holly.”

Holly. No more Vixen. The stony Mountie was back, along with my government name.

“Protocols must be followed for both forming a maul and attending to an estrus cycle on Bear Mountain. We’ve already broken three tribal rules—not to mention the fuzzy human ethics of this situation.”

“Boo, ethics,” I mumbled with a wide yawn. Sleep tugged at me like an anchor, heavier than anything I’d felt before. Not even the time I attended a triplet mom through a vaginal home birth had left me this drained.

Still, I managed to say, “Come back. If you’re right about this estrus stuff, my bear’s going to want to do that again.”

“She knows you need to rest,” he assured me, his tone softer. “She’ll let you sleep first... before attending to the last member of our maul.”

“Maul?” I mumbled, groggy, the word barely registering.

“Sleep, Holly,” he insisted, irritation creeping back into his voice. “I’ll rein in this chaos, then explain everything when I return with...”

His words faded as sleep pulled me under.

Then, I woke to the smell of bacon.

And eggs. And something sweet and starchy—pancakes? The aroma filled the air, like the Sunday breakfasts my mom used to make for Noelle and me after my stepdad had been an insufferable asshole all week. Along with the rich smell of maple.

A smile tugged at my lips as my eyes fluttered open.

Only to find myself face-to-face with a massive, bright yellow grizzly bear.

He blinked at me.

I blinked at him.

And then, like any formerly all-human woman who suddenly found herself in the middle of a cheesy Christmas/horror/paranormal-shifter movie, I screamed.



## Page 14

*Source Creation Date: August 5, 2025, 4:16 am*

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i'm so sorry

hawk

I 'd just finished plating the first meal I'd cooked in ten years that hadn't been scooped onto a metal tray when a scream tore through the air.

In the next moment, terror, regret, and apology hit me like a flash storm, flooding my two bonds like the emotions were my own.

I growled, already putting the pieces together before I rounded the half wall separating the den's tiny galley kitchen from the front room, a breakfast plate in each hand. Still, seeing Leif's pale-yellow grizzly hovering over our mate set my teeth on edge.

When we'd found her sleeping like an angel in her nest, I'd warned him: no crossing the threshold without an invitation. Technically, he hadn't. His paws stayed outside the blanket pile's border, but his long neck was stretched so far into her space, his nose might as well have been brushing hers.

And that angel of ours was now wide awake and screaming, "Get back! Don't bite me!" while scrambling to her knees.

"That train's already left the station, baby," I called, glaring at the grizzly. "Blondie, I told you not to crowd her!"

Leif rose to his full height on hind legs, his big yellow head swiveling to glare back at me.

“You said you’d stop calling me Blondie after we exchanged maul bites!” he rumbled through our bond.

Already doubting that decision, I blasted my annoyance down the link. “Shift back already, Leif .”

In the next instant, his hulking bear form was replaced by a sheepish and naked guy with messy blond hair and his hands raised in surrender. Our mate blinked at him—then immediately reached for a blanket to cover herself up.

Too bad. I’d been enjoying the view. That thick and luscious body and those long braids tumbling over bountiful breasts. I got hard again just thinking about fisting a hand in her hair while I took her again and again and...

“I’m sorry,” Leif said, cutting through my carnal thoughts as he turned back to her. “I wasn’t trying to scare you. I didn’t mean to wake you up. I just came over to check on you, and then suddenly, I shifted. And you screamed...”

“He’s still new,” I interjected, setting the plates down at the nest’s border.

Leif glared at me, offense radiating off his maul bite. “I’m three years old!”

“You’re three years old?” she repeated, her forehead crinkling in confusion as she pulled the blanket up higher.

“No! I mean, I was turned three years ago,” Leif rushed to explain. Then, as if realizing he’d made it worse, added, “Not like you, though. The bear that turned me was trying to kill me, not mate me...”

Leif trailed off, his face reddening. “The point is, I’m not new—or a toddler. I’m twenty-nine. Definitely old enough to be your mate.”

Our mate just stared at him, her expression unreadable.

“So, basically brand fucking new,” I said, picking up where he left off.

“Protective instinct kicked in when he saw you, and swoop—next thing you know, you’re waking up to a grizzly.”

“I’m really sorry,” Leif repeated.

“It’s...” She glanced warily between the two of us. “It’s okay, I guess. I was just confused.”

“I bet. That must have been so scary for you after everything that’s happened,” Leif said, his voice thick with earnest concern.

Alright, crisis averted. I left Leif to over-empathize with our mate while I headed back to the kitchen to grab the plate stacked with the four extra waffles he’d requested, along with enough forks and knives for all of us to dig in to the breakfast I’d made.

By the time I returned, our mate was sitting near the edge of her nest, the blanket wrapped around her like a sheath dress. Just outside the border, two pillows lay neatly in place. Leif was already seated cross-legged on one. I set the stack of waffles in front of him, tossed the other pillow back into her nest, and crouched down beside them to eat.

“Bon appétit,” I said as we tucked into the breakfast I’d thrown together from the stash I found in the fridge at Koda and Leif’s quarters after showering and changing:

vanilla cream waffles, jam compote, and herbed scrambled eggs.

Not gonna lie, I was pretty damn proud of myself when I felt the explosion of flavor ripple through both Leif's and our mate's bond marks when they took their first bites.

"Wow!" Leif exclaimed, his tone laced with shock. "This tastes as amazing as it smelled!"

I caught the disbelief radiating through the bond. He hadn't believed me when I said I was a good cook. But his surprise didn't last long before he went right back to making dopey heart eyes at our mate.

"It didn't smell nearly as good as you do, though," he added, his voice warm and earnest.

Our mate's embarrassment flared, rolling through the bond as if it were my own.

"Sorry, I didn't mean to embarrass you," Leif said, ducking his head sheepishly.

"No, it's just..." She hesitated, her expression softening. "I like the way you smell, too—not quite like maple syrup, but more like some kind of maple candy?"

"Maple fudge," I supplied, figuring her American accent meant she wasn't familiar with the Canadian staple.

"Yes! Maple fudge!" she said with a shy smile. "I actually really like it."

"You do?" Leif asked, his insecurity melting into a big, dopey grin.

I chimed in. "Of course you like how he smells. You like how I smell, too, don't you, baby? Cuz we're a scent match."

Her brows furrowed. “A scent match?”

The confusion in her expression made me frown. “Wait—are you telling me Koda spent all morning with you and didn’t break all this shit down?”

“I mean, I know I’m a bear now, and my sister is, too. She has, um... three mates. And I’m in estrus—which is this embarrassing condition Koda’s been helping me with.”

“That’s what he called it?” I arched an eyebrow, thinking about Elizabeth Bennet, Emma Woodhouse, Anne Elliot, and every other Austen character that spent nearly their entire stories in denial. “Helping you? With a condition?”

“What would you call it?” she asked, wary.

Before I could stop myself, the answer rumbled out on a low growl. “Claiming you. Breeding you. Filling your belly with our cubs.”

Her voice cracked as she repeated, “Our cubs?”

Leif and I exchanged a look, realization hitting us both at once.

I stayed silent, too pissed to speak, but Leif stepped in. “Wait, he didn’t explain the maul dynamic to you like Hawk explained it to me?”

She tilted her head. “He showed me that my sister had three mates—a maul . But I didn’t realize that...”

Her words trailed off, but the bond filled in the gaps. Still, I waited for her to keep going. My wicked bear likes the feel of her entire face flushing hot while she struggled to have this conversation with us.

“I didn’t realize that it had anything to do with... me,” she finally finished. “Or us. Or scent.”

“So you don’t like the way we smell?” I asked, already knowing the answer. “When your next wave of estrus hits, you don’t want us in that nest with you?”

She didn’t respond immediately. Instead, she took several small bites of her waffle, clearly stalling for time. I could feel the war raging in her head—everything she’d been taught about “responsible” women battling with the fresh wounds of her divorce.

I stayed quiet, letting her work it out.

Unfortunately, my third maul had the personality of a too-eager golden retriever.

“Hey, just so you know, we’re not like your ex,” Leif blurted out. “We just want to be with you—even if the cub thing doesn’t work out.”

Her fork froze mid-air. She stared at us, her expression blank with shock. Questions crashed over the bond like a multi-car pile-up.

Leif set down his fork to address the Mack truck one first. “Takoda didn’t tell you about us being able to read your mind through our bond bites, either? What were you two doing that entire time?”

“I think I can guess,” I said with a wry twist of my mouth, setting down my own fork. “Alright, baby, let’s try to get all your questions out of the way before the next estrus hits.”

“So, let me get this straight...”

Our mate's name turned out to be Holly. Not that it mattered. To paraphrase the greatest poet of our time, Mariah Carey, she would always be my baby .

Either way, I liked the new understanding she radiated over her maul bite as she recapped what we'd explained. "Not only did Koda bite me, but he bit both of you, too. Then you two bit me, which means all three of you can read my mind, and Koda can read your minds, but I don't have access to your thoughts at all."

"Yeah, that's true," Leif answered, guilt rippling down his bond.

I just tugged down the neck of my t-shirt, baring the spot between my throat and collarbone where female bears usually make their claim. "If you want to bite us, so you can hear what we're thinking, here's my neck."

Ursa, I'd spent so many nights in jail dreaming of this—a maul, a mate, a connection. Just imagining Holly claiming me like that turned my dick to steel.

But she threw up shields, her thoughts carefully blanking out as she said, "You don't have to do that. I'm new to all this bear stuff, but I'm aware we're in some kind of mental thrall because of this... extreme ovulation I'm going through."

Leif frowned. "Extreme ovulation?"

"That's what she's calling estrus," I explained to him with full authority, even though she was doing a surprisingly good job of blocking us out.

Holly cleared her throat. "Point being, I'm sure you only bit me because of that, so I think we can all agree not to make decisions like reciprocal bond bites until whatever... this... is passes."

"We could agree," I said. "But Leif and I don't. We're bears, baby. We see what we

want, and we bite it. No questions asked. So, what's it gonna be?" I tilted my head toward her nest.

"You gonna invite us in so your third can finally make his claim, or are you gonna force him to wait until your bear does it for you?"

"Don't push her," Leif said, leaping to her defense like a big, yellow guard dog. "She's been through enough."

"She sure has," I agreed. "And I'd like to start making up for that shitastic ex of hers. But hey..." I raised my hands in mock surrender. "No pressure. You're calling the shots here—at least until your bear takes over. That's why we're asking now, before you go back into thrall, as you called it. So, what will it be?"

I could feel Leif's need to claim her thrumming inside him. We both felt her bear staring at him from inside her. But for all his puppy-dog eagerness, Leif waited patiently for her answer.

"I don't like this," she whispered, her voice barely audible. "Even if I say no, my bear's going to make me say yes, isn't she?"

I tilted my head. "Free will is a bedtime story humans tell themselves, like children trying to ignore the monsters they know live under their beds."

She blinked...then smiled, pleasant surprise lighting up her pretty face, "Clara Quinn. She's one of my favorite writers."

"Mine, too." I grinned, then sobered to bring her my point. "The choice isn't really ours. But if you let us in, I promise you this, baby, you won't regret it."

Beside me. Leif swallowed in full agreement, his heart hammering over our maul



bite. “So...?” he asked, voice cracking. “Will you let us in?”

15 /

good boy

leif

Holly shifted, her gaze flicking between me and Hawk. Inside, I was practically panting, desperate for her to choose me before her bear did.

She was quiet for so long, I started to lose hope. But then her eyes locked on mine, and she said, “Okay, you can both come into my nest.”

The words barely left her lips before the air around us perfumed with chocolate and caramel, despite the blanket she’d clutched around herself. Her estrus came through as if the bear inside of her had been waiting for her human to decide.

My chest tightened at her invitation. She’d chosen me! She wanted me! But just as quickly, the high gave way to a crashing wave of doubt.

Wait...what do I do now? Could I handle this? Could I handle her ?

Old fears from my all-human past crept in like mountain fog, chilling the heat that had flared inside me. My anticipation flagged, along with another part of me I’d need to... claim her.

“You’re overthinking it, puppy.” Hawk’s voice shoved its way into my mind, sharp and commanding, before he growled aloud, “Lie down, Leif. Now. On your back.”

I scrambled into position, grateful for the direction even if I was kind of embarrassed by how easily he'd read me.

Hawk pulled Holly into his arms, turning her toward me as he peeled away the blanket shielding her lush curves.

"Slight change of plans, baby," Hawk murmured low in her ear, his voice full of gravel. He knew I could hear him—both through my bear ears and over our bond bites—and he didn't care.

He cupped her big breasts, massaging them in a way that made her groan and arch against his chest as he told her, "He's afraid he can't handle you. And let's be honest—he's probably right."

The words hit me like bullets, sharp and merciless, and a groan escaped me, humiliation burning my chest. But for some reason, a new heat lit up my body, and my dick swelled in an instant, the tip wet with something I'd only ever heard about—pre-cum.

"You'll have to take the lead with him," Hawk told Holly, his smile curling darkly as his eyes locked on mine. "Claim him since he can't claim you."

Holly's shields stayed firmly in place, sparing me from whatever she might be thinking. But Hawk didn't spare me. In fact, he hit at me even harder, punching every derisive, judgmental thought he was having about me into my maul bite.

"Climb on top of him," Hawk told her. His voice dropped, smooth but relentless. "Take what's yours."

She hesitated, her gaze darting over her shoulder to Hawk, then back to me.

I couldn't breathe. Humiliation washed over me in hot, suffocating waves, and for reasons I couldn't comprehend, I leaked more pre-cum.

"It's alright, baby," Hawk assured her, crooning in her ear with an authority that made my stomach twist. "He likes it mean. I promise you. Go."

Holly tentatively moved to get in position but then hesitated, her thick thighs quivering as she hovered over me, dripping estrus onto my straining erection.

I'd never been so hard in my life. Instinct took over, and I reached up to grip her hips, desperate to guide her down, to feel her?—

"Don't, puppy." Hawk's command cracked through the room like a whip. "You don't get to touch her. Your job is to fucking lie there while she takes what she wants."

My cock throbbed violently at his censure, my breaths coming short and uneven. But I obeyed. I dropped my hands, bunching them in the blankets beneath me, my entire body trembling as I waited for her to make her move.

"Go ahead, Holly," Hawk murmured, his voice soft but commanding. "Take what's yours."

She hesitated, her eyes searching mine. Her shields were still up, but whatever she found in my gaze, it was enough. In the next moment, her trembling fingers reached between us, guiding me to her entrance.

The instant her wet heat slid over me, I nearly lost it.

"Oh, fuck ..." I groaned, my hips jerking up involuntarily as I gripped the blankets beneath us, fighting for control. "Holly, you feel so?—"

“Don’t you dare come before she does,” Hawk interrupted, his voice sharp and unyielding. “Hold it. Be a good boy until our mate’s finished with you.”

The command sent a shock of sick pleasure through me. I didn’t understand why, but something about the restraint, the demand to wait, only fueled the fire raging in my veins.

A tidal wave of need was crashing through me, but I made myself hold back, even as I begged, “Please, Holly. I don’t know how long I can?—”

“Ssh, Leif.” Her hand brushed over my chest, gentle and soothing. “You can do it.”

Her words were a balm, and to my relief, she began moving. Slowly at first, testing, then with growing confidence as she placed her hands on my chest and found her rhythm. Each roll of her hips sent electric pleasure crashing through me. I bit my lip, desperate to hold on.

“You’re doing so good, baby,” Hawk said to Holly, his voice laced with approval. “See how he’s trembling? How bad he wants you? But you know what, fuck what he wants. Take your time. Don’t let him come until you’ve had your fill.”

Her confidence bloomed with his words. Her movements grew bolder, more purposeful. She leaned forward, her braids brushing my chest as her lips hovered near my ear.

“You like this, don’t you?” she whispered.

“Yes,” I gasped. “God, yes.”

Hawk chuckled, cruel and knowing. “Up until you walked into that bar, he thought he was broken. Didn’t like girls. Didn’t like boys. Suspected he’d never want anyone.

Isn't that right, Leif?"

I didn't realize he'd basically read my sexual history until he said that. My dick jumped with a heat I couldn't name, even as a molten, nasty shame burned up my chest.

"Hawk..." I rasped, but the truth had already spilled out.

"He thought he was like that guy Aled from Alice Oseman's Radio Silence," Hawk continued mercilessly. "An ace. And there's nothing wrong with that. But he figured out that wasn't the case for him the moment he saw you. He knew. He was waiting for this. For you."

Holly stilled, her gaze locking onto mine. "Is that true?"

My throat tightened, and tears welled in my eyes. "Yes," I finally croaked, barely able to choke out the words. "It's...it's true."

"Keep going," Hawk urged her before she could respond. "He's trying to be a good boy, but I don't think he can hold on much longer now that we've unlocked his domination and humiliation kink."

The words...the truths I didn't know until this very moment hit like a hammer, shame and arousal tangling in a way that made my head spin.

"Holly...Hawk...don't...please...oh fuck...oh fuck..."

I didn't know...didn't know what I was saying. Couldn't be coherent. Couldn't form full thoughts.

All I could do was fist the blankets and try...try to hold back as Holly's movements

grew more frantic.

Her shields suddenly dropped, and I could feel the rising bloom of her incoming pleasure like it was my own.

“I’m close,” she gasped, her nails digging into my chest.

So was I. Too close . Hawk was right—this was too much for me. I couldn’t handle it. My cock spasmed, threatening to betray me.

“Let her finish,” Hawk growled, his tone a sharp command. “Be a good boy, Leif.”

Be a good boy . The order pushed me to the edge, my muscles trembling with the sheer effort of restraint. I wanted to...I wanted to be a good boy...but I didn’t know if I could!

Holly cried out, her body spasming around me as her climax hit. The sensation was overwhelming, and I bit back a roar, barely holding on.

“Oh, God, that was so good, Leif,” Holly gasped, her voice shaking as she came down from the high.

“Be a good boy, Leif,” Hawk’s dark warning pushed into my head.

I squeezed my eyes shut. “Holly...Holly...” I pleaded through clenched teeth.

“You gotta give him permission, baby,” Hawk reminded her lazily. Like he was just watching a game of badminton or something.

“Oh, sorry!” Holly said with a lot more urgency in her voice. “Yes, you can come, too. Do it. Come like a good boy for me.”

Her permission shattered my control, and my release tore through me in a powerful wave that left me gasping and shaking beneath her.

“Good boy,” Hawk said, satisfaction curling in his tone.

But I barely had time to recover before he growled out another command.

“Bend your legs, puppy,” he ordered. “I want you to watch.”

I obeyed without question, my body still quaking as Holly shifted above me—not of her own accord, but because Hawk was pulling her into a kneeling position over my spent cock.

Hawk lined himself up behind her and thrust into her with a low growl, his movements rough and demanding. Holly gasped, her elbows braced on either side of my chest as Hawk claimed her.

And just like that, I was hard again.

Her shields were still down, and I felt everything—the tight clamp of her pussy around his larger cock, the electric current of her pleasure spiraling higher with every thrust.

“Watch, Leif,” Hawk commanded, his voice dark and possessive. Then he privately told me over our maul bond. “Watch your mate. This is what she needs. This is what we’re here for. This is your fucking job until one of us puts a cub in her.”

Holly’s breasts pressed into my chest with every thrust. Her cries of pleasure filled the air, her body trembling as Hawk took her.

Meanwhile, above her back, Hawk’s lips curled into a cruel grin as he added, “And



after one of us knocks her up, I'll let her use you like a butt plug while I'm between her legs. Her personal grizzly fuck toy."

I couldn't look away.

Shame and humiliation burned through me as Hawk spelled out our future. And arousal. So much arousal. My cock throbbed dangerously, straining against the urge to come.

"Don't come," Hawk warned me out loud, his voice low and menacing. "Not until she's done. Not until she's ready for you again."

I groaned but clenched my fists in the blankets, forcing myself to hold on.

And as Holly cried out, her body shuddering beneath Hawk's rough, demanding rhythm, I knew one thing for certain:

I'd do anything for her.

Anything .

Which was how I managed not to come like a very bad boy. Even when Holly's lips instinctively found mine, her third orgasm breaking against my mouth as a muffled cry while Hawk released into the wet, gripping heat of her pussy.

His tone had been derisive earlier, but the intense pleasure flooding our maul bite told me everything I needed to know—he more than approved of the new dynamic he'd ruthlessly unearthed from inside me.

"Way to keep things interesting for our new maul, puppy," Hawk said with a wicked grin as he collapsed to the side of us.

But his grin faltered when another wave of emotion swept over the bond. Doubt. Humiliation. This time, it wasn't coming from me.

It was Holly.

She was surfacing from her estrus haze, the realization of what had just happened hitting her hard. Her shame and confusion rolled through us in thick waves, and she tried to pull away, her thoughts spiraling. What's wrong with me? How could I have done that to him ? —

“No, no, you're perfect,” I assured her, wrapping her tight in my arms before she could go down that dark path. “I'm not going to pressure you to bite me back, but if you could feel what I feel, you'd know you did nothing wrong.”

Her face pressed against my chest. “I humiliated you,” she whispered. “And worse, I got off on it.”

“It's okay, baby,” Hawk said, reaching out to rub her back. “It's okay to feel this good.”

“Is it?” she murmured, her words muffled against my skin. “I mean, I get that this is some kind of biological imperative for bear shifters, but I barely know you two. We just met.”

I felt everything come rushing back now that the estrus had let go of her—her uncertainty, her guilt, her lingering wariness.

I scrambled for something, anything, to say to convince her I wasn't just some stranger. “Well, like I said, I'm a made bear—got turned after a hunting accident three years ago. I'm from Vancouver, born and raised. You met my grizzly earlier—uh, sorry about that, by the way. Other than that, this is my first year as a

RCMP. Might be my last if Takoda carries through on pressing charges for that bar fight.”

“He won’t,” Hawk interjected, cutting off my spiraling thoughts. “Mauls supersede laws.”

“I hope so,” I muttered. “I really like this job. It’s so much better than my last one.”

Hawk’s gaze sharpened. “What did you do before that could possibly be worse than patrolling a boring-ass mountain town in hibernation season?”

He had no idea. And unlike with my nearly non-existent sexual past, I kept my mental shields firmly locked around that topic.

Luckily, Holly distracted him with another question. “Wait—so you and Koda are both Mounties. And, Hawk, you’re...”

She turned her face to Hawk, her shields snapping back up as she trailed off.

A beat of tension. Then Hawk’s hand tightened on her hip, his voice steady but resigned as he admitted, “Guess this is where I fess up. Not my first time inside a jail cell. I’m an ex-con.”

A new brand of wariness spilled over our bond as Holly stilled against me. “How long?” she asked, her voice tight, guarded.

Hawk didn’t answer right away.

My bear thrummed, wanting to break up the tension with a joke or something. But I stayed quiet, bracing myself for Hawk’s response.

“Ten years,” he admitted, the weight of those words settling heavy in the space between us. “Should’ve been twenty, but they cut my sentence short for good behavior.”

“What did you do?” she pressed, her voice faltering. Anxiety and dread leaked through her bite.

“Revenge,” Hawk said simply. “Real gruesome shit against a rival wolf gang. That’s what got me locked up. Before that, I was into drugs and guns—Iron Claw shit.”

“Wait.” Her mental shields suddenly snapped back up, and she raised up out of my arms, sitting on the blankets next to me, but a little further away from Hawk. “How did I let myself forget that you’re in that motorcycle gang, too?”

“Not anymore,” Hawk said firmly, sitting up along with her. “I left. That night you met me, I was letting our VP know I wasn’t coming back. Also...”

He looked away, and a spark of embarrassment flared over our maul bond. “I was putting in an application to be a short-order cook at the Bar & Grill.”

“Good idea!” I blurted. “The food was great before Cody went into hibernation, but those Red Twin grizzly brothers of his... They really can’t cook. It’s been a hard winter, depending on them for lunch and dinner.”

Holly and Hawk both turned to me, their expressions united in the same message: Leif. Read the room.

“Sorry,” I muttered, raising my hands. “Just saying, they could use the help.”

Hawk’s attention shifted back to Holly. “Now that I’m out of jail, all I want is to settle down. Find a maul. Here. This is exactly where I want to be. It’s the only thing

that got me through those ten shitty years.”

“And you think this accidental maul is that dream come true?” Holly asked. I didn’t need her shields to be down to read the skepticism in her tone.

But Hawk didn’t flinch. “I know it is.”

“So do I!” I sat up and rubbed my stomach. “I mean, those waffles were incredible. Takoda was a genius for adding you to our maul.”

Her wariness shifted to a frown as her gaze flicked between us. “Wait,” she said slowly, suspicion creeping into her voice. “Where is Koda? He promised he’d be back to explain all of this to me, and he doesn’t seem like the type to break a promise.”

Hawk’s grimaced, and his gaze flicked to me. And I froze, guilt replacing all my enthusiasm about our new maul inside my chest.

“What did you two do?” she demanded, narrowing her eyes.

Before either of us could respond, a voice boomed from the top of the stairs. “HOLLY!”

Then Koda appeared, his chest heaving with rage, his dark eyes locked onto our mate.

16 /

the message

less than an hour earlier

takoda

Black eyes, as it turned out, hurt like a frozen lake smashing against your face in February—no give, no mercy, and sharp as hell.

Up until today, I wouldn't have known that. But a few hours locked in my own station's holding cell had given me plenty of time to learn. The throbbing ache behind my swollen right eye was worse than any headache I'd ever had. But I gritted my teeth, refusing to bear out.

Today's events had proved beyond a shadow of a doubt that I could no longer trust the beast inside of me.

I wasn't sure what was harder to believe: that Hawk and Bjorn had exchanged maul bites while I was chasing Holly. Or that when I returned to let them out—following tribal protocol, mind you—Hawk attacked me, Bjorn, my own subordinate, locked me in this damn cell.

“This is what you get for leaving us trapped in here while you had your way with our mate.”

That was all the warning Hawk had given before hitting me with a vicious left that sent me stumbling back into the cage.

And now, while they were with Holly, attending to her in estrus, I was stuck behind bars with a black eye and an even blacker mood.

Mate... my bear whined. His ache for her throbbed along with my swollen eye.

“I don’t want to hear it,” I snapped out loud, leaning my head against the cool metal bars. “You’re the one who chose a criminal and a Vancouver outsider for a maul I didn’t want. Now look at us...”

“Uh... Constable Takoda?”

Dammit . Someone had heard me. One of the Outsider Red Twins had wandered into the station—this time in human form.

“ Sergeant Takoda,” I corrected. The only good thing that had come out of Bjorn’s appointment to my detachment was the rise in title.

Straightening up, I forced myself into the rigid posture I always maintained on duty, folding my hands behind my back to project as much authority as I could muster—despite wearing jeans and a button-up thermal I’d snagged from my quarters instead of my usual Red Serge uniform.

And being on the wrong side of these bars.

Frigging Hawk ...

“What are you doing in there?” The Red Twin scrunched his forehead, stopping a few feet outside the holding cell.

“What are you doing in my station?” I countered, my tone sharp. “Come to follow up on this morning’s conversation about last night’s bar fight?”

“That must’ve been my brother,” he said, taking a cautious step forward. “I’m on duty at the bar tonight, but I wanted to check in with you about something that happened an hour ago. I was at the Barrington Super Center, picking up groceries, when two Iron Claws came right up to me. One of them shoved my shoulder and said we needed to talk.”

My jaw tightened. Iron Claw sightings at Barrington’s weren’t uncommon—their clubhouse sat just a few miles away, strategically positioned at the base of the mountain in the abandoned mining works. Usually, though, they left my people alone. It was an unspoken rule—especially during hibernation season. The few of us who stayed awake didn’t bother them, and they didn’t bother us while the rest of the town’s bears were at their most vulnerable.

“What did he say?”

The Other Red Twin winced. “He said he wanted me to give Horse a message. That’s you, right?”

The nickname made my bear growl low inside me. I’d worried there might be fallout after killing one of theirs, and now it seemed my suspicions were right.

“Spit it out,” I snapped.

“They said, ‘Tell Horse he doesn’t own the mountain—we do.’” The Other Red Twin’s eyes flared as he relayed the message. “Then he made a sign like this....”

He held up one hand, palm forward, spreading his fingers wide.



Dammit.

It had been a while since any of the Iron Claw had put a red handprint on a Bear Mountain home—basically, marking whoever was inside for deletion. Still, recognized the message for what it was: a direct threat. A promise of violence.

They needed to be dealt with before someone got hurt. Specifically, Holly. Holly.

But my bear reared at just the thought of her name, letting me know there would be no traveling to the bottom of the mountain. Much less doing anything that would delay us going to the bear he'd bonded behind my back.

“Get into the station computer,” I ordered the Other Red Twin. “You need to get me out of here.”

The grizzly hesitated, his brow furrowing. “Uh, I’m not exactly trained on?—”

“Now,” I snapped, glaring at him with my one good eye.

That command got him moving. He scurried over to the desk, and I gritted my teeth as I walked him through accessing the cell’s keypad log.

A few excruciating minutes later, the lock clicked open, and my bear tore out of the cage the second the cell door swung wide. Without so much as a thank you, I charged through the station, past the confused red grizzly, and into the freezing night.

Holly was out there, and nothing—not even the Iron Claws—could keep my bear from her.

No, the beast inside me wasn’t going to let me do anything useful until this estrus business with Holly was done.

I set my jaw. Alright, new plan....

First order of business: take charge of the chaos this unsanctioned maul had undoubtedly descended into without me at the helm.

Second order of business: handle Holly's estrus per protocol—ensure no one loses control again while we each take efficient, orderly turns with her until her cycle concludes.

Then, finally, I could get to the third order of business: take back my head from my bear so that I can deal with those damn Iron Claws.

Last time, I vowed, even as my bear pushed me to run faster. Last time I let this beast run the show.

With that new three-part plan in mind, I calmly opened the door to the den less than a minute later.

Only to be hit by the overwhelming scent of chocolates filled with cognac liquor and maple fudge.

Sex. The entire den reeked of sex and satisfaction.

“Holly!”

Suddenly, instead of walking in to calmly relay the first two points of my three-point plan, I was roaring her name at the top of my lungs and storming down the stairs.

To find her...

To find her...

My brain stuttered, threatening to shut down entirely when I saw Holly naked in the nest, her thighs and sex glistening—not just with estrus. Hawk grinned at me, then gleefully sent a mental replay of what had happened during my absence through his maul bite. I got to see—and feel —the two loads of cum he and Bjorn had shot into her just minutes before I arrived...

My dick hardened with an aching jolt, twitching behind my jeans.

Right before the air perfumed with chocolate and caramel. Another wave of estrus. For me.

The scent hit like Hawk's punch, drowning out every rational thought I'd carried in with me.

My vision tunneled, the rest of the world fading away until she was all I could see.

Mate!

My bear propelled me forward, snarling with need.

Before I could stop myself, she was on her back, and I was ripping down the fly of my jeans, pushing into her with one raw stroke. That I could feel as both me and her. The fullness, the stretch of her pussy, struggling to accommodate my longer and thicker length.

I groaned, and her scent wrapped around me, pulling me under. It was intoxicating, primal, and utterly maddening. Mate!

“Koda, oh, Koda!” She moaned my name, and the air perfumed with the smell of chocolate and hazelnuts as I thrust into her with heavy grunts. A feral animal, completely unhinged. “Oh God, why does this feel so good?”

“How’s all that noble helping with her condition going for ya, Koda?” Hawk asked somewhere in the background of our raw, animalistic sex.

I could feel him laughing at me over the maul bite. Judging me for so easily coming undone.

I wanted to punch him until he had no teeth left to grin with.

But even that violent urge couldn’t make me stop fucking her.

Holly gasped, then moaned when I pulled her even tighter against me, ramming between her soft thighs. The need to claim her—to mark her as mine—was overwhelming, a fire roaring through my veins.

Tell me to stop , my human begged her from somewhere inside my body. Make me regain some measure of control.

But Holly hadn’t bitten me back. She couldn’t hear me like I could hear her, feel her, both taking and giving pleasure.

Instead of heeding my command, she wrapped those chubby thighs even tighter around me, her heels pushing down the jeans I hadn’t even bothered to take off.

Her heat surrounded me like a vice, and her nails scraped down my arms. Mate!

Her bear moaned inside of her, echoing mine as her chocolate-and-caramel scent grew stronger. She was close, her bear was telling me, spurring me on to push in deeper. To hit that spot Hawk had shown her. To fuck her until she?—

Holly suddenly cried out underneath me, her back arching as her climax catapulted her over the cliff we’d been galloping toward.

And the next thing I knew I was following her over the ledge, releasing with a guttural shout, hips jerking as I came and came. Filling up her chocolate and caramel with my hazelnuts.

Mate... Mate.... Mate....

I couldn't even tell whose out-of-control beast was chanting anymore. Hers or mine?

Either way, Holly's bear was already pulling her under. Her lashes fluttered shut, and her plump lips parted with a tired sigh as sleep came to claim her. So fast, I couldn't say for certain it wasn't passing out.

Her bear finally disappeared from my mind, releasing me from its siren grip. The moment her body went lax beneath me, I pulled away, and harsh reality replaced the frantic mating chant in my head.

What had I done?

Cold air rushed in between us, but it wasn't enough to clear the heat or the shame crawling under my skin.

My chest heaved, my heart pounding like I'd run a marathon. This wasn't control. This wasn't the man I'd spent my life becoming.

I'd let my bear take over—again.

I reared to my feet, staring down at the female sleeping so peacefully above the mess I'd made between her soft thighs. The weight of my failure pressed against my chest, a bear threatening to crush me.

“Welcome to the maul, Koda.” Hawk's voice cut through my silence like a knife.

I wasn't looking at him. But I didn't have to. His smirk was audible.

I zipped up my jeans, clenching my teeth so hard I wondered if my jaw wouldn't shatter.

It didn't. Somehow, everything threatening to come apart inside me held as I left the den I never wanted without another word.

The cool night air cleared my nose of her chocolate and caramel scent. But it didn't help. Shame clung to me as I blindly walked, trying to put some distance between me and the female who drove me out of my mind with the wanting of her. But, of course, not too much distance.

My bear stopped me less than a kilometer from the cave. I didn't even make it out of the village.

I couldn't think straight. Couldn't breathe.

I swiveled my head around, searching for something, anything, to anchor me, to distract me. That's when I saw it—the sign for Mak's construction business, weathered but sturdy, standing tall above an industrial pre-build I'd help him erect back when we both thought that would be his only job and I'd eventually be taking over as Tuk'mara.

For once, the sight of it didn't fill me with bitterness. I peered at it through my one good eye, while thinking about that death trap of a den, and a new idea took hold.

A project. That's what I needed. Something physical to keep me busy. Something to keep my bear occupied, to stop the ache clawing at me from the inside out.

I just need to stay busy. Limit my time with her.

If I couldn't outrun my bear, maybe I could outwork it.

17 /

sex, sleep, eat, repeat

holly

S o...

That was how my first full day on Bear Mountain began.

But over the next few days, I fell into a routine: sex, sleep, eat, repeat.

Koda was barely around. And when he was, it felt like I was dealing with the animatronic Mountie version of the guy I'd met that first night at the detachment station. He'd swapped out his formal uniform for a rotation of dark-washed jeans and either a slate-gray or charcoal thermal button-up, but the vibe was the same: stiff, efficient, all business, absolutely no play.

Every morning after breakfast, he'd "service" me in what I could only describe as the most clinical way possible—efficient, no frills, and completely detached. Then he'd disappear to a place he referred to as Mak's workshop for the rest of the day.

In the evenings, he'd return for dinner, and like clockwork, I'd be asked to present on my hands and knees for another round of mechanical sex. With a few minutes of efficient pumping and deft finger work, he'd bring me to climax, grunt out his own terse release, and then head back to Mak's workshop to work on what he called "den projects."



More than once, I wondered if I'd just imagined the heat from those first few sessions. Maybe he was only having sex with me out of some misplaced sense of duty—like a sailor legally obligated by international maritime laws to rescue a stranded enemy ship at sea.

Except... whenever I looked up after breakfast or dinner, I'd catch him staring at me. His gaze molten—and heavy with hunger. Like there really was a ravenous bear beneath the stiff, animatronic exterior. And that look? It never failed to kick off the post-breakfast and dinner waves of my estrus.

But then he'd just robot-sex me, zip up, wash his hands, and walk out without so much as a second glance.

Not that Leif and Hawk didn't keep me plenty busy. And thoroughly sexed up.

Unlike Koda, they were all about spontaneous fun and games.

On my second full day in the death trap den, Hawk declared that Leif could only leave the nest for essentials, like using the bathroom—which, long TMI story, wasn't something female bears in estrus had to worry about. Apparently, no male wanted their female to leave the nest during estrus. According to Hawk and Koda, it was Ayaska protocol for the female to stay put while the males attended to her every need.

So essentially, Hawk was making Leif wait at my beck and call like a dog.

Or, more accurately, a 6'6 surprise submissive.

That second day, Hawk blindfolded him and ordered him to lie still, on standby until I needed him. On the third day, Hawk let Leif move around—but duct-taped his mouth and instructed me to choke him while riding him. It was wild and a first for me, but I'll tell you this: neither Leif's nor my bears were mad about it.

On the fourth morning, I thought maybe we were taking a break. Hawk didn't give Leif any commands after Koda left for the day, so I settled into a nap.

But when I woke up, there was a wooden chair on the border of my nest, Leif tied to it, with a Post-it note on his forehead that read: Whatever you want, baby.

Thank goodness Leif always enthusiastically thanked and praised me afterward for "making him a good boy." Otherwise, I might not have been able to reconcile the woman who climbed into his lap with the woman I thought I was.

By the fifth day, though, we actually did take a break. I was sore everywhere, including my toes—something I hadn't known was possible until my estrus taught me there really was such a thing as too much toe-curling sex. Hawk declared a 24-hour moratorium on anything more adventurous than me lying there while he and Leif took care of everything.

That was when I discovered something new: sex could be both a pain and a balm, depending on how you used it. My aches and pains melted away under their soothing licks and massages. Then they ended in the kind of slow, sensual sex that finally made me understand, on a soul-deep level, what J. Holiday meant by "put you to bed."

But by the sixth day, my worry began to eclipse the pleasure.

I'd only cleared my schedule for a week, and I had a life in Vancouver waiting for me. Falling into a sex-thrall every few hours wasn't exactly conducive to driving home—or getting back to my job of delivering babies for a living.

Hawk and Koda had assured me I'd definitely know when it happened. Apparently, bears were super in tune with their bodies, and I'd feel it in my ovaries when my bear decided to fertilize an egg. Not exactly something I could easily wrap my head

around. Human ovaries didn't twitch, and the only way to confirm conception was by getting pricked with a needle, peeing on a stick, or missing a period—which female bears, like their all-animal counterparts, didn't have.

Not going to lie, I was really looking forward to the no Aunt Flo part. But so far, I hadn't felt my ovaries so much as a twitch.

I'd gotten tingles everywhere else—including places I hadn't known could tingle (like my poor, overworked toes). But my ovaries? Crickets.

"Does estrus usually take this long?" I asked Leif and Hawk after another vigorous midday session that curled my toes but left my ovaries stubbornly silent.

"No idea," Leif replied casually, licking at the shoulder bite Hawk had reopened.

That was another thing: Hawk loved re-biting. I'd lost count of how many times he'd clamped his teeth down on the marks he or one of the other two bears had already made on me. It wasn't even a dominance thing; he just seemed to favor whichever bite was closest.

And Leif, who didn't have permission to do that, always handled the cleanup. He seemed to love using his bear magic to reheal the wounds after every session.

"Don't worry, baby," Hawk said, kissing the shoulder Leif wasn't working on. "Whatever your bear decides, we'll figure it out. We're your maul."

It was a nice—obviously estrus-biased—sentiment.

But it wasn't really an answer.

Before I could press him further, Hawk distracted me with a deep kiss—the kind

Koda never bothered with—and a pat on the thigh. “Get some sleep,” he said, leaving me in the nest to doze off in Leif’s arms. “That construction mess around the stairs isn’t going to clean itself, and I’m at a good part in Legends & Lattes .”

That was another weird thing. Koda had somehow managed to install a wooden cover for the pool and an entire banister on the front stairs while I was napping—like some kind of oversized, animatronic Mountie elf. From what I could tell, he liked to build, and Hawk liked to clean up after him.

Which was one of many surprising things I’d learned about Hawk over the past few days. He was 42 and absolutely obsessed with reading. Audiobooks, eBooks, physical books, magazines—it didn’t matter. If his local library app had it, Hawk would read just about anything—and sometimes even quote it—whether it was Clara Quinn, celebrity biographies, Gabriel García Márquez, the memoirs of famous generals, or cozy fantasy writers like Travis Baldree.

He also cooked like a gourmet chef and cleaned the den from top to bottom every day with a level of dedication I might have called obsessive if he didn’t immediately drop everything as soon as one of my estrus waves hit.

Koda, on the other hand, seemed to be looking for every possible excuse to get away from me.

That night, he actually complimented Hawk on the dinner he’d made and even bantered a little with Leif. But he barely acknowledged my presence.

Well, there was always the post-meal smolder and inevitable estrus wave. Except this time, before I even finished my meal, Koda set his plate in the caddy Hawk used to ferry dishes between the nest and the kitchen. No heated look, no estrus-triggering eye contact. Instead, he rose to his feet without even looking in my direction.

“I’m almost done with the balcony railing upstairs,” he said, his voice clipped and stiff. “I’ll just get back to the workshop since you don’t seem to need anything.”

“Seriously, Horse?” Hawk asked, frowning at him.

“Sir, maybe you should consider...” Leif began tentatively, throwing me a worried glance.

“See you in the morning,” Koda said, cutting them both off with another terse nod.

And just like that, he was gone.

Leaving me behind with the distinct feeling that his patience—and whatever sense of duty had made him agree to help with my estrus—was wearing thin.

18 /

get him back

holly

“ O pen your eyes, baby. Your bear’s letting me know she likes this, but I want to watch you enjoy it, too.”

I woke up slowly, my senses coming online one by one. The first thing I noticed was the wet, insistent slide of a tongue between my legs. Hot, enthusiastic, worshiping.

Then came Hawk’s voice, low and rasping in my ear. “C’mon, baby, open those beautiful brown eyes for me.”

Mmm, mates. ... My bear’s happy purr-growl echoed in the back of my mind as my eyes fluttered open.

I registered Hawk’s body pressed against mine, his arm resting beneath my breasts like a protective bar as he sucked on my ear.

Below that was the tongue, stroking into me with slavish devotion. I didn’t need to look down to know it was Leif.

Or that I must have gone into estrus while I was sleeping. For way longer than usual. The sun from the den’s round totem eye windows had nearly made it to my nest, which meant it must be past breakfast time, nearly noon. This was new.

My body caught up before my mind did, and my hips undulated with a mind of their own, trying to seek more pleasure out of Leif's eager-but-sloppy strokes.

Hawk released my ear lobe to command, "Slower, puppy." His hand found Leif's man bun and began guiding his head with firm authority. "I know she tastes good, but this isn't about you. Pay attention to her. Let her body teach you what she needs."

Leif obeyed instantly, his tongue shifting from eager laps to deliberate strokes under the guidance of Hawk's hand. Soon my thighs began to tremble, and my mind spun from the overwhelming sensation of watching Hawk make Leif tend to me so thoroughly.

But just as I began to lose myself in the rhythm of his tongue, my nose snagged on an absent scent. Maple, cognac, but no hazelnut. Koda. Koda wasn't here. Again.

My estrus was dragging on, and he was obviously sick of it. Of course, he hadn't waited for me to wake up—just headed back out to his brother's workshop.

The bitter thought sliced through my pleasure like a blade, leaving behind the quiet ache of being avoided and regretted.

My ex-husband drifted into my mind unbidden, his fake "Yay!" masking every milestone of our relationship. His passive-aggressive remarks and lack of genuine desire were constant reminders that I'd been a convenient relationship he'd settled for after grad school, not a wife he truly wanted.

"Koda ain't your ex, baby," Hawk suddenly growled, letting me know my shields had slipped again. "This is about him trying to prove he can stay away."

His tone flared with irritation before softening into a wicked edge. "And you know what, we're going to prove he can't."

“H-how?” I tried to keep up with the conversation thread, but Leif chose that moment to start swirling his tongue around my clit, probably on some silent instruction from Hawk. The new, much more intense sensations rolled my eyes back, and it took me a try or two to gasp out, “How-how are we going to do that?”

Instead of answering, Hawk pushed his lips into my ear to ask, “How you enjoying that tongue in your hot, needy cunt, baby?”

I’d slapped my shields back up, but his crude question sparked through my core. A moan escaped, and my thighs clenched around Leif’s head, letting them both know without reading my mind how much I liked what that tongue was doing to me.

Hawk smirked, his lips brushing my ear. “Usually, our bears wouldn’t let us clean you out while you’re in estrus, but they’re sick of Koda’s shit, too. So consider this a special project.”

His hand slid down from Leif’s head, gripping the soft roll of my stomach before circling lazily over my clit. The dual sensations were almost too much to bear.

“Feel that, baby?” he murmured, his breath teasing against my skin. “That’s what it feels like to be wanted.”

Leif’s tongue dipped deeper, his devotion making my hips buck. My breath quickened, and I could feel the pleasure building.

“Stay with it, baby,” Hawk urged, his voice a low growl. “Let Leif take care of you like a good boy.”

Hawk’s hand returned to Leif’s man bun, applying pressure, urging him deeper. The waves of pleasure coursing through me tightened into a knot, coiling tighter with every stroke of Leif’s Hawk-guided tongue.



But just as I was about to come undone, Hawk yanked Leif's head up.

"Hawk!" I gasped, my body writhing in protest.

"Not yet." His dark eyes glittered with challenge. "You want more? Get him back."

"What?"

"Koda," Hawk said simply, his tone daring. "Reach out to him. Bring him back to the nest."

My stomach churned at the idea. The thought of opening myself to Koda, of letting him feel my need, was almost unbearable. No offense, but humiliation didn't turn me on like it did Leif.

"No offense taken," Leif answered aloud, my essence dripping off his lips as Hawk kept his head raised.

Which was how I realized my shields had already slipped. Along with my pride.

"What do you want me to do?" I found myself asking— begging without meaning to. There was a new edge to my estrus today. It clawed at me like an animal trapped inside my body, frantic and crazed.

Hawk chuckled as if he'd known it would only take me a few seconds to cave.

"Exactly what you're doing, baby—only aim all those thoughts, think all those desperate emotions at Koda. Picture him in your mind..." He lowered Leif's head back down to my pussy while he talked as if the big blond constable was some kind of huge sex toy. "Show Koda what he's missing."

My body arched, the need coiling tighter and tighter as Leif's tongue sent me spiraling toward the edge, but it wasn't enough...wasn't what I needed.

"Tell him that," Hawk urged. "Beg him to come back and give it to you."

"Beg him? No, I'm not going to do that.." I protested.

Right before a wave of longing erupted from deep inside me, raw and molten, sending a visual of me getting railed by Koda's thick dick into the ether like a beacon. Freaking bear. She would seriously do anything to get laid. Especially today.

"Good, good..." Hawk's lips curved into a knowing smile against the side of my face.

Then he cruelly lifted Leif's head again and said, "That's it for you, puppy."

"No," I whined. What kind of sick edging play was this? It wasn't enough, but it had been something .

My bear clawed at my insides as another wave of estrus burst out of me, slicking the pussy and thighs Leif had just finished cleaning up.

Forget my rule about not cursing, I turned my head to spit out something particularly venomous at Hawk.

But stopped when the scent of hazelnuts hit my nose, and Leif rolled away to reveal the male standing behind him, just outside my nest, with his hands clenched into fists at his sides.

Koda.

He looked all sorts of things, standing there.

Sorry.

Guilty.

Conflicted as hell.

But most of all, hungry.

For me.

Hawk moved away, and I sat up. “You came.”

Koda’s jaw flexed as the late morning light streaming through the window cast his face in harsh lines.

Or maybe that was just his expression.

“I shouldn’t have. I shouldn’t be here,” he rasped, his voice thick. “I’m trying to stay away because...”

Because he didn’t want to get hurt again.

Because he wanted to prove his human was still in charge.

Because this was utter madness.

I couldn’t read his mind, but I could easily guess it.

I had my reasons for wanting to put distance between us, too. But...

“Koda, it doesn’t matter why,” I whispered. “Our bears don’t give a eff what we want.”

Then I reached out my arms to him.

His composure cracked, and the conflict in his eyes burned away, replaced by a raw, desperate need that mirrored my own.

In the next instant he charged into my nest, casting off his boots and clothes as he closed the space between us. Until he was fully naked and dropping to his knees before me.

“Vixen...you called me back.” Koda’s voice was a mix of accusation and wonder.

“I wanted you,” I admitted, my bear as unrepentant as an Ariana Grande song. “So I made you come.”

His gaze darkened, some unreadable emotion storming over his face.

“Don’t you dare ask me to present—” I started to warn.

Only to cut off when he collared my throat and crashed his mouth into mine for the kind of wet, tongue-swirling kiss that would have shorted a real animatronic out.

So maybe he was one of us living, breathing mammals after all.

He kissed me until my head spun, and then he released my throat to pull me into a sex position that wasn’t at all perfunctory.

More like a half-lotus, half-hug that allowed him to keep devouring my mouth as he guided the undulations of my hips up and down the long, thick dick I’d mentally

begged him for—totally worth the pride murder.

Soon, an orgasm, bigger and better than anything his robot version could ever deliver, bloomed inside me.

Then I was on my back again. But instead of Leif's mouth, Koda's hips pistoned between my legs, and his heavy body pinned mine back into the nest.

Mate! I wrapped my legs around him, my bear growling her satisfaction as he lost control between my thighs.

Was my bear at all sorry she'd ripped him from one of his many avoiding-me projects? Nerp! This was where he belonged, she informed me, like the unapologetically selfish bitch she was turning out to be.

"Mate," he growled, his guttural tone letting me know his bear was in charge, just like mine.

"Mate!" I gasped, my hips rising to meet his.

Every thrust sent shockwaves of pleasure spiraling through me, but as I neared the edge, a new sensation crept in—an ache, sharp and urgent, in my gumline.

My teeth.

They throbbed, pressing against my gums like they had a mind of their own. The urge to bite him, to mark him, tore through me, terrifying in its intensity.

No! I whimpered, turning my head to the side.

Koda didn't notice, too lost in his own frenzy, but my bear growled in protest,

demanding more, until?—

“Aah! Aah!” Suddenly, I was coming again without warning.

We both were. Koda bit into Leif’s shoulder bite as he released with a heavy grunt. A first for him. But that wasn’t what scared me.

As the climax ripped through me, the tingling in my teeth sharpened, and my eyes fixated on the space between Koda’s neck and collarbone.

Luckily, Koda chose that moment to collapse on top of me, his body heavy and warm. The throbbing sensation in my teeth stopped, but my bear... She remained restless, dissatisfied.

Something was missing.

As Koda rolled off me, I looked over at Leif, who was kneeling beside us with an eager-to-serve expression that had become familiar over the past few days. His golden hair had come mostly lose from his man bun, leaving strands falling around his face. He was beautiful. So beautiful.

My mouth watered.

That was all the warning he or I got before I lunged at him, toppling him with an urgency that left no room for thought.

“Sweetie!” Leif’s startled gasp quickly morphed into a groan as I put him on his back with a strength that didn’t feel entirely mine. My hand wrapped around his hard length and guided him to my aching core.

And then I took him— took what was mine.

Leif's head fell back, his hands grasping my hips as I moved above him, riding him with a feral desperation I couldn't control.

"That's right," Hawk drawled from beside us, his voice low and dark. "That's your third, baby. Take that dick. It's yours. It belongs to you and only you."

Leif's eyes locked onto mine, his expression awash with devotion and awe. "I'm yours," he whispered, his voice breaking on the words. "Always."

The tenderness in his voice cut through the frenzy for a moment, making me hesitate. But then... MATE!

My bear surged forward, pushing me harder, faster, demanding more.

As I neared the edge again, a sharp ache flared in my gums, insistent and unrelenting. My teeth pressed against my lips. And this time, the pressure was so overwhelming that I had to slap a hand over my mouth to stop myself from biting him as another climax crackled through me, leaving me trembling and raw.

Leif groaned beneath me. "Holly, may I come?"

"Yes!" I told him, the word mumbled as if I were speaking through cotton.

Or a mouth full of bear teeth.

Leif stiffened beneath me, coming with a broken roar, filling me up with another load.

And my teeth receded again, but it still wasn't enough.

Hawk.

I rose to my feet, unable to care that I was basically dripping come everywhere, and looked around for him.

But to my shock, he stood just beyond the barrier of my nest.

Out of reach.

“Not done yet, baby?” he asked.

Though his knowing expression told me he already knew the answer to that question.

“No,” I replied, nonetheless.

“Come back to my nest,” I commanded in a voice that sounded like those weird space witches in the Dune movies. “I want you next.”

“I ain’t Koda. You can have me whenever, however you want,” Hawk answered smoothly.

But his harsh expression didn’t match his offer. “But your bear’s tired of this. Tired of waiting.”

My heart stuttered. “Tired of waiting for what?”

“You know what,” Hawk said. He was always so nice to me. But suddenly, his voice dipped into the disapproving growl he often used with Koda and Leif.

“Koda isn’t the only one in denial,” he informed me. “This is your last chance. If you want a cub, you’re going to have to stop fighting her. Your bear won’t give you what you want—until you bite... If not me, one of us. Any of us.”



I shook my head, my chest clenching with a new fear. “What?”

“Your bear is in a frenzy,” Hawk explained, speaking slow like I was a foreigner who didn’t understand his native language. “That means she’s ready to come out of estrus. But she’s not going to fertilize an egg.”

He held my eyes in his grim amber gaze. “Not until you bite one of us.”

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bite me

holly

N ot until you bite one of us.

Hawk's directive reverberated through me like a lightning bolt, making clear what my human side hadn't even thought to suspect.

Still, I had to sum it up out loud, like I did with pregnant mothers who presented me with particularly complex birth plans. "My bear's ready to come out of estrus but won't let me have my baby until I bite one of you?"

Hawk answered with a nod and a pitying look that scraped across my skin like sandpaper.

"And you know this how?" I shook my head, not wanting to believe. "Did you also get a bear shifter medical degree during your ten years in jail?"

My voice had taken on a sharp, bitchy tone, but Hawk's expression remained patient. "No, baby, I did not. My mom's a healer, and one of my maul dads used to be Bear Mountain's official town doctor before my youngest brother, Ash, took his place. Like Ralph Waldo Emerson said, 'The apple never falls far from the stem.' I mean, in my case, it seriously did. But before that, I picked up a lot of residual medical stuff."

Wait, Hawk's family maul included three medical professionals?

His eyes softened with a gentle reprimand. "You'd know all of this if you bit me."

Bite him. Bite him. Bite him .

The call was coming from inside the house now. My bear issued the command, her growl vibrating in my chest.

Koda and Leif came to stand in the spaces on either side of our faceoff. I couldn't tell if it was in solidarity with me. Or Hawk.

"Again, you'd know if you bit any of us," Hawk replied out loud.

Crap, I needed to get my shields back up.

But I couldn't raise them. I was too tired. Everything ached. Most of all, my teeth.

It wasn't the body-snatching takeover of smearing or the double-you-over urgency of estrus, but still, the throbbing in my mouth felt... biologically intense. Instinctive, essential—like the reflex to blink or breathe. My teeth needed his neck.

But I couldn't.... I couldn't possibly....

"I can't," I whispered, more to myself than to Hawk. "I just can't. Not even for a baby."

Koda's expression remained unreadable. But Leif's worried eyes bounced between the two of us like someone watching a family fight.

"Why not?" Hawk snarled. All the pity drained out of his amber gaze. "Why are you

so afraid?”

I blinked at him. “Are you serious?”

Anger spiked, flushing my body even hotter than the estrus.

“Because this is a crazy fever dream! One that can’t possibly last!” I shouted. The words came tumbling out like a dam breaking. “It’s just biology! How can you not see that? This... whatever feelings you think you have for me and the not-real ones I have for the three of you will go away as soon as I’m out of estrus.”

Hawk’s nostrils flared. “You think I’ll just stop loving you. That my heart will flip off like a switch when your estrus is done.”

He loves me? My heart stuttered over the big reveal. No, no, he couldn’t. That was just his biological response to the estrus talking.

“No, my feelings are real ,” Hawk insisted, shamelessly reading my mind. “I’m in this with you for as long as this heart is beating in my chest. Then I’m down to meet you in the Great Bear Forest.”

His voice resoftened. “I’m your mate, Holly. Forever .”

“No, no...” I rebuked his claims with a shake of my head. “You’re an ex-con who made a vision board you can slot anybody into!”

Hawk’s eyes flared. “You think?—”

“I know you’re not seeing this for the temporary arrangement it is.” I hurled the facts at him, like gym dodgeballs meant to inflict bruises. “Takoda already said this is all on his bear. He didn’t ask for any of it, and I don’t have to bite him to know he

doesn't want to be here. It's that obvious."

The stiff Mountie confirmed my guess with a flex of his jaw and a glance to the side. It might have hurt, if it didn't prove my point.

"Exactly," I said into his silence. "And as for Leif..."

"Don't. Holly, stop." For the first time since we met in that jail cell, Leif gave me a command, his blue eyes begging me not to finish that sentence.

But I had to. Hurting him was the only way to make him understand. I looked the big doofy blond straight in the eyes to inform him, "You're just a puppy who obviously has no idea what he's signed up for..."

Leif reared back like I'd slapped him.

"Stop it. Leave him alone, Holly!" Hawk's voice turned vicious as he regarded me from the other side of the nest's border. "He's just as new to all this forever maul stuff as you. But at least he has the courage to adapt to his new reality. And you know, you're not the only one who's navigating some serious emotional damage."

He waved a hand at the Mountie he'd made me lure back here. "Koda's been hurt, too. His original maul—the one he dreamed of since he was a kid—fell apart before it could even get started. He thought he was going to be a lone bear for the rest of his life. Until a week ago, when you walked into town, and he had to settle for me, instead of my perfect doctor brother, to maul you."

"Hawk..." Koda began, his jaw tight.

"No, let me finish. It's time to stop protecting her. She has to hear this," Hawk insisted without taking his eyes off me.

To my surprise, Koda didn't say anything else. Just crossed his hands behind his back. The international sign for "go ahead."

Which Hawk did, his amber eyes furious as he continued to lay into me. "He's terrified of you—of going into this with all of us. But at least he just took breaks to keep his head together. He didn't fuck you one minute, then turn around to shiv you where it cuts deepest the next because he's so scared of getting hurt again."

"I'm not scared! I'm right!" I balled my hands into fists, hating him and dripping for him at the same time. "You're trying to convince me it'll be totally fine to bond forever with two randos and a violent criminal, and I'm trying to make the three of you see past this estrus stuff to the fact that we're not remotely suited for each other outside this nest!"

Hawk's lip curled, his eyes flashing with fury. And hurt. "Is that all I am to you?" he asked, his voice low and taut. "Some random criminal?"

I hesitated. I didn't... I didn't want to hurt him.

But that was just the estrus talking, wasn't it? Overly caring about someone I'd met less than a week ago—someone I barely knew outside of his cooking and criminal records—wasn't logical. Or sane.

Steel hardened my voice—and my heart—as I assured him, "That's all you will be to me after this estrus is done."

Hawk was basically a walking slab of prison muscle with a proven track record of knowing how to handle himself in a physical fight. But his head jerked back like I'd delivered a knockout punch.

Then... a terrible, angry sadness replaced the challenge in his amber gaze. "You're

right. This shit wasn't on my vision board. I'm outta here."

He turned and stormed toward the scuffed combat boots he'd lined up neatly next to my HOKAs and Leif's brown Sorels underneath the newly banistered stairs. His broad shoulders were tight with barely contained rage.

Good. Good. I'd finally broken through to him.

Relief warred with the sudden hollow ache in my chest.

But then he stopped. "No, fuck that."

He turned, his eyes blazing as he strode back to me, and this time, he didn't stop at the nest's border.

"You don't get to do that!" he informed me, getting directly in my face. "Dismiss me like I'm nothing. I'm not going to let you treat me like your shitty ex-husband treated you just because you're scared."

The comparison to Corey sliced through me. "That's not fair?—"

"No, it isn't." He cut me off, his voice raw and unyielding. "Because I'm a dirty ex-con who will use anything— anything —to win a fight. My fists, my words, my jagged little literary quotes. That's why Koda, and probably you too, would've preferred my clean, responsible little brother. But guess what? I'm the one who fucking loves you." He jabbed a finger into his chest. "I'm the one willing to fight as dirty as it takes to get you to bite one of us so that we can put a cub inside you before you lose the chance. Because I know..."

His expression softened, but the fire in his eyes continued to burn. "I can feel that's what you want! More than anything. And, baby, I will fight like hell to get you what

you desire most in this world—even when you’re too fucking scared to fight for it yourself."

"Hawk," I said, straining to keep my voice level. "You're being crazy."

"Yeah, I am, and I don't care ." Hawk laughed. A sharp, bitter, cutting sound. "I know I don't deserve you like these two Dudleys. And I'm so crazy, I already decided you're my endgame anyway—that I was put on this earth to spend the rest of my life earning your bite. Because I love the fuck out of you, and that's what's really got you so upset, ain't it?"

"What are you even saying?" I couldn't stay calm anymore. I lean forward to shout right up in his face, too. "You don't know me! Not for real. And nothing you're arguing makes any kind of sense in the real world!"

"I don't know you?" Hawk's voice became a churning gravel pit. "You ignored every red flag, every gut feeling, and married your ex because you thought some idiot who actually believed he was settling for you was the best you could do!"

His eyes bore into mine. "And now, you're scrambling for some safe excuse—some bullshit, medical explanation—so you don't have to deal with the fact that Koda's loyalty, Leif's devotion, and my bat-shit-crazy, all-consuming love are real! You can't handle it, Holly. You're terrified of what it means to actually be chosen—for once in your life—and now you're running, shoving us away, because you know I'm right!"

I flinched, then opened my mouth to defend myself against his completely wrong rundown of my motivations. But he wasn't finished.

"You don't want to claim us because you can't handle a real man. Real love." His words hit like rapid-fire gut punches—hard and unrelenting. "You'd rather run back to



your love-and-child-free life in Vancouver than take a chance on this... on us... and commit to our maul. So sure, be sensible, Holly."

Hawk sneered, his lip curling. "Pretend this is just about fucking until your estrus is done when really, it's about you ! You being a fucking coward."

My hand moved before I could think, and my bear was stronger than I knew.

The slap cracked through the den, louder than I expected, and Hawk's head snapped to the side with the strength of my direct hit.

Then he turned back slowly as a dark bruise mark bloomed across his cheek. But he didn't touch it. He didn't speak. Just stared at me, his amber eyes glowing like embers as his bear growled audibly from deep inside his chest.

My eyes flashed, too, and my bear growled back at him.

Right before I exploded forward and sunk my maw into Hawk's shoulder.

## Page 20

*Source Creation Date: August 5, 2025, 4:16 am*

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waking up

holly

I bit Hawk.

No, I bonded Hawk. And to my shock, I immediately did not regret it.

The taste of his skin, his blood, filled my mouth, and the world tilted with a download of emotions and information.

Fear.

Relief.

Triumph. So visceral, it felt like a tidal wave crashing through me.

Gratitude.

And love. So much love.

But everything was tangled. I couldn't tell which emotions were Hawk's and which were?—

“Ours.”

Hawk's bear voice erupted in my head with the answer—even rougher and deeper than his human one. "Everything you're feeling belongs to us now, baby."

He'd always been able to do this, I sensed then. Push into my mind. All of them could from the moment they bit me. But they'd each held back from doing so for various reasons, only one of which I knew for sure.

Hawk hadn't wanted to invade my mind. He'd ached for me to let him in.

"Us. Ours."

The words echoed in my head as I pulled back, my lips slick with his blood, my chest heaving. The bite mark glowed faintly, pulsing with energy that wasn't entirely human.

Bear magic. I stared at the bite while Hawk stared at me, his expression a mix of shock and reverence.

"You..." Hawk swallowed in a way that reminded me of Leif—who I now knew he'd already come to adore like a little brother.

"You claimed me," Hawk announced, his voice coarse. "You finally fucking claimed me."

The words were somehow filled with both accusation and praise.

But his bear let me know I'd just made his day.

"My entire life," Hawk corrected over the bond I'd just created between the two of us.

Before pulling me back to him for the kind of kiss that really did belong in one of those cheesy romance movies.

Deliberate.

Deep.

So full of love.

Mate...

For the first time, my bear purred the word as opposed to scream-growling it like someone on fire.

“Give her final claim.” I heard Koda’s voice nudge into Hawk’s mind, tinny and distant, via the bite I’d given my second. “It’s time to finish this.”

Hawk lowered me back into the nest of pillows and blankets and positioned himself between my legs.

“This is it!” another tinny voice exclaimed into his mind. Leif. His sweet heart was just about to beat out of his chest. He was so excited.

We all were. Because we all knew this would be my final claim in estrus. I hadn’t bitten Leif, and Koda didn’t have any bites whatsoever on his body. But my bear was ready and transmitting the message loud enough for everyone to know.

Funny, I’d thought of the animal inside of me as some kind of feral intruder with an agenda that didn’t match mine. But in the end, she was just like me.

She’d withheld her egg and demanded the bite because she’d wanted to feel safe.

Cherished. And now she did, and that was why she was finally ready to fertilize an egg.

I gasped when Hawk pushed into me. Not because it hurt. I was obscenely slick with two loads and my estrus in its last rage.

I gasped because the intensity of his emotions took me by surprise. I could feel him enter me, not only as myself but also as him, along with Leif's residual titillation layered on top.

Hawk pumped between my legs. Slowly, so I could feel every thrust, every withdrawal, and every stroke back in. He was making love to me, I realized as his hard hips rolled between my soft thighs. Taking his slow, beautiful time.

Until I cried out with my feelings and his feelings and a few of Leif's on top. Hawk and I tumbled over the edge. Together in more ways than one. As slow as Hawk had taken it, it was a shockingly intense climax, rushing through us both with a powerful force that felt like a river.

The river of life.

My bear didn't fill me in on any of the biological details, but yes...yes...Hawk and Koda had been right. I could feel her sparking in my ovaries. Making the bear magic that would ultimately lead to a cub.

Hawk's forehead pressed against mine as we both trembled, riding the crest of the most powerful thing either of us had ever experienced.

"You feel that?" he asked, his voice raw with wonder.

It was a rhetorical question. I could feel him feeling me feel our cub being made.

“Yes,” I answered nonetheless, tears pricking at the corners of my eyes as something new, something ours, took root within me.

We stayed like that for a long moment, entwined and breathless, before Hawk pulled out and settled me on the side I preferred to sleep on, then spooned me back into his chest.

For once, he was fully spent against my backside, without that insanely fast refractory period I’d come to expect.

“Not for long if you keep thinking thoughts like that,” he warned dryly inside my head.

But then he moved my braids aside to kiss the back of my neck. “Help me help you get some rest.” His voice was softer now, full of a tenderness that made my chest ache.

“Yeah, get some sleep.” Leif lay down on his side in front of me and took my hand, pressing a kiss into my palm. “And when you wake up, I’ll prove it’s not just the estrus. That I’m just as crazy about you as Hawk. I love you, sweetie.”

A serious longing replaced his eager expression. “And I want your bite, too.”

My bear smiled inside of me, already loving him so much back.

“Okay,” I whispered from inside Hawk’s arms. “We’ll talk about it when I wake up.”

“Awesome,” Leif answered, already grinning.

Probably because my black bear was clearly relaying to his blond grizzly that my answer would most definitely be yes.

I sighed contentedly, expecting Koda to slip out as I slept, like he always did.

Instead, the scent of hazelnuts got closer.

When I glanced down our bodies, I found Koda arranging pillows so he could settle at our feet. His shields were still up, but I was learning with Koda that his actions often spoke louder than his words. And sometimes in place of them. He'd spent all week baby-proofing this death trap of a den while I slept. And now that my bear had conceived, his actions told me he also wanted to be here when I woke up.

He lay down in a vampire-in-a-coffin pose that didn't surprise me one bit. Of course, he slept on his back. Stiffly. However, I jolted a few moments later when his voice broke through our shared silence.

"I don't like coffee. Never drink it. Not even with cream and sugar."

I blinked, confused, until Hawk clued both Leif and me in through our bond bites. "My brother Ash smells like coffee."

"I was going to ignore it," Koda continued, staring at the ceiling. "But... this is better. We..."

His clipped voice softened, almost taking on the cadence of Hawk's as he said, "We smell right together."

I felt, rather than heard, Hawk's and Leif's silent agreement. Their shared certainty washed over me, and I wondered if I'd ever get used to feeling other people's emotions as if they were my own.

But Koda's shields remained up. We'd had so many misunderstandings, so much stubborn avoidance. I needed to hear him say it—to make his intentions clear.

“I, too, would like to discuss the possibility of receiving your bite,” he said before I could finish the thought. “When you wake up, I believe our next order of business should be the future of our maul.”

Our maul.

For the first time in years, I let myself believe.

“Okay,” I said again, my heart full as I drifted into the most peaceful sleep I could ever remember....

...then I woke up in a cold, empty nest.

No hazelnuts. But also no maple fudge. Or cognac.

They were gone! All three of my mates were gone.

The realization hit me like a slap as I sat up in the empty den.

“Hawk?” My voice echoed faintly off the stone walls. “Leif? Koda?”

No answer.

Female bears weren’t supposed to leave their nest, but I could feel with biological certainty that my estrus was over.

Pushing the blankets aside, my bare feet slapped against the cold stone floor as I finally left my sacred space to search the den.

But they weren’t here.



I knew that for certain, even before I poked my head around the alcoved wall and went up the winding interior stairs to open the doors of bedrooms that had zero furniture in them.

My bear couldn't feel them. Anywhere.

All three of the guys who'd promised to be here when I woke up had gone out of range of my bond with Hawk.

They were gone. Gone.

Which meant they'd abandoned me as soon as my estrus was done. Exactly like I said they would.

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the dream was over

holly

The dream was over.

After waiting around in the den for hours, I checked at the bar and RCMP station in the hopes I'd gotten it wrong. But the Bear Mountain detachment was dark with a "Closed" sign hung in the window, and the copper-haired bartender told me he hadn't seen any of the males who'd promised to be there when I woke up. Over six hours ago.

Eventually, I gave up and drove back to Vancouver. The sun would set in a few hours, and no offense to my little sister, but I knew better than to drive on mountain roads at night.

Plus, I had a real life to get back to: a couple of expectant mothers, a phone to replace, an alimony check to write and send to Corey—that was ironically due in two days, on February 14th. Happy Valentine's Day .

A just-above freezing apartment to rewarm...

I sighed when I walked into my frigid studio. Before I left, I'd turned the thermostat to vacation mode, thinking I'd be back in a couple of days at most. Not a week. My breath visible, I turned the thermostat back up, then made the extremely short trip

from the door to the quilted armchair I'd opted for since the studio I'd barely been able to afford after my divorce wasn't big enough to fit a couch.

Somehow, the space felt even smaller than I remembered. It certainly wasn't as big as a two-story den, with two of three large guys keeping me warm—and hot—whenever my bear demanded it.

My stomach grumbled, reminding me I hadn't eaten since yesterday when Hawk served us a nest dinner of perfectly seasoned pork chops, spiced applesauce, and a creamy Parmesan risotto, which was, according to him, "subtly infused with thyme." As usual, the whole meal had been a masterpiece of simple ingredients transformed into something extraordinary.

Leif had complimented him profusely. And Koda had suspected out loud, "I believe you might be an even better cook than that outsider grizzly Holly's sister mated."

A bubble of laughter rose, remembering how Leif had immediately come to the defense of outsider grizzlies—before conceding, "But yeah, you totally lapped him, bro."

My bear whimpered inside of me, wanting the den, wanting them. But I cut off the memory, shoving it way down where it belonged.

That fever dream was over, I reminded the both of us. It was time to attend to my real life.

By myself.

Estrus was over.

And so was my so-called maul.

Instead of feeling sorry for myself, I grabbed the laptop I'd left sitting on top of an end table to put in an online grocery order from the nearest Barrington's.

But guilt and dread twisted in my chest when the screen lit up with pop-ups of all the calls and emails I'd missed while deluding myself into thinking I was the main character in my own Bear Mountain romance.

My stomach twisted at the many missed call alerts from my best friend, Lark. Then it sank further when I saw the subject line of the latest email from my partner hospital, Vancouver Pacific Health Center: Re: Re: Re: URGENT: Midwife License Concerns .

Oh no... In British Columbia, midwife licenses had to be renewed annually between February 1st and March 31st. I'd been waiting to resolve my permanent residency application status before renewing it since I no longer had Corey as my anchor. I knew I was cutting it close, but I didn't think the hospital would start sending me emails about it before the renewal period was even done.

Crap! Crap! Crap!

The shrill bloop-bloop-bloop of a Facetime call interrupted my bureaucracy spiral. And I answered it when I saw it was Lark, trying to get through.

Lark was my best friend in Vancouver. We'd met in an online support group for Women Dealing with Infertility. We'd become instant friends as soon as we'd discovered we were both Black Americans living in Vancouver—though Lark hadn't moved here on the political whim of her half-Canadian fiancé like I had, but because she and her fraternal twin sister had snagged jobs as teachers at Barrington Prep, one of Canada's most exclusive boarding schools.

Despite having a busy schedule herself, she'd really been there for me over the years,

offering emotional support through not only my last miscarriage but also my divorce from Corey. And I knew she'd been feeling some conflicted emotions around her twin sister falling pregnant with her fiancé so easily, while Lark was still dealing with the emotional fallout of being diagnosed with Primary Ovarian Insufficiency, a condition that would most likely prevent her from carrying a child.

“Hey, you,” I said, accepting the call.

Lark's familiar face filled the screen, framed by the dorm room she lived in at Barrington Prep to earn extra money for the complicated set of steps she'd need to go through to achieve her baby dreams—most of which weren't covered by British Columbia's public health system.

She'd done a great job of keeping a positive attitude through her private pain, but today her usually sunny expression was pinched and wary.

“What's going on?” I asked, immediately sensing something wrong.

“I just got off the phone with my sister,” she began, skipping pleasantries.

My heart sank for her, but I kept my face neutral as I prepared to validate her conflicted feelings around her twin's pregnancy.

But then Lark said, “She told me Vancouver Health Center called, asking her to pick another midwife because you no longer had privileges there.”

“What?” I immediately pulled up the mail screen on my laptop. “Why?”

Lark winced on the other side of the screen. “Something about an issue with your midwife license?”

My heart plummeted. “No, no, that’s impossible. It’s only February 12th, not the end of March yet. They wouldn’t just yank my?—”

I stopped talking when I opened an end-of-day email that started with, “Since you haven’t answered any of our calls or emails over the past several days, we’re afraid we’ll need to revoke...”

“No! No! No!” I whispered as I read the email, informing me that yanking my privileges was exactly what the VHC had done for all my scheduled births—until I presented them with proof that my midwife license was in good standing and had been renewed for the year.

The words blurred as panic set in, and the apartment closed in around me.

My career, the one thing that had kept me grounded through miscarriages and divorce, was slipping through my fingers, too. If my license was gone, how would I pay rent? Support this incoming baby?

Not having enough money or stability was exactly why I’d delayed trying to get pregnant with Corey for so long.

What was this? All Your Worst Fears Come True Day?

If so, I had an extremely strong protest email to write to whoever came up with that crap.

“Is there anything I can do?” Lark asked, looking even more worried on my phone screen.

“Put me in a time machine and stop me from making the biggest mistake of my life while my career was going up in flames,” I muttered.

“What?” Lark asked, her forehead crinkling.

A knock sounded on my door before I could explain. Probably my landlady, letting me know I’d also have to pay more rent on my crappy apartment in honor of All Your Worst Fears Come True Day.

But I couldn’t fall apart. This baby only had me now. I had to keep it together.

“I’ll figure this out and call you back,” I told Lark before hanging up to answer the door.

But when I opened it, it wasn’t my 4’9” Asian-Canadian landlady standing there.

It was Corey, my 5’9”, half-French-Canadian ex-husband.

*Source Creation Date: August 5, 2025, 4:16 am*

holly

“ A ll? , Holly Bell, how are you?”

Corey said hello and clipped his “you” in a vaguely French-Canadian way. Quebec was on the other side of the count, and he’d been mostly raised in Minnesota by his American mother, but he’d decided to lean into his paternal accent when we moved to Canada, thanks to his dual citizenship.

I hated that about him.

I also hated that he still referred to me by my first and middle name, even though I’d somehow managed to convince myself that it was cute that Corey insisted on calling me Holly Bell even after I told him I didn’t like it on our first date.

Truly wondering what I’d ever seen in him, I stared at the man whose smug, entitled expression hadn’t changed much since the last time I saw him in person. On the other side of a courtroom, pumping his fist because his conniving lawyer had gotten every undeserved thing he asked for.

I sighed and folded my arms. “What do you want, Corey?”

“I was hoping you hadn’t written that alimony check yet,” he answered.

He stopped. Probably expecting me to ask him why.

I just stared at him. Giving him nothing.



“The thing is,” he said with a mournful look, “it turns out that your years of making me wait were more detrimental than I initially thought. Despite her much younger age and health prognosis, Celeste and I still haven’t managed to get pregnant.”

Another pause. Corey and I met while he was completing his M.F.A. in Public Art, but he’d done a bachelor’s in Theatre before that, and unfortunately, the only thing he retained from that unnecessary four years of education was how to abuse the dramatic pause.

Again, I waited for him to get to the point.

Which, eventually, he did with a mulish look. “Celeste wisely suggested I get tested, and as it turns out, I suffer from a condition of age called male factor.”

“A condition?” I felt a little like Hawk when I lifted both eyebrows to ask, “You’re calling not having the swimmers to get your girlfriend pregnant a condition of age?”

His lips thinned. “The point is, it’s all your fault that Celeste and I will also have to undergo IVF, so I will be needing more money from you in the next alimony check.”

The sheer gall of this man. “So, let me get this straight,” I said, unfolding my arms. “You’re asking me to give you more money because of your issue with getting your girlfriend pregnant?”

Corey’s face dropped. “If I had started earlier?—”

“If you’d started earlier, what?” I demanded. “You’d be milking me for child support on top of alimony? What exactly do you think would have been different if you managed to baby-trap your sugar wife as opposed to getting everything you wanted in our divorce?”

Corey sputtered. His mouth opening and closing like a fish. But then he used that theatre degree to compose himself with a lift of his chin. “This is why you have gotten what you deserved. You’re always making jokes. Always dismissing my pain.”

I shrugged. “Hey, some people like my jokes. And laughing is way better than blaming others for everything that’s gone wrong in my life.”

Corey narrowed his eyes. “So you believe you carry no blame in this predicament I find myself in?”

“I mean, I wouldn’t say zero blame. But I’m sure those three zeroes on all your alimony checks make up for anything you imagine I’ve done to you.”

Corey huffed. “There you go again. Quipping when you should be taking responsibility for?—”

“Okay, speaking of zeroes. I have zero time to get lectured about responsibility by a bottom-feeder like you. Sell the house you got in the divorce if you want kids so bad. But don’t ever come back here asking for more money again.”

I began to close the door in his face, but he wedged himself between it before I could.

“It is not asking. It is what you owe me,” he said coldly. All warmth and civility disappeared from his expression, and his Minnesota accent returned in full force. “Don’t make me drag you back to court and give the judge and even bigger sob story. Imagine what they’ll think when I tell them you used to hit me.”

My stomach twisted, but I held my ground. “You’re bluffing.”

“Am I?” he asked, leaning in with a sneer. “It’s your word against mine, and the

courts already believed me once. I can make them believe me again. Or you can figure out how to add one more zero to this month's alimony check so that Celeste and I can?—"

One moment, Corey was standing wedged into my front door. And the next, he was gone.

Whooshed out of my sightline.

"What in the...?" I stepped forward and froze.

Hawk stood in my apartment floor's hallway, holding Corey by the throat against the wall at a locked arm angle, with his feet dangling above the industrial carpet.

And Koda and Leif were standing on either side of him, flanking Hawk like soldiers.

The three bears who had left me behind... They were here.

"What are you doing here?" I asked, wondering if my mind had broken with Corey's visit and this was some kind of hallucination.

Instead of answering, Koda held his badge directly in front of Corey's choke-reddened face. "Sergeant Takoda of the RCMP. I just witnessed every word of that threat."

"And I just recorded it!" On the other side of Hawk, Leif shoved his phone into Corey's face the same way Koda presented his badge.

"And I'm here to break your fucking neck for daring to talk to our mate like that," Hawk growled between them.

“RCMP? This—this is abuse!” Corey managed to choke out around Hawk’s squeezing hand. Then he said what any half-Canadian who’d grown up in America would under the circumstances. “I’ll sue! I’ll sue your entire department!”

“Sue us?” Koda shook his head, like he was honestly confused. “Sue us for what?”

“Him!” Corey scratched uselessly at Hawk’s hand. “You can’t let him do this!”

“Let me?” I couldn’t see Hawk’s face, but I could hear the razor-sharp smirk in his voice as he informed Corey, “I’m not a Dudley, bitch. I just got out of jail for manslaughter, and my knifin’ hand’s feeling itchy.”

Corey turned desperate eyes to Koda and Leif. “Aren’t you going to do something?”

“Do something about what?” Leif shrugged. “I don’t see anyone doing anything wrong. Do you, sergeant?”

“Nope,” Koda answered, popping the p sound while looking straight at Hawk’s choking hand. “Only someone trying to blackmail our pregnant mate into giving him even more money he doesn’t deserve.”

“You’re pregnant!” Corey’s gaze darted to me, desperate now. “Like, legitimately? You don’t think you’ll lose it this?—”

Pain flared through me at the thought of losing this pregnancy, too. But that pain was quickly overcome with rage that Corey would dare to ask me that.

Actually, it might not have been all my rage.

“Don’t talk to her, you waste of a dick!” Hawk commanded on a growl, tightening his grip so Corey didn’t have enough air to possibly disobey that command. “Don’t look

at her. Look at me!”

He squeezed even tighter. “The ex-con who’ll proudly cut your tongue out and feed it to a dog if you ever talk to her again. If you ever breathe the same air as her again.”

Corey released a whimper, his face turning a dangerous shade of blue. Then something else released. Corey’s cream-colored slacks darkened with the stream of piss that ran down his leg and dribbled onto the floor.

“Fucking piss pants.” Hawk wrinkled his nose in disgust and dropped him like a sack of garbage.

Hawk watched the smaller man gasp for air, wanting to do more than just drop him in his own puddle of piss. He wanted to kill my ex for what he’d done to me. But I could feel him tamp down that instinct. Not out of any moral code. But because he knew I wouldn’t allow it.

“Unless you would...” Hawk’s voice pushed into my head, and he peeped at me over his shoulder with a look that was half-coax, half-plea to end my ex-husband’s life.

But I answered out loud, “I think you made your point.”

Hawk turned back to Corey to growl, “Guess it’s your lucky day. Holly decided to let you live. But that alimony shit stops today. No more checks. Ever.”

Corey opened his mouth to protest.

“Please, say something shitastic like you deserve it or that she owes you anything.” Hawk crouched down to get eye level with him. “I am looking for even the tiniest excuse to break off the leash she’s got me on and snap your neck like a twig.”

Apparently, Corey wasn't as stupid as I was beginning to believe when he showed up at my door to demand more money for his male fertility issues.

He scrambled to his feet and bolted for the stairs, leaving the smell of only his piss behind.

Silence hung heavy in the air as his footsteps receded down the metal stairs.

Then all three bears turned to me.

"Hi, Holly," Koda said gently. Seemingly for all three of them. "May we come in?"

*Source Creation Date: August 5, 2025, 4:16 am*

holly

Okay, the dream might not be over.

They were here. All three of the bears who'd left me behind... were at my door. Asking me to invite them in.

I stared at them, my heart pounding so hard it felt like it might break free from my chest.

Hawk, with his grizzled smirk. Leif, with his soft, hopeful expression. And Koda, with his stoic, unreadable gaze.

They all wore dark blue jeans and flannels over Henleys as if they'd prompted a chatbot: How can all three of us look like small-town romance novel heroes when we show up at Holly's door?

Relief flared like a firework... then plunged like a misfired rocket into the cold, dark ocean of hurt. The same frigid place I'd woken up alone.

"What are you doing here?" I demanded, my voice sharp and trembling.

Hawk stepped forward first, reaching out to me, his amber eyes warm and tender. "Aw, baby?—"

"No!" I shoved him away.

Well, tried to shove him away. It was like pushing against a brick wall, and I was the one who ended up stumbling backward into my apartment. Still, my pride held as I snapped, “Don’t touch me!”

To Hawk’s credit, he didn’t try to block me out. I could feel his hurt bleeding through the bond, along with a tinny, anxious hum from Leif, who worried my neighbors might think they were assaulting me. Then, to my shock, I felt a deep wave of regret.

Not from Hawk. Not from Leif. I blinked, and my eyes landed on Koda—the Mountie I’d initially pegged as animatronic.

It came from him.

His shields were down, and through the connection, I heard him murmur to Hawk, “This is on me. I’ll handle it.”

“I’m not something to be handled,” I informed him with my teeth clenched.

I shoved all my fury down Hawk’s bond as I added, “Or discarded after being promised forever. You didn’t even leave me a note!”

My voice was rising again.

And this wasn’t a bear nest. No more waiting for an invitation. I felt the three of them decide to step inside without waiting for my permission. Hawk, then Koda, then Leif, who softly shut the door behind him.

“Holly...” Koda began, his dark eyes filled with pity. He took another step toward me.

“No!”



I threw up my hands and backed away until my legs hit the armchair.

But Koda kept coming. “Hol?—”

“No!” I choked out.

No one was squeezing my neck, but it felt like it. I couldn’t breathe, and my chest was tight with all the emotions I’d been trying to shove down since I got in my rental car and drove away from Bear Mountain.

He took another step forward. And there was nowhere else to go.

Apparently, I hadn’t learned my lesson because I tried to shove another bear.

But this time, Koda caught me. His arms clamped around my body like steel bands, pulling me flush against his chest.

Of course, I kept trying to push him away.

And by push him away, I mean I broke down sobbing like a tired, confused, starving baby as soon as he got his ridiculously strong arms around me.

“Ssh, ssh. I messed up, Vixen,” Koda whispered into my hair, his voice rough with emotion. “I didn’t mean to hurt you. I love you so frigging much, and I’m so, so sorry.”

“Then why did you leave me?” I sobbed into his chest, the words cracking like dry leaves underfoot. “I waited for you. I waited for you for hours!”

“I know, but...”

He stopped. Hugged me tighter. Then, without letting me go, he asked aloud, “Hawk, can you...?”

That was all the warning I got before a series of images exploded in my head, downloading like I was seeing everything through Koda’s eyes.

Waking up early the next morning.... Leaving the cave to retrieve the toolbox he’d left at Mak’s workshop.

Wanting to get back to the den as fast as possible so he’d be there when I woke up....

But then... seeing the bloody handprint on the wall of the den he’d just spent a week baby-proofing.

My stomach dropped. His had, too—hard and fast. The memory vibrated with the weight of his panic.

“What?” I jerked back, pulling out of his arms to stare at him. “Are you trying to tell me that instead of waiting to talk to me, you ran off and fought an entire crew of murderous bear bikers?”

Before Koda could answer, Hawk appeared beside us, his tone as casual as if we were discussing the weather. “In your first maul’s defense, there ain’t no such thing as a bear who can think straight when their mate’s in danger.”

Koda gave him a solemn nod. “Thank y?—”

“But yeah, it was real fucking stupid,” Hawk cut in before Koda could finish. “I would’ve told him that if he’d bothered to consult with his maul before heading out.”

“It was my responsibility,” Koda insisted, his jaw tightening. “I was the one who got

us into this mess, and I thought I'd be able to get us out of it. Even if it meant almost dying."

"Wait." My stomach twisted. "You almost died?"

A grim silence stretched between us.

Instead of answering, another reel of memory unspooled in my mind, courtesy of Hawk's bond-bite projector.

Koda stepping down from his beautiful chestnut-brown Canadian Horse, Sentinel, onto the gravel parking lot outside a massive black industrial building—the Iron Claw MC's clubhouse.

A mix of shifters of every shade and race walking out to confront him before he could get to the door, coming to a stop right in front of him. A wall of danger made flesh.

The group includes a huge black bear, who Koda hasn't seen out of bear form since they were in their teens.

And the other biker who'd attacked me.

Apparently, he hadn't walked away from his encounter with Koda's bear unscathed. Four raw, angry scars slashed across his face, and one ear was just... gone. Only a jagged gap remained where it had been ripped clean off.

Hawk paused the memory there, his voice cutting in like the narrator of a gritty documentary. "Bears can heal just about anything, but they can't grow shit back. And Iron Claws aren't allowed to use shifter magic to heal wounds—unless they've killed whatever left the mark. But, the prez who took over after me? Batshit insane. Doesn't like losing. Sometimes, he makes them wait to take their revenge until they're good

and rage-filled, with a permanent scar to remind them.”

My mind spun. Which one of the menacing bikers was the president of this horrible gang?

“The prez is the bear,” Koda and Hawk informed me in unison, answering my question before I could voice it.

The memory flickered back to life, Hawk running the film again without giving me time to ask the dozen other questions I had about the gang he co-founded.

The Iron Claw offering Koda a choice: survive a physical fight with three of their members—without shifting—or they’d end him.

“And finish what we started with that sweet piece of club meat you stole from us,” the one-eared biker adds, wagging his tongue.

I couldn’t tell if it was my disgust or Koda’s rolling through my stomach, but either way, I felt him lock in.

Failure isn’t an option.

The first two fights are over in minutes.

The first match is with a bulky MC whose muscles can’t make up for his lack of technique. He falls quickly. The second is with the one-eared biker, who’d clearly hoped the first guy would wear Koda out and better his chances.

Too bad for him.

Koda snaps both their necks within five minutes of engagement.

But then Koda finds out why the Iron Claw hadn't called it "hand-to-hand combat" when the biker gang's feral bear president lumbers forward for the third match.

My stomach dropped. "You fought a feral bear without shifting?"

"For about two minutes," Koda admitted with a wince. "Before he got the upper hand."

"Or claw, in this case," Leif added from behind Koda's shoulder with a wry shake of his head. "He was messed up pretty bad by the time we got there."

"Typical Iron Claw bait and switch," Hawk muttered. "Nobody's ever survived one of those 'challenges.'"

I didn't want to know. But I had to ask, "What happened next?"

The memory abruptly shifted, and the perspective became clearer, sharper.

I realized I was seeing Hawk's version of events now.

Because Koda didn't want to upset me.

Well, I'm here to tell you that plan did not work.

Tears welled in my eyes as Hawk's memories unfurled....

Him and Leif screeching up to the clubhouse, the tires of the RCMP Chevy Tahoe spewing gravel.

Jumping out of the passenger seat to find Koda lying on the ground beneath the feral bear. His face and chest shredded, his guts bulging out from an open flap in his

stomach.

Hawk's brother has his claw raised in the air, ready to strike the final blow.

“Wait!” I tore myself out of Koda's arms and turned on Hawk. “That feral bear is your brother?”

Hawk shrugged and threw me a sad smile. “Yeah, more than one of us disproved that ‘far from the stem’ theory of Emerson's. He's been a bear since his early twenties, thanks to a particularly fucked-up case of PTSD after serving in a black ops unit. So no, he wasn't exactly following in any of our parents' footsteps either.”

His voice remained its usual non-pitying shade of gravel and grit, but I could feel the regret and guilt he felt for helping his brother descend even further into madness when he was dishonorably discharged from the Canadian forces rather than getting him the help he needed.

Hawk was doing his best to walk a road of redemption now, but...

“I'll never forgive myself for that,” he confessed inside my head.

“Anyway,” Koda said, speaking over our mental communication. “If Hawk hadn't shown up and used his brother card to negotiate for my life and get the Iron Claw to leave us all alone, only two of your maul would be here right now.”

“We got there just in time!” Leif said, injecting more cheer into his voice than a story that grisly and emotionally complicated probably warranted. “But it took Koda's bear a while to fix him up, and Hawk said it wasn't safe to move him.”

Hawk regarded me with an apologetic look. “That's why we weren't there when you woke up.”

“And why we didn’t make it back to the den for hours and hours,” Koda added. “But we’re here now, Holly.”

Yes, they were. “I’m so glad you’re alive.” Relief coursed through me, warm and heady.

But then I found myself shaking my head with a confusing mix of frustration and regret. “I just wish you’d told me any of this before you all left. What does it mean that we were talking about making a whole life together when we don’t even have basic communication down?”

All three of them flinched, their combined guilt rippling through Hawk’s bites.

“You’re right. I should’ve trusted you. I should’ve trusted all of you,” Koda said finally, his voice low and steady. “That’s how I ended up with another black eye.”

“Hawk!” I swatted his shoulder, glaring. “You punched him after your brother nearly killed him?”

“No, not him. Me.”

Leif pointed to himself with both thumbs, grinning like a kid showing off straight- As . “Then I told him I’d report him for misusing RCMP resources if he didn’t let us bite him.”

“He didn’t have to threaten me,” Koda muttered, sounding both defensive and begrudgingly amused. “I was all in, even before he and Hawk showed up to save my life.”

“Still, look what we’ve all got now!” Leif crowed, grabbing both of Koda’s wrists and lifting them to show off the bond bites. He was practically glowing with pride.

They were bonded now. An obvious, true maul.

Which only left me more confused.

“I don’t really know what to say here,” I admitted, looking between them. “A few minutes ago, I thought you’d completely abandoned me, and now... this.”

I waved my hands around vaguely, trying to encompass all of it.

The dumpster fire inside the laptop still sitting in my armchair.

The three larger-than-life guys crammed into my tiny apartment.

Koda’s insane near-death experience, followed by his, Leif’s, and Hawk’s unexpected arrival at my door as a fully bonded maul.

“You don’t know what to say,” Koda repeated softly, his gaze flicking down to the floor, then back to me. “In that case, this next question is really going to confuddle you.”

He took a deliberate step back to stand between Leif and Hawk, his expression unreadable.

Then my heart stopped beating when all three of them sank to one knee.



*Source Creation Date: August 5, 2025, 4:16 am*

leif

This was all planned out. Sort of.

I'd picked out a ring at Maple & Diamond on Robson Street before we drove over to Holly's neighborhood in the DTES—what we locals call the Downtown Eastside, I'd explained to Hawk on the way.

And we'd talked about what we'd say as soon as she opened the door.

Takoda would start with a big speech about how he'd never been as happy or content as he was last night, falling asleep in her nest. How she'd shown him what the real prize in life was—love.

Hawk was supposed to go next with a heartfelt monologue about how this maul and our mate were better than anything he could have envisioned. The best reward for his redemption arc.

And finally, I'd tell her how I knew I'd grown up because I'd never felt as ready for anything as I did to spend the rest of my life on Bear Mountain with her and our maul.

But having to threaten Corey—and Holly being more tearfully furious than happy to see us—hadn't been in the plan.

So, after a lot of explaining and apologizing, we all just ended up dropping to one knee, pouring our feelings into Hawk's maul bite. Takoda lifted his arms, his shirt

sleeves pulling back to show the maul bites Hawk and I had given him on each forearm, as he flipped open a scarlet box to reveal the entwined rose gold and platinum three-band diamond ring I'd picked out.

“Will you marry us?” he asked on all three of our behalves.

Holly slapped both hands over her mouth. Then immediately put her shields back up so we couldn't feel or hear what she was thinking.

Fuck. Did that mean the answer was no? I could feel Takoda and Hawk worrying the same thing beside me, their tension rolling over the bond.

“I...” Holly lowered her hands, lips parting as if she were about to say something. But then she clamped them shut again, her face crumpling like she was about to cry—not the happy kind of tears.

Takoda was full-on panicking now, pushing backup plans into our heads. “Alright, the two of you will need to stay in Vancouver and woo her back.”

“Nah, Koda, don't try backing out now. This maul doesn't work without you,” Hawk insisted. “And you don't want the puppy to give you another black eye.”

“I'll do it!” I confirmed--and threatened.

“I'm not backing out,” Takoda insisted, his voice grim. “I'll return to Bear Mountain, finish un-death trapping the den, and figure out a big enough grand gesture to win her heart ? —

“Hey, ssh!” I cut the conversation short. “She's talking again.”

“I'm sorry, guys, but I can't...” She shook her head, her voice breaking. “I just

can't..."

All three of our hearts sank.

Until Holly cracked up laughing and pointed at us.

"I can't believe how good it feels to feel the three of you panic like I did when I woke up in the den alone!"

"Vixen..." Takoda growled while Hawk and I stared, our mouths hanging open.

Holly just grinned, dropping her shields to flood the bond with how much she already loved us.

"But if you don't mind promising forever to a super-petty vixen," she teased—right before her smile melted into something tender and full of hope. "Of course, I'll marry you."

She was a super-petty vixen.

And, of course, we didn't mind.

Takoda let out a stunned exhale, then vaulted to his feet, sweeping her into his arms.

"Mate," he murmured against her hair, the word reverberating down all our bonds as Hawk and I closed in, surrounding her in a warm, unbreakable hold and pressing kisses wherever we could find skin.

Her head tilted back, and that's when we got the happy tears we'd been hoping for since we climbed the stairs to her fifth-floor apartment.

“We’re a maul now,” Takoda said, his voice thick with emotion as he kissed her forehead. “You’re not alone anymore, Holly. Never again.”

Hawk’s rough hand steadied her back, his lips brushing the crown of her head. “You’re ours, sweetheart. Always.”

I pressed closer, letting my warmth soothe away any residual feelings of abandonment. I could feel how much she needed this—how much she needed us. And I let our truly petty vixen know, “You’re perfect.”

Holly turned her head to look up at me, and her lips trembled with a fragile smile. “I’ve never been good at believing something like this could last,” she admitted a lot more softly than she teased us. “Thank you for not giving up on me.”

“Never,” Takoda said fiercely. “We’d never give up on you.”

I leaned down, my forehead brushing her temple. “You’re worth every fight, Holly. Every misunderstanding cleared up. Everything we’re willing to do to show you this is forever.”

I felt the best thing from her then—the crumble of her walls breaking, her heart letting us in, one beat at a time.

But then it suddenly stuttered, and a slew of new, panicked doubts spilled over the bond.

Everything that had happened before she opened the door to find her ex-husband standing there lit up our maul bites as Holly drew back from our group hug.

“My license is at risk. My visa’s in the air. And all threats aside, I still officially owe Corey, like, four more years of alimony payments....” She shook her head, bitter

regret replacing all the happy feelings from a few moments ago. “My life is currently a mess, and I don’t know how all of this is supposed to work with a three-way marriage—which I’m sure is technically illegal anyway.”

“Ayaska Bears have a special exemption,” Takoda said, his voice steady. “And I meant what I said earlier. You’re not alone anymore, Holly. We’ll figure this out together.”

“Worst case, you disappear to Bear Mountain,” Hawk offered casually.

Takoda nodded, shooting approval over the bond. “I no longer talk to Ash, but we’re having a cub boom this spring, and I’ve heard he’s in desperate need of a midwife.”

Dr. Ash. Just the name made my bond with Hawk and Takoda hum with tension. But they were both willing to set aside their estrangement with him if it meant Holly getting to keep the job she truly loved—and Bear Mountain gaining a capable midwife on top of everything else.

“You belong with us, Holly,” Takoda told her. “We’ll take care of you.”

But Holly just kept shaking her head. “I trust you. I do. But I can’t practice without a license, and I really can’t stay here illegally. Plus, if immigration—or worse, the RCMP—finds out you’re harboring me...”

Her words trailed off, and I felt Hawk’s and Takoda’s hearts sinking through the bond.

Then they stopped.

Because both of them noticed at the same time that my heart wasn’t sinking right along with theirs. I’d kept it carefully neutral.

They turned in unison to squint at me.

“Why ain’t you as upset about all this as we are, puppy?” Hawk demanded.

Well, I knew this would have to come up sometime.

“Actually,” I said, grimacing, “I’m pretty sure I can help with all of this. The thing is... I changed my last name to Bjorn about three years ago, after I was made and before I joined the RCMP....”

With that, I finally unshielded the one thing I’d hidden from them. From everyone in Bear Mountain.

A beat of stunned silence. Then they all exploded with questions.

“You used to be the billionaire vice president of a major corporation?” Takoda asked.  
"And now you're my constable ?

“We’ve been dominating a motherfucking Barrington?” Hawk realized out loud.

“Like a Barrington-Barrington? My favorite grocery store-slash-supercenter place, where I get 5% back on all my purchases because I shop there so much I decided to get the store credit card?” Holly blurted.

Their questions hit me all at once, but I answered the best I could.

“Canadian billions, but yeah, pretty much,” I told Takoda, my first-ever real boss.  
“And the vice president thing was more like a title gift for graduating from B-School at UBC.”

I turned to Hawk. “Yeah, being a Barrington’s probably why it took me so long to

figure out what was really going on with my sex drive.”

And I threw Holly a sheepish grin. “If you think that 5% is great, wait until you all start shopping with the family discount.”

Hawk shook his head. “No wonder you said you’d handle the ring.”

Holly blinked at her wedding ring finger. “Oh, my God. How much did this cost?”

I still wasn’t great at understanding what my half-siblings referred to as “real-world money.” Was high five figures too much or too little for an engagement ring? Either way, I shielded the answer from her, sensing she didn’t really want to know.

Luckily, Hawk had another question. “Wait, isn’t your mom that Swedish swimsuit model? The one with huge...?”

Unluckily, it was that question.

He cupped his hands in front of his chest in the universal sign for big tits. “I remember that Bleachers Illustrated Swimsuit Edition cover from back in the day. Blondes aren’t my thing, personally, but that mag got passed around by a few of my friends’ older brothers and?—”

I groaned, rubbing my face. “Can you not finish that story?”

I turned back to Holly before he could answer. “Point being, I’m pretty sure I can help.”

*Source Creation Date: August 5, 2025, 4:16 am*

holly

Less than a week and two easily arranged (for Leif) emergency court dates later, I got married on Valentine's Day to the loves of my life.

At Barrington Manor.

By yet another (and hopefully last) judge.

This one asked even fewer questions than the immigration and family court judges who had respectively approved my still-pending permanent resident application (so I could renew my midwife license) and suspended the enormous monthly alimony payments I'd been ordered to make for four more years.

In fact, Corey might have to pay me back. His claims were officially under investigation, with his male factor infertility admission now stamped across all related case files.

Thanks to Leif Bjorn (née Barrington), Corey could no longer hurt me—or squeeze another loonie out of me. (That's what Canadians call their dollar coins, by the way.)

And thanks to Leif, an utterly unfazed judge oversaw our three-way vow exchange in the trophy room of Barrington Manor with just as much gravitas as if it had been a regular one-on-one ceremony.

I'm not sure what technically makes a place a manor instead of a mansion, but the trophy room was stunning—ornate crown molding, massive crystal chandeliers, and



an arched window spilling golden light into a 1,500-square-foot space.

I could have done without the many animal heads staring down at us from the dark wood-paneled walls, though. Also, the three standing, fully taxidermied moose—one from each century of the family’s grocery empire, which dated back to the late 1800s. Their first store, still standing in Quebec, had narrowly lost the title of North America’s oldest grocery store to *épicerie J.A. Moisan* by just a couple of years.

At least there weren’t any bears. Leif told us he’d thrown a particularly bratty grown billionaire tantrum to have them removed after he was made.

But the heads of way too many dead caribou, elk, deer, and big-horned sheep bore witness to our nuptials alongside Leif’s parents.

Afterward, servants wheeled in a feast—larger and more sumptuous than the one Corey and I had put out for the 75 guests at our wedding reception in one of the University of Minnesota-Gemidgee’s event spaces. Even though we were only seven people if you counted the judge.

Then six when Leif’s father—who’d attended only on the condition that we all signed NDAs and the ceremony was explicitly not legally binding to Leif—left as soon as our vows were done.

We all worried Leif might be upset by his elderly father’s swift departure, but our third maul cheerfully assured us over our brand-new four-way bond that he’d gotten way used to the Barrington patriarch’s cold disapproval ever since he’d thrown away his corporate career to fulfill his secret childhood dream of joining the RCMP.

Leif’s six-foot-tall mother, on the other hand—his father’s decades-younger, vegetarian, animal-activist third wife—beamed with approval.

“Leif has his older half-brothers and sisters to carry on the Barrington legacy,” she

said to me in perfect yet heavily accented English over a plate filled with raw vegetables and nothing else. “I am so glad my only child is following in my unconventional footsteps.”

She sighed wistfully. “I much preferred my many African lovers before I decided to marry Leif’s father for his money.”

Okay...

Leif rescued me from the conversation a few seconds later, sending me a huge mental, I am so, so sorry, as he steered me back to Koda and Hawk with a hand on my back.

I just laughed. “It’s okay. She made you.”

Meeting Leif’s parents answered all my remaining doubts about whether he truly wanted to trade in his lux life in Vancouver for a cave den in Bear Mountain with Koda, Hawk, and me.

And, later that night, my maul made sure I forgot all about awkward conversations and judgmental stares when we spent our wedding night in Leif’s “childhood bedroom,” which was, in actuality, a suite larger than the house I’d lost in the divorce.

After days of lying in a mess of blankets and pillows on the floor, I more than appreciated his massive bed—big enough to fit all of us.

I also discovered a new appreciation for lube.

With the help of our new friend, Mr. Astroglide (bought with Leif’s shiny Barrington’s Black Card), Hawk pushed into my back entrance for the first time on our wedding night. He crooked a hand under one thigh, opening me wide so Koda

could claim me from the front.

Then Hawk let my leg go, draping it over Koda's hip as the two of them found their combined rhythm.

It was overwhelming—having them both inside me at once.

Not just physically.

The night before, I'd bitten both Koda and Leif in an informal ceremony on the eve of our wedding.

Now, I could feel all their carnal sensations along with the hum of their tender emotions: Hawk's near-reverent gratitude for this second chance at happiness. Koda's quiet resolve to make sure I never felt unwanted again.

Leif's compersive joy as he watched and patiently waited his turn, like the very good boy he was—who also happened to be an heir to North America's largest privately held grocery chain.

“You feel that? You feel us?” Koda whispered against my lips. “That's home.”

The word hit me harder than I expected. Home.

I understood exactly what he meant.

Whether we were in Leif's penthouse overlooking the harbor, here at Barrington Manor, or in a nest hastily built by a black bear on Bear Mountain, we were home . Because we'd found each other. And now, as a fully bonded maul, wherever we all were was home .

For so long, I'd thought love like this wasn't meant for me. I'd thought I had to do

everything on my own, that maybe I didn't deserve a baby or spousal appreciation.

But now I had all of that.

Hawk would never have to worry about me being too scared to accept my good fortune with open arms again.

I wasn't afraid anymore.

Because I knew this Beary Spicy Valentine would last forever.