



His Bear Hands (Bear Creek Grizzlies #1)

Author: *Layla Nash*

Category: Fantasy

Description: Zoe Stewart didn't plan to end up in the woods after she emptied her corrupt boss's bank accounts, but the small town of Bear Creek is the only safe place for her to hide from his minions. Except Bear Creek isn't connected to anything and she might die without fast wifi, even with the handsome brooding lumberjack to look after her. After a walk in the woods goes badly wrong, Zoe discovers her protector is more than he seems.

Simon Crawford just wants to run tourists into the backwoods of the Cascades on boutique hunting and fishing trips. When his old battle buddy asks him to look after Zoe for a short time, Simon reluctantly agrees and discovers his bear wants her as much as Zoe wants to leave. When a car accident leaves Zoe on the verge of death, Simon saves her the only way he knows: gives her his blood and changes her into a bear.

Just as her bear recognizes his and their happily ever after seems just around the corner, Zoe's corrupt boss hunts them both down and threatens to destroy everything Simon has built in Bear Creek. Will Simon's bear hands be enough to save them both, or will their happily ever after end before it even begins?

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SIMON

Simon sipped his beer and eyed the door of the only bar in town. The jukebox rattled and clicked as it switched over, and static in the speakers distorted most of the actual music. He made a face and waved off one of his guys, playing pool. Tate was running late, which was unlike him. Which meant it was probably the girl's fault.

Simon believed in punctuality. Sometimes it meant the difference between life and death.

He leaned forward over the polished, scarred bar to catch the bartender's attention. "Rosie, any calls for me?"

Cell phone reception sucked out there, which was the way he preferred it.

Rosie, both literally and figuratively a cougar, arched a bleached blonde eyebrow at him. "Honey, the only one calling for you is me, and you ain't answering."

He snorted, shaking his head, and went back to watching his guys play pool and grumble at each other for cheating. Bear Creek was a nice enough town, if a little big for his tastes. It had a bar, a grocery store, a one-room schoolhouse that covered all the kids in town, and exactly one stop sign. No stop lights. Still, though. There were far too many people, and his bear got irritated if they crowded him.

Simon glanced at his watch, about to call it a night, when the door swung open and

Tate walked in. Simon eased to his feet to shake his buddy's hand. "Hey man. Thought you weren't going to make it."

"Had to get out my compass and land nav skills to find this place," Tate said, giving him a half man-hug and slapping his back. "Jesus, man, this is literally the ass-end of nowhere."

"Exactly." Simon paused before they started reminiscing too much, and instead studied the kid who trailed after Tate. Not a kid, really, even though she carried a backpack like she'd wandered off some college campus. The top of her head barely reached his shoulder. She looked like a strong wind would carry her away, although she smelled pretty damn good. His bear grumbled and started paying attention. She smelled like sweet clover and sunshine, a little bit like honey wine. Simon tried to focus and get the scowl off his face as she half-hid behind Tate.

Tate raised a bushy dark eyebrow and caught her shoulder, dragging her forward. "Simon, this is Zoe Stewart, a good friend of mine. Zoe, this is Simon. We used to work together."

She watched him from behind oddly shaped glasses, maybe horn-rimmed or cat eye or some weird shit people found popular, and nodded. "Hey."

Simon gritted his teeth and held out his hand to shake. "Nice to meet you, Zoe. Would you like something to drink?"

"No, thanks." She shook his hand exactly twice, then pulled away, eyes scanning the bar to take in the dim room, the overwhelmingly male patrons, and the cracked TV playing an old football game in the corner. She took a deep breath, then fixed him with a somewhat panicked look in her bright green eyes. "Do you have wifi? "

"Wifi." Simon blinked, jaw slack as he looked at her. That was her first concern?

When Tate said the kid was on the run from some really dangerous guys, and he brought her to a dank bar in the middle of the wilderness to stay with a complete stranger — her first concern was wifi? He looked at Rosie, at a loss.

She smiled, throwing a bar towel over her shoulder, and slid a glass of water to the end of the bar. "We used to, honey, but I can't get the damn thing to work. Just gives me some weird error. I gave up trying to fix it. You're welcome to take a look, if you want."

Zoe exhaled in relief and started toward the end of the bar where a mess of cables and boxes looked like an archaic wifi set-up, but stopped short as Tate caught her elbow. The man leaned down and said very quietly, "Remember the rules, okay? No personal stuff."

"I got it," she muttered, and pulled free and followed Rosie. She huffed an exasperated noise as she said, "Well, this is all wrong," and then crouched to start unplugging things.

Tate shook his head as he picked up the beer Rosie set out for him, and took the stool next to Simon. "She's some kind of computer genius. Hard to believe, but there it is."

Simon eased back onto his stool, though he kept the girl in his peripheral vision. Tate trusted him with her safety, and that started the moment she entered the bar. Simon took a deep breath. "I know you couldn't say much over the phone, but now you're here. Start talking."

Tate leaned his elbows on the bar and stared at the glass in front of him, talking low and fast. Like they used to do during briefings in the Foreign Legion. "She's a big-shot hacker and computer geek, was working for the MobileCorp company out of Silicon Valley doing some questionable shit. She won't admit precisely what, but from what I've seen, it was corporate espionage and money laundering. The CEO,

Mick Castellano, is a bad dude, man. Organized crime at the very least, and connected to crime syndicates around the world. He does business with anyone and everyone. She moved his money and stocks and email and everything around the world a couple steps ahead of the feds and his competitors."

"Seriously?" Simon looked at the girl as she crawled under the table with the wires and equipment, her tennis shoes sticking out into the bar so one of the pool players had to step over her. She sat up and pushed the too-big glasses up her nose, a determined look on her face as she pulled some needle-nose pliers out of her backpack. Simon looked back at his friend. "That kid is a master criminal?"

"I know." Tate snorted and shook his head. "What's the world coming to, right? Anyway. She didn't know what she was doing, hiding his money in all these different off-shore accounts and pulling files out of the encrypted servers of his competitors, but about two weeks ago, MobileCorp was involved in a little snafu in east Asia."

Simon frowned down at his beer, trying to remember the details of what he'd seen on the nightly news, in between ferrying tourists on hunting and fishing trips. "The riots?"

"Yeah. I don't have all the details, and I don't want 'em, brother. Suffice to say, MobileCorp cut a deal with the governor of some principality, it affected the local economy, there were riots. The police cracked down and the next thing you know, half the city burned down and a couple hundred people are dead."

"Shit." Simon craned his neck to check on the girl. Hard to believe someone so young and small could be the cause of so much trouble. She grabbed the arm of one of his guys, Ethan, and pointed up at a box blinking on a shelf near the ceiling, well out of her reach but easy enough to Ethan to pull down. Ethan glanced at him, bemused, and Simon gestured for him to help the girl. Simon looked back at Tate. "But what does a master criminal care about a couple hundred people on the other side of the world?"

"That's where it gets funny. Turns out she has a well-developed sense of justice, or at least a sensitivity to preserving her own skin. I guess when she connected the dots about MobileCorp's culpability in the whole thing, she saw some personal responsibility for the deaths of those people. And it also turns out she has poor impulse control, because instead of going to the feds or people who could actually protect her and give her direction, she just started doing shit."

"Like what?" Simon drained his beer and gestured for Rosie to get him another. He needed something stronger for damn sure, but he still had to drive everyone back to the lodge. All the other guys were three sheets to the wind.

Tate glanced around and dropped his voice still more, though he laughed under his breath as he spoke. "She cleaned out his bank accounts but dummied it up to look like everything was normal. Copied all of the incriminating files and squirreled them away. Pretty much took this dude's business apart, along with all of his contacts, and then turned up on my doorstep, saying she might be in trouble and needed to get out of town."

Simon cursed and rubbed his eyes. His bear was not happy. Anyone that reckless would be a liability in the backcountry, particularly in late summer as all the wildlife started preparing for winter. She could get herself or someone else killed. Or Simon would end up spending twenty hours a day trying to keep her alive. "Why did she turn to you, old man?"

Tate reached for his own beer. "Fuck you, dude, I'm eight months younger than you." He ran a hand over his shaved head, though, and shrugged. "I was doing a side gig a couple of months ago and we crossed paths. That's not important. "

Sure it wasn't. Simon shook his head. Some things never changed, and Tate was one of them. Always running both ends against the middle. If he hadn't saved Simon's life at least twice, Simon would have packed it in that second and gotten the hell out of

town — without the girl. As it was, he reached over the bar for a bottle of whiskey, catching Rosie's attention so she could add it to his tab. The bartender watched the girl connecting things, clicking away on a laptop that appeared out of the backpack, and giving orders to Ethan and suddenly also Cooper — and both men looked a little confused as to why they obeyed her commands.

He tried to hide a smile. Maybe having the kid around would be good for his guys. They were all bears and could get a little aggressive if cooped up together for too long. If the girl could hold her own, she might be a calming influence. Maybe. Simon sighed, aware that Tate watched him closely. "So if it's not important how you know each other, why is she here? They can connect you two, I'm guessing, so you need to stash her?"

"Yeah." Tate made a face and rubbed the back of his neck. "Just a couple of weeks. I know some feds, they're building a case against Castellano. She's provided most of the evidence so far. I just need her to lay low for a couple of weeks until they can put this guy and his people away, then she can go into witness relocation or something. She'll be out of your hair soon enough. I just need her to stay alive for the next month."

"And you think sticking a city kid, without the sense God gave her, in the middle of bear country is going to keep her alive?"

Tate grinned as he slapped Simon's back. "That's where you come in, brother. I figured if anyone can keep her alive, it's you."

Simon massaged his temples. The whiskey definitely didn't help. He needed a baseball bat to the brain for Tate's plan to seem like a good idea. A shower of sparks exploded across the other side of the bar, and the smell of burning wires nearly short-circuited his brain. He lurched to his feet to grab her away from the danger, but the girl jumped up, a little wild-eyed, and wiped her hands on her jeans. She muttered,

"I'm fine," as Ethan tried to drag her away from the dicey socket, and instead she crouched in front of it again.

"So apparently she isn't a genius with electricity?"

"Everyone has their shortcomings. Just keep her away from the generators, okay?" Tate glanced at his watch and started to stand. "She won't admit when she's in over her head. I appreciate the help, man. I've got to get on the road, though."

Simon eased to his feet as well, shaking his friend's hand once more. "It's good to see you, Tate. Stay safe, you hear me? And we'll see you in a couple weeks."

"No worries, brother." Tate grinned, slapping his shoulder, and strode over to speak to the girl. Simon didn't try to overhear, and Ethan and Cooper shuffled back a few steps to give them the appearance of privacy.

The girl looked a little panicked once more as Tate squeezed her shoulder and turned away, though she clamped her lips together as he left. Simon followed Tate outside to get a small suitcase from his car, throwing it into the back of the ancient Range Rover. Tate hesitated next to his rental car, keys flashing in his hand. "She's a little odd, Simon, but she's a good kid. A nice kid. And she's had a rough time of it. You don't live your entire life inside a computer without good reasons, right? And I told her to stay off her personal accounts and not to call anyone she knows, in case MobileCorp can track her, but it's going to be tough. Just — be gentle with her. She might be useless in the woods but she's fucking brilliant with numbers and computers and all kinds of shit."

"I won't hurt her," Simon grumbled, a little irritated Tate felt he had to say it. "Of course I won't. She'll be fine. Just wrap that case up as quickly as possible. It's hunting season and I don't think I have enough orange reflectors to keep her alive in the woods."

Tate grinned, about to retort, when another crackle and shout came from inside the bar. The lights flickered and a cloud of smoke drifted out of the bar as Cooper leaned through the door, sighing. "Uh, boss —"

"Got it." Simon gave Tate a sideways look. "We're even, though. I think she's going to be more work to keep alive than I was."

"I don't know about that, brother. You did some pretty stupid shit back in the day." Tate laughed as he swung into the rental car. He waved as the car peeled out of the parking lot, and Simon shoved his hands in his pockets as he watched the brake lights disappear into the night.

Then he trudged back into the bar, already rubbing his temples. So much for a nice, quiet summer at the lodge.

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ZOE

The second electrical shock really did it. As if Zoe didn't feel bad enough about being in the middle of freaking nowhere in the middle of the night, her fingers hurt as well. Which made typing a real bitch.

She waved away the three burly dudes who tried to drag her away from the junction box. "No, I'm cool. It's almost —"

"Leave it," a deep voice said, and her heart seized up. The biggest dude, like a freaking mountain, appeared close by and his giant hand closed around her elbow to carefully draw her away from the wires. "The wiring around here is old school, you're going to get yourself killed."

"There isn't enough power to —" She leaned enough to flip a switch and the whole box hummed. She laughed in triumph, pulling away from the guy who made her stomach flutter, and checked the router as it re-set. "Awesome. Wifi."

She grinned at the older lady behind the bar, who eyed Zoe as if she were a moderately dangerous animal, and then turned to check the approval of all the dudes. Now they had wifi. They could join civilization. Instead they just looked wary. "See? It's —"

But the big dude with the dark hair and neatly-trimmed beard looked like he had a headache, not even a trace of gratitude on his face. He reached for her arm once more

and tugged her away from the wiring and equipment. "Great. I'm sure Rosie appreciates it. It's late, though, and we should get going."

She set her heels, heart in her throat. Tate trusted these guys, and this guy in particular, but that didn't mean Zoe wanted to walk blindly into the dark with him. Not that she really had any other choice. She hadn't seen much of this town when they drove in, since there weren't any street lights, but she'd put dollars to donuts there wasn't even a no-tell motel. "Where?"

"To the lodge." He kept hold of her arm as he knocked his knuckles on the bar and spoke to the bartender. "Thanks, Rosie. We'll settle up next week?"

"Any time, hon." The older woman glanced at Zoe and tilted her head at the router. "Thanks for the wifi, chickie. You need anything, call here and ask for Rosie."

"Th-thanks," Zoe managed to stutter, flailing on the end of the big guy's grip as he picked up her backpack and headed for the door. She tripped over her own feet trying to keep up, a little more nervous as three guys followed them outside, but she didn't take her eyes off the backpack. Her retirement plan, or at least part of it, was in there, bouncing against the mountain's broad back. "You don't live here? In — town?"

The one holding her wrist, Simon, snorted something close to a laugh. "No. We live about an hour north and west of here, so we need to get going."

Zoe wrenched herself free and folded her arms over her chest, standing in a gravel parking lot as she stared at the guy. "You're freaking kidding me. This is barely civilization. Do you live in a tree or something?"

He arched an eyebrow as he looked at her, a familiar exasperated look on his face. She'd seen that look a lot growing up — from teachers, social workers, cops, bosses, her mother when she was sober enough to focus... Even Tate gave her that look

sometimes, and it hurt more than she could admit. Zoe hardened her heart. She stood on her own two feet, and this knuckle-dragging Neanderthal would not intimidate her into silence.

Simon smiled, though, and ran a hand through his dark hair, setting it all askew. "No, we do not live in a tree. There's a very nice log cabin, we call it the lodge."

Zoe gulped air, trying to reorient the world. Just a couple hours earlier, she was in her cozy apartment, plotting the downfall of Mick Castellano and all of his cronies. And Tate just expected her to live in the woods. Her voice wobbled a bit more than she wanted, but it softened his expression. "Do you — do you have hot water? And electricity? A fridge?"

"No, we eat berries and raw squirrels," one of the other guys said, but he smiled more than Simon. Ethan, she thought they called him.

She didn't dare hope. "Wifi?"

Simon's mouth twitched, as if he wanted to smile but wouldn't, and he held out his hand. "We have Internet, yes. And we even have a kitchen. Ethan only eats raw squirrel because he likes raw squirrel."

"Redneck sushi," Ethan said, jumping into the backseat of a dilapidated Range Rover.

Zoe couldn't quite tell if they were joking. She glanced back at Simon. "I had a suitcase, I don't know where —"

"I got it already," he said, tilting his head at the truck as the other guys loaded up in the back. One leaned against the window and almost immediately began snoring. Simon caught her arm once more, palm warm and rough against her skin, and led Zoe around the car to the passenger side. He opened the door for her and stood behind her

until she clambered up. " You can survive a couple of weeks out here, Zoe. You'll be fine."

She shouldn't have believed him, but part of her relaxed to hear the calm certainty in his voice. Simon looked far too capable and strong and intimidating to make false promises, and if Tate knew him from his shady past, then Simon had to be all right. She took a deep breath as she buckled the seat belt, gripping her knees as the giant man meandered around the car and got in the driver's seat. "Thank you."

He focused on starting the car, frowning as the engine chugged but didn't turn over. "You're welcome."

It took a few tries and some well-intentioned but teasing instructions from the two awake guys in the back before the engine roared to life, then Simon turned and drove into the dark town. Zoe gripped the center console and the door for dear life as they bounced out of the gravel parking lot and onto what felt like dirt roads. The Range Rover had to be older than she was, and the shocks worn out several years ago. After a half a mile, though, Simon hit another gear and the ride smoothed out. A chorus of snores from the backseat meant she and Simon were the only ones still awake in the truck. She took a deep breath, more uncomfortable than she could remember being in a long time, and tried to think of something to talk about. That's what people did in cars, she thought. Talked. She'd never been very good at interacting with people in the meatspace. Online was so much easier.

As she debated, Simon fussed with the headlights and peered into the darkness beyond the dim lights. "You can sleep, if you're tired. We'll be driving about an hour."

Sleep. Sleep would be a convenient way to avoid conversation. She chewed her lip but her heart raced too fast to even pretend. Zoe gripped the strap of her backpack, just to remind herself it was all real and happening, and tried to find a comfortable

position in the seat. She searched for an acceptable topic when the handsome guy driving the truck didn't seem to resent conversation but clearly wasn't the talkative type. "So, um, what do you do?"

He glanced at her, though his expression revealed nothing even in the faint greenish glow of the dashboard, then looked back at the road. "Tate didn't tell you much, did he?"

"No. Just you guys knew each other and you owed him one."

"I did." Simon frowned, slowing the truck to take a steep turn in the road, then sped back up. "We traveled together when we were younger. I ended up out here a couple of years ago. I run a company that offers backcountry hiking, camping, fishing, and hunting trips. We take tourists on vacation."

Zoe blinked. "So you just hang out in the woods? All the time?"

He laughed, a charming little huff that made her even more nervous. "Yeah. All the time."

She bit at her nails, drawing her feet up on the seat in front of her so she could hug her knees. This guy belonged on a reality TV show about camping and hunting and lumberjacks. Seriously. He made her uneasy, but not in a bad, murderer-y way. He was too capable, too efficient. He owned a space, regardless of where that space might be. In the bar, he dominated the room, even when he just sat and talked to Tate. In the car, he owned the car and the entire freaking road and everything they drove through. He was big and handsome and clearly stronger than anyone she'd met in real life, including Tate, because his arms looked bigger around than her thigh. He possessed the kind of calm certainty that made her feel like a nervous, ridiculous kid who flapped into the middle of his world, made a mess, and then bolted for the exit before anything serious could happen.

She sank lower in the seat and couldn't look at him, her cheeks burning. Thank God the darkness hid the embarrassment. He really was too handsome for real life. He was exactly the type of guy she loved, would stalk online, but could never approach. He wouldn't ever be interested in her.

"Tate mentioned some of what you do," he said after the silence stretched and Zoe made no effort to fill it. "After all this blows over, what are your plans?"

Heat flushed her entire face. Great. So he knew she worked for really awful people. "I don't know," she managed to force out, wishing she could pretend to sleep. Even bouncing her head on the window would be better than an awkward conversation with a gorgeous lumberjack. She wondered if his beard was soft or scratchy, and for a second even considered reaching out to check. She sat on her hands instead. "I wanted to — make up for some stuff. Thought I might find a charity to work for or something."

"That would be good." He nodded, still frowning at the road ahead of him. She wondered if he ever smiled, if the wrinkles across his forehead were permanent. Maybe those rugged good looks would crack and disappear if he smiled too much. Made sense. Simon glanced at her. "You balanced out a little bit of karma, at least, by helping Rosie with the wifi at the bar. I know she appreciated it."

Zoe hoped it was worth it; her chest still ached from that second jolt of power. She hadn't expected the wiring to be quite so finicky. Maybe the electric shocks explained the way her heart stuttered around him. It couldn't be Simon himself. "Good."

"That said," he started, and she froze, heart sinking. Adults never started good news with that tone of voice. Simon took a deep breath. "I'd prefer if you didn't touch anything at the lodge. The generators work most of the time and we can't afford to have an outage. I'm sure you could make some improvements, but things are good the way they are. "

She bit her thumbnail and stared out her window. Message received. Don't touch anything, don't mess anything up, and she would be out of his life in a matter of weeks. He didn't want or need her screwing things up. "Right. No problem."

"While you're here, we could use help in the kitchen and the garden, maybe with decorating."

"Decorating?" Zoe wrinkled her nose as she looked at him. "What do I know about decorating?"

"I thought..." He trailed off, shaking his head. "Don't women like decorating houses? You can pick out curtains and lamps and stuff."

Zoe laughed, resting her temple on her knees, still drawn up to her chest, and studied his profile. "Uh, no. I can barely match my shoes."

"Noah will be disappointed," he said under his breath. "He wanted you to class the place up a bit."

She made a face and tried a sideways shrug. "I can google the hell out of it. Rustic cabin decor. Country chic. Backcountry cottage."

He snorted, dangerously close to a face-cracking smile, and something in Zoe's chest eased. Maybe he didn't resent her. Maybe the next couple of weeks would be a good distraction instead of a terrifying hell of hiding under her bed without an Internet connection. Her phone hadn't registered a signal for hours.

"Country chic," he said. "That's definitely us," and he gestured over his shoulder at the three bruisers snoring away in the backseat.

Zoe straightened enough to glance back at them, the three guys with their mouths

hanging open and limbs all akimbo, then looked back at Simon. "Are you guys related?"

"Not really." He slowed the car again to take a switchback as they started gaining altitude. "I know Ethan from the same place I know Tate, and Cooper and I went to high school together. Finn showed up one summer and never left. And Noah, who's back at the lodge, is a distant cousin. He ran into some trouble and needed a place to lay low for a while. I have a habit of collecting strays." And he sighed.

Zoe felt about as low as possible in the jacked-up truck. Another stray. Another burden for Simon's giant shoulders. Her head rested against the seat and she resigned herself to a long month of trying not to fall in love with him. Since she was only a stray.

SIMON

Simon rose with the dawn, a habit beaten into him by too many years in the military. Life without discipline was dangerous. Sloppy habits led to sloppy decision-making, and sloppy decision-making got people killed. He walked the perimeter of their immediate property, a quick jog that left his scent around the place to hopefully scare the other predators away, and then went back inside the lodge to start breakfast for the two guests.

Luckily Tate's call came during a lull in business. They hadn't been overflowing with guests, so Simon had an extra room for the girl. She'd been up most of the night, finally turning out her light at three in the morning. He heard her moving around, and remained ready to interdict her if she made a run for it, but in the end he only heard a little bit of snuffling that could have been tears. He gave her the room next to his so he could keep an ear out for any escape attempts — or assassination attempts, if things went badly.

He felt like a jerk already, after the abrupt way their conversation in the car ended. He couldn't quite figure out why, but he must have said or done something that offended her. Zoe barely whispered two words to him even after they arrived and he showed her where she would stay, only a soft 'Thank you' before she retreated to the small but cozy room. Simon frowned at the burner on the stove as it refused to light, leaning down to check the gas line before getting out a match.

Simon shook his head as he poured muffin batter into a tin. She was so jumpy, so

damn skittish. He wanted to talk to her, to figure out how she looked at the world, to figure out why a shot of excitement raced through him every time he touched her. But she'd clamped her mouth shut and stared into the night with a pensive look on her face, worry creating lines across her forehead.

Ethan and Cooper stirred in the back of the lodge, shambling out in their pajamas, and silently ate their oatmeal and bacon and bowls of fruit. Then they disappeared again to get dressed and start work. The tourists wouldn't be up for another hour, most likely, and then would take a nature walk around the lodge. Simon glanced at his watch. Almost seven, and no sign of the girl. He'd told her to be up early before he shooed her off to bed, but she barely acknowledged he spoke. She looked dazed, a little off-kilter, and he wondered if she were actually as steady with her situation as Tate seemed to think. Being hunted by international criminals would be enough to throw anyone off their game, and Zoe didn't strike him as an even-keeled person to start with.

At half-past seven, he climbed the massive staircase to the second level of the lodge, the great-room open behind him, and took a right and then a left to the back of the house. He kept the big room with the great corner views in the back right of the house for himself, and gave her the space next to it, closer to the front of the lodge. The guests all stayed on the other side of the house, and the rest of his guys slept downstairs in the back. Simon wanted to build a few smaller cabins behind the lodge, so his guys could make better dens to manage their bears, but so far they didn't have the revenue to support new construction. Soon, though, or at least he hoped.

He knocked on her door, listening for anything stirring inside. Nothing. He knocked again and heard a grumbled, "Not now."

Simon edged the door open and poked his head in. "Hey. Time to get up."

She sprawled across the queen size bed in yoga pants and a t-shirt with a cartoon

character on it, dark hair tangled across the pillows, and he abruptly had to revise his assessment of her age. Definitely not a kid. The backpack and sweatshirt she'd worn the night before hid some womanly curves, emphasized by the tight t-shirt and the gentle swell of her hips. He looked away before his thoughts drifted elsewhere, and knocked on the inside wall a little louder. "Time to get up, Zoe. Work starts early around here."

"You're nuts," she said, lifting her head enough to give him a jaundiced, one-eyed look. But she didn't move or cover herself up. "It's only seven. Normal people don't get up before noon."

He made an irritated noise, though it had more to do with the fact that he needed to stay behind the door to hide his interest in her than her reluctance to get out of bed. His bear very much wanted to crawl in with her and spend the rest of the day getting to know every inch of her. Simon struggled for control, his voice deepening as she moved and the t-shirt stretched across her breasts and her nipples slowly stood out against the thin fabric. "Zoe, I will dump a bucket of ice water on you if you're not downstairs in ten minutes. "

She lifted her head again to peer at him. "You don't let the strays sleep in?"

Simon blinked, trying to formulate a retort, but she struggled free from the tangled sheets and marched up the door to pat his chest. "I'll be downstairs in half an hour."

She started to shut the door in his face but Simon blocked it with his boot and his shoulder. The bear might like her but he ran a tight ship, and everyone worked for their keep. Even if she smelled so good it drove him wild. "You're not a guest. You're here to work."

"Thought I wasn't supposed to touch anything?" She sounded fierce for something so small and soft and sleepy, her hair standing up and pillow wrinkles marking her

cheek.

God, he wanted her to touch something, all right. Simon cleared his throat and struggled to remain composed. The guests would be up any minute and he didn't have time to show her exactly how he felt about her staying in bed all day. He wouldn't get a lick of work done if his bear was distracted by her all snuggled up and cozy. Maybe putting her in the room next to his was a terrible idea. "You're helping make breakfast for the guests, then you can weed the garden."

Her nose wrinkled into an expression so damn adorable his bear grumbled about letting her go back to sleep in his bed. Safer that way. None of the other bears would get any ideas about her. Zoe tried again to shut the door. "Manual labor isn't really my thing. I'm more of a white collar numbers kind of girl, see?"

Simon gripped the door, unmoving despite that she put her full effort into shoving him into the hall. It was kinda cute, maybe, her feet sliding on the floor as she leaned her entire body into trying to push him out. Simon frowned. "And how did that white collar stuff work out for you? On the run? Hiding out? I don't run a charity, girl, and you're going to work for your keep. "

"I can pay you," she said, exasperated, and abruptly turned on her heel. She released the door so quickly he nearly fell through it, but recovered by the time she turned around, holding the backpack in one hand and a stack of cash in the other. It had to be at least five grand, probably ten. "How much do these yuppies pay? I'll double it. Just let me sleep in a little." She tossed him the cash and slid back into bed, making a sleepy noise as she rolled back up in the sheets.

It took every ounce of strength he had to not follow suit or at least tuck her in. He dropped the cash on the mattress next to her. "Manual labor will be good for you. Now get your ass out of bed. You've got ten minutes. If you're not downstairs by then, I will dump ice water on you and your first chore will be cleaning it up."

"Okay." She yawned and rearranged her pillow. "See you downstairs in ten."

Simon ground his teeth and left, catching the door before he slammed it, and stalked down the stairs to the kitchen. He pasted a smile on his face for the newly-awake guests, a married couple on something called a babymoon, and engaged in friendly conversation though he kept an eye on the clock. At eight minutes, he excused himself and filled up a bucket of water from the sink, dumping ice into it.

When the guests laughed and asked what he was doing, Simon's smile turned more genuine. "We have a reluctant employee. She has trouble with mornings."

So at least they were on his side as he hauled the bucket upstairs. He stood outside Zoe's door at nine minutes, and as soon as his watch said ten, he shouldered the door open. She blinked and looked at him, yawning. "It's not —"

He tossed the water on her and she yelped. Scrambled up as ice and water and sheets flew everywhere, and glared at him, mad as a scalded cat. Simon struggled to keep his expression even as she muttered curses and the soaked t-shirt clung to her body. "Like I said, Zoe. Your first chore is now to clean all this up, put the sheets in the washer, get dressed, and come downstairs to finish preparing breakfast."

Her chest heaved with indignation and her green eyes looked dark as emeralds as she scowled at him. "You're mean."

"And you're late." He turned on his heel and strode out before the sight of her breasts made him change his mind. He whistled as he headed back to the kitchen, stowing the bucket under the sink, and finished pressing fresh orange juice for the guests.

A few minutes later, a great deal of cursing came from a giant wad of sheets and blankets and pillows as it staggered down the stairs and disappeared into the back of the lodge. Simon pulled a tray of muffins from the oven and set them out to cool,

keeping his composure as Zoe strode into the kitchen and fixed him with an evil eye. "What would you like me to do?"

He directed her to the skillet on the stove. "Don't let the sausages burn."

The guests tried to hide their grins. Simon felt a little bad; Zoe still looked like she'd just woken up, though she wore the jeans from last night and another t-shirt. At least she put a bra on. He turned his attention to the radio on his belt so he didn't end up staring at her chest, and pulled a map from the drawer in the kitchen island. He placed it in front of the guests. "So, a light nature hike around the lodge after breakfast is a great way to start the day. I recommend this track," and he highlighted a short trail that wandered into a nearby meadow. "The birds are singing and Ethan said he saw a couple of foxes out early. Just keep an eye out for bears. The mama bears have been bringing their cubs around to eat. They're just black bears and are usually more afraid of you than you are of them, but when the mama bears think their cubs are threatened, it changes the situation. So take bear mace with you and this air horn. That should scare them away. Just talk and make noise as you walk so you don't surprise them."

The man raised his eyebrows as he studied the map. "It's safe, though, right?"

"Of course. Just stay aware and make some noise. But Noah can go with you, if you'd like?"

"No, we'll be fine." The guest continued eating, studying the map with a frown. "We'll take a radio with us, just in case."

"Sounds like a plan." Simon checked how Zoe handled the bacon and sausages, leaning over her shoulder as she poked them with a fork. He kept his voice low. "When those are done, make yourself breakfast. Then please help Ethan clean up."

She grumbled something that even his bear hearing couldn't catch, which was

probably just as well by the death glare she gave along with it. Simon tried not to laugh and instead tugged on the end of her ponytail. "Okay, sunshine. Have a good morning."

He took a large cup of coffee and retreated to his office, just behind the kitchen. He'd never been a morning person, until necessity made him one. Hopefully Zoe figured out how to get herself out of bed on time each morning, otherwise that bucket would get a lot of use over the next month. He paused in the doorway to the office, frowning in thought as the bear pushed for them to keep her in their sight. Keep her close. Of course, if she insisted on sleeping in, that gave him the opportunity to wake her up.

Simon pinched the bridge of his nose and shoved away the thought. Not a good idea. Definitely not a good idea. He could make it through the month without getting attached to her. A girl like her would never want to stay at the lodge, and he sure as hell couldn't move to the city. Even if the bear thought she smelled good and wanted to stay next to her, it wouldn't work. She didn't know anything about shifters or his bear, and it was best to keep it that way.

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ZOE

Zoe fumed as she served the bacon and sausage to the guests, then as she cleaned the pans and followed Ethan's quiet directions on loading the dishwasher and bagging up the fresh muffins so everyone had snacks later. Ethan seemed like a quiet soul, thinner than Simon though he was just as tall, and after the guests wandered off on their hike, he pointed her to one of the stools at the kitchen island. Zoe sat, irritated and tired and hungry, and leaned her arms and head on the island.

Ethan fussed with another pan and mixed something up in a bowl. He glanced back at her. "Coffee?"

"Do you have any Zow?" The energy drink was sometimes the only thing that got her through the day. Maybe she could order a few cases of it. She'd need it, if Simon insisted on making her get up so damn early. She still couldn't believe he actually got a bucket of cold water and threw it on her. Even the worst group home she'd been in didn't do that. She closed her eyes and muttered a few interpretations of his family tree. Even that wicked twinkle in his eyes wasn't enough to make seven a.m. worth seeing .

Ethan laughed. "I have no idea what Zow is, so no, we don't. Try this." And he placed a mug of fresh coffee near her elbow, along with a little pitcher of cream and a dish of sugar.

Zoe managed to crack one eye open and sipped from the coffee, though she made a

face and dumped in most of the sugar and half of the cream. Then she hid her face again, waiting for the caffeine to kick in. It wasn't an auspicious start for her first day on the lam. A delicious scent filled the kitchen, like vanilla and nutmeg, and she lifted her head to look around. Pancakes.

Ethan slid a short stack in front of her, along with a bottle of warm syrup, and said, "Breakfast is served. Don't expect this every morning, young lady. Just your first day at the lodge."

"Thanks." Her stomach growled and Zoe mustered the energy to prop herself up and eat. Maybe sugar and coffee together would keep her awake. Since Simon apparently had a long list of chores for her to complete. "How do you weed a garden?"

He smiled, light brown hair tousled across his forehead, and flipped a pancake in the skillet. "Maybe we'll tackle that later this afternoon. Not sure I want to turn you loose against the vegetables without you knowing what to look for."

"Well," she said, pointing her fork at where Simon had disappeared. "Someone told me to weed the garden."

Ethan leaned back against the counter next to the cooktop as he rolled up a pancake and dunked it in some syrup, studying her with an odd expression on his face. "So you're some kind of computer genius?"

Zoe made a face and concentrated on the delicious pancakes. "I guess. I like computers more than people."

"I like animals more than people." He smiled with half his mouth. "You'll fit right in. Can you fix the wifi here as well? "

"Probably. But Simon told me not to touch anything." She wiped syrup from her chin.

"Other than the dishes, I think."

"I'll talk to him." Ethan loaded the dishes into the dishwasher and started scrubbing the pan. "But you should double-check your marching orders."

Irritated, Zoe checked her phone — still no reception — and shoved away from the kitchen island to go find Simon. She never cooked, not when there were dozens of delivery and takeout places in her neighborhood. Then she didn't have to worry about cleaning up. Who wanted to spend time doing dishes when there were a lot more interesting things to see and do? The wood floor creaked under her feet as she wandered down the wide hall to where Simon disappeared; she still carried her coffee, hoping to leech some warmth and energy out of it.

The door to his office stood open and she peeked inside. Simon sat behind an enormous wooden desk in the small room, a couple of bookshelves lining the walls, and frowned at a massive ledger book open in front of him. She hesitated in the doorway, uncertain of her welcome, and jumped as he said, "If you're coming in, come in."

Zoe edged into the room and wandered around the perimeter, studying the titles on the books, and dared a glance at him. Simon made a note in the ledger before he leaned back in the chair, studying her with a neutral expression. Zoe flushed but didn't know why, and finally spoke. "What's that?"

He glanced down at the ledger, then back at her. "It's how I do the bookkeeping."

"On paper?" Zoe blinked, at a loss for words. "People still do that?"

"We do." He carefully closed the ledger and folded his hands on top of it, waiting patiently for her next question.

Zoe gulped some coffee to buy time, with no idea why he made her so nervous. He just sat there, so quiet and still, as if he feared startling her. "You should automate. Get a computer and one of the accounting programs. It'd be a lot faster. Easier to audit. I bet you'd find some places to save money, too."

"Thank you, but I'm fine with this." He patted the ledger, dark eyes tracking her every move as Zoe paced.

"I could set it up for you." She forced the words out in a rush. "It would be easy and I think it would help. I'm much better at that kind of stuff than weeding or cleaning or cooking. I swear. It would really —"

"Thank you for the offer, I appreciate it, but I'll keep doing things this way."

She gulped, a little hurt, but shrugged. "I just think —"

"I'd prefer not to let a master criminal set up my accounting software," he said, and even the hint of a smile didn't take the sting out of his words.

Zoe rocked back on her heels. She flushed, felt adrenaline rush through her and make her hands cold as she struggled to find something to say. She hadn't thought he would judge her like that. She gnawed on her lower lip and looked at the legs of the desk, deflated. She couldn't even meet his eyes. "Right. Sure. I'll just — go."

She turned on her heel and almost ran into the door. She cleared her throat and tried to steady herself, feeling even worse as he stood and sighed. "Zoe, I didn't mean—"

She fled. Hustled out the back door and left her coffee on the pile of firewood, not wanting to go through the kitchen and risk facing Ethan. He would be nice but would probably call her a criminal too. They didn't understand. Sometimes you ended up in something without realizing how you got there. She hadn't set out to be a criminal. It

just — happened. And she felt really badly about it. She tried to make things right. She really did .

Zoe shoved open the door and burst outside, not stopping to think before heading for one of the trails. She took off on the trail Simon highlighted for the tourists. She hugged herself and tried to clear the knot from her throat. She paid her way through college creating characters in video and computer games, then selling them to the highest bidder, she moved money around for people, and somehow ended up working for a company that didn't have the greatest ethics. Then Mick Castellano's people head-hunted her away and suddenly all the brakes were off and she had free rein. All those skills that kept her safe and ahead of the competition were suddenly worth a lot. They paid her a ton, more than she ever could have made using a business degree. It was just digits, moving from one place to the other. Just files and numbers. All make believe. It wasn't supposed to actually hurt people. People weren't supposed to die.

She stumbled on a tree root in the trail and nearly fell. She paused to take a breath, fighting for control as her breath came faster, a little desperate. Had to get a hold of herself. Life online was so much easier. She could hide in her apartment and do everything she needed to do without ever seeing another person. People just hurt you. You opened yourself up to them, offered them part of yourself, and they hurt you.

Her vision blurred and Zoe cursed, dashing tears from her eyes. Simon was too good-looking to be nice. He pretended, like they all did, and used that to get close enough to really hurt her. She pulled out her phone and hoped for a signal, any type of connection, so she could call Tate. Tell him to come get her. She would take her chances with Mick and his guys. She could get all the money back, could hide all the files again somewhere better. It wasn't too late.

Nothing. Not even half a bar. Zoe shook her head. There had to be a phone in the lodge somewhere. It was just a matter of finding it without Simon catching her. She started down the trail again, still looking at her phone as the trail curved and an

enormous meadow full of flowers stretched out in front of her. Zoe blinked, more than a little awed. Holy shit. Maybe there was something to all this nature crap after all.

She fiddled with her phone to take a picture, then froze. Three baby bear cubs, little black roly-poly things with giant paws, played in the flowers. One reared up and chomped the head off a flower, and another one tackled him with a growl. Zoe bit her lip to keep from laughing at their antics, and instead she hit the video on her phone to record them playing. It lifted her spirits a bit so see them rolling around and wrestling. So much cuter in real life than on a computer screen.

Zoe inched a little closer, off the trail, and zoomed in on the babies. One sat up on his hind legs and stared at her, then made an odd little squeaky sound.

Something rustled behind her, and Zoe looked over her shoulder. A bear — a much bigger bear — lumbered out of the undergrowth behind her and sat up on its hind legs. Its small eyes flashed red as it looked at her and made a growling noise that set Zoe's heart racing. She fumbled with her phone, trying to remember if she'd read anything about bears. Surviving bear attacks. Maybe climbing trees? Making noise?

Her mind raced. What the hell had Simon said this morning to the guests?

Zoe gasped as the bear reared still taller and waved its paws in the air, snarling louder. She stumbled back, falling on her butt and nearly landing on the cubs. They squalled and ran for the trees, and the mama bear charged. Zoe screamed.

A flash of brown streaked down the trail and nearly landed on her, then reared up and roared at the black bear. The mama bear grumbled and redirected, bounding to where her cubs waited, but watched them warily. Zoe blinked, feeling faint, and then nearly passed out completely as the giant brown thing turned and she looked at a freaking grizzly bear. A grizzly bear. Easily five times as large as the mama bear, its teeth

twice as long, its paws as big as her chest. She scooted back into the meadow, praying as fast as she could. She never read anything about dealing with grizzly bears.

She braced for the fatal swipe as the grizzly loomed over her, its eyes dark and angry, and she held her hands up to fend it off. "Please don't eat me."

It sounded so stupid she wanted to take it back. Worst last words ever.

But nothing happened. She looked up as the grizzly backed away, crouched down, and then disappeared. Disappeared.

Zoe sat up, heart in her throat. The grizzly deflated and then Simon stood there, buck-naked. Simon. Looking furious. He stormed over to her, grabbing her upper arm hard enough Zoe cried out, and he shook her until her teeth rattled. "What the hell is wrong with you? What were you thinking?"

She stammered, trying to come up with something, and searched for the grizzly. Couldn't be. Maybe they had a pet bear, trained to protect the guests. That would make sense. Simon wasn't a bear. Simon couldn't turn into a bear. That happened on the Internet with special effects magic, not in real life.

Zoe tried to breathe as he hauled her up the trail toward the lodge. "Wh-what did — what's —"

She couldn't get any other words out, between him yelling at her for putting herself in danger and her own labored breathing. Simon shook his head, the muscles jumping in his jaw as he dragged her up the porch stairs and into the great room, slamming the door behind him. He threw her into one of the chairs and loomed over her, posture so much like the grizzly that her heart tripped. "What the fuck were you doing out there? You got between a mother bear and her cubs. Are you trying to get yourself killed?"

Zoe stared up at him, mesmerized by the dark eyes flashing with gold and the muscles that rippled across his chest and abs and thighs... She flushed and dragged her eyes higher to stare him in the throat. "I don't know what —"

"You could have died." He whirled and strode away, pacing in jerky movements that only made his muscles stand out. He had a perfectly tremendous ass. Zoe drew her legs up to her chest in the chair, huddling lower as he threw one of the kitchen stools across the room and it shattered into kindling against the massive stone fireplace. "That bear would have killed you for threatening her cubs. And then what would I do? What the hell would I do if you got yourself killed?"

Zoe held up a hand to block out his sizable dick so she could actually look at him without blushing, and gulped for air. She'd seen a lot of weird shit online but never seen one that large in real life. She felt almost like it was looking at her. Or pointing at her. Wanting to introduce itself.

Maybe she was in shock. That might explain the hysterical giggle that bubbled up in her chest. Zoe tried to regroup but her thoughts scattered like wild birds and she could only stutter, her voice wavering as the tears returned. "I didn't mean to —"

He swore, turning away once more to run his hands through suddenly shaggy hair. When he faced her again, he tried to look and sound calm, though Zoe didn't buy it for a second. "Please explain to me what you were thinking."

She moved her hands to continue blocking his junk. "I just — did you really turn into a bear?"

He blinked, looked down at himself, then up at her. A red flush crept up his throat and filled his face. He scowled at her, his finger jabbing the air. "This conversation isn't over. Stay right there. Don't move a goddamn muscle."

Then he turned on his heel and stormed up the stairs to his room. Zoe sat in the great room, stunned, and stared at the giant fireplace, almost big enough to walk into. Her brain didn't work fast enough to keep up. He couldn't be a bear. But nothing else explained how he showed up as the grizzly disappeared, and why he ended up naked in the middle of a meadow half a mile from the lodge. She looked down at her phone, still clutched in her hand, and held her breath. The recording... She played it back, watching the cubs play, then the mama bear rear up, then it bounced and blurred as she fell, then a grizzly, then... Simon. Simon standing up, looking afraid and angry. Afraid.

She watched it again. And again. And again. Trying to puzzle it out. Trying to understand. The bile rose in her throat, welling up along with panic and sheer terror.

He couldn't be a bear. And yet, on the video, he was.

SIMON

Simon regretted calling her a criminal immediately. He didn't mean it. But the thought of her in his office, working on his books, in close proximity every day, drove him nearly crazy. He wouldn't get any work done. He'd have to spend weeks cleaning after she left just to get rid of her scent. So he came up with the best defense he could. And it sucked. It hurt her feelings. He chased her immediately, and thanked God he did — so he was close enough to save her when she wandered between a mother black bear and her cubs.

Instinct took over and he shifted, burst right out of his clothes to intimidate the furious mother bear, and as soon as the danger passed, he shifted back. But his heart stayed in his throat as he confronted her, terrified at the thought that she might have been hurt, or worse — killed. The thought of losing her nearly paralyzed him.

So he yelled at her the entire way back to the lodge, naked as a jaybird, and then continued yelling at her inside the lodge. And then saw her trying to avoid looking at his junk. So he fled like a coward, instead of going to his office to get some extra shorts. Simon paced the confines of his room, struggling with control as he grabbed double handfuls of his hair. A sharp pain in his chest spiked as the image of her, helpless on the ground as the mother bear loomed over her, flashed in front of him.

Simon growled and made another circuit. Crazy, ridiculous girl. No sense of self-preservation. Taking a fucking video of the baby bears without paying attention to anything around her. He would have to put a bell on her and wrap her in reflective

tape just to get her through hunting season. And God only knew what trouble she could get in when the snow fell, she might —

He stopped abruptly. She would be gone before the snow fell. Tate would retrieve her, she'd testify against the evil CEO, and then she'd disappear into some federal witness protection program. He would never see her again. His bear roared at the thought, rigid with fury. They couldn't lose her. He didn't know how or why or what trick of fate made it so, but she was his. His mate. The other half of his soul.

Simon scrubbed his face and braced his hands on the dresser, leaning forward to stare at the floor. His mate. That clumsy, wild-eyed computer genius was his mate. The one who couldn't live without good wifi. Who didn't know how to weed a garden or walk through the forest without almost getting killed by a bear. Who was on the run from an international crime syndicate. The universe certainly had a sense of humor.

The door creaked open behind him and Simon turned, prepared to apologize to her for being such an ass, but it was Ethan. The biologist raised his eyebrows as he got an eyeful of naked Simon, and grabbed up a pair of sweatpants thrown across the chair near the door. He tossed them at Simon, then folded his arms over his chest. "So. How's it going? "

Simon shot him a dirty look but pulled on the sweatpants. "What the hell do you want?"

"I'd like to know why you're making so much noise up here, and why the girl is downstairs crying."

"She's crying?" Simon lurched toward the door. She couldn't cry. He would smother the sadness right out of her.

"Whoa." Ethan grabbed him by the shoulders and shoved him back, expression tense.

"Since I'm guessing you're the reason she's crying, you plant your ass over there and start talking."

Simon's bear reacted to the challenge and the thought of his mate in pain, and a red sheen covered his vision. But his better sense prevailed and he staggered back to sit on his bed. "I'll kick your ass for that later. She went out to the meadow, got between a couple of cubs and their mother. I followed her and when the mother bear went after her, I changed. Saved her. Then I — yelled at her for being careless and marched her back up here."

"You shifted in front of her." Ethan heaved a sigh and flopped into the chair near the door. "And then shifted right back? So now she knows you're a bear. Well, that's great."

"She would have died." Simon swallowed another wave of fury at the thought and searched around for a t-shirt. "I didn't have a choice."

"You didn't bring bear mace with you?"

He shot Ethan a dirty look. "Go pound sand."

"I'll get right on it." He yawned instead. "Look, man. Level with me. The kid's cute and she's kinda funny, and right now she's scared and alone. Why are you up here, snarling and growling, when you should be down there explaining to her how to be safe in the woods?"

"I didn't trust myself. And I was naked."

Ethan laughed and held up his hands to fend Simon off as he rounded on him. Ethan cleared his throat. "You hauled her up from the meadow in the nude? Seriously? And then yelled at her more? I'm surprised she didn't laugh in your face."

"I hate you so much right now." Simon rubbed his jaw, his beard out of control after the shift. He'd have to get Finn to trim his hair again, too. "Now get out of my way."

Ethan shrugged and levered to his feet, giving Simon the room to stride out into the hall and jog down the stairs. Simon paused on the landing, scanning the great room for a sign of her. "I thought you said she was down here."

"She was." Ethan frowned, edging past him to go into the kitchen and peer behind the staircase. "She really was, dude."

An engine chugged to life outside and Simon froze. The Range Rover.

Ethan cursed and ran to the office behind the kitchen. He stuck his head out. "She took the keys."

Simon leapt for the door, throwing it open in time to see the Range Rover rumble out of the drive and down to the road. He cursed, searching for the other truck, but the only vehicle left was a four wheeler. Ethan leaned through the door to toss him the keys and a radio. "I'll call Cooper back with the other truck. Go now and tell us where to meet you."

Simon gritted his teeth and ignored the pain in his bare feet as he strode across the rocky drive and jumped on the four wheeler. He tore down the road after her, heart in his throat. The Range Rover was a tricky old beast and the brakes were a bit soft. As long as she slowed down on the steeper curves, she'd be fine. He'd catch up and everything would be fine. He would explain everything. Of course, if she drove as well as she walked through the woods, he needed to hurry.

Simon stood on the four wheeler and roared down the road faster than he'd ever dared, listening desperately for any sign of the Range Rover ahead of him. Birds scattered and his radio crackled, the rest of his guys checking in with status reports as

they converged on the road and the most likely place to find her. He couldn't breathe and his vision narrowed until he only saw the road ahead of him. The bear drove him to go faster, careening down the road, to save their mate.

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ZOE

Zoe tried to make conversation with Ethan when he came into the lodge, but by the odd look he gave her, she failed. She went back to staring at the wall, trying to decipher the next logical step. If this were a role playing game, she should get out of there. Men who turned into bears heralded a lot of sick shit she didn't want to deal with.

As soon as Ethan jogged up the stairs, she crept over to the kitchen to search for the keys to something. Any possible mode of transportation. Nothing. So she snuck into the office where Simon kept his antiquated ledger books and snatched the keys off his desk. The gears ground as she tried to pull out of the drive, but she didn't care about the transmission. Simon could pay for a new one if it fell out.

The door to the lodge banged open just as she peeled out, gravel scattering from under the tires, and she careened down the side of the mountain. She raced away, terrified that Simon would come after her as either man or bear, and fumbled with her phone to try to get a signal. She had to call Tate. Had to figure out whether Tate actually knew what these guys were or if this was some sick joke. Maybe he could pick her up. Send her a rental car or a bus ticket or something.

She wrenched on the steering wheel and stomped on the clutch to avoid flying off a switchback, and dialed Tate's number. She kept hitting re-dial, half her attention on the road, and waited until the trees thinned and she actually got a signal. The phone rang several times before Tate picked up, sounding annoyed. "Yeah?"

"You son of a bitch," she said, nearly breathless with the effort of keeping the Range Rover squarely on the road. "These people are nuts . Come get me. Come get me now ."

"You shouldn't have called." Tate swore, and it sounded like he moved quickly. "Jesus Christ, what's wrong with you? It's been less than a day. Just sit tight. You'll be fine."

"I swear to God, Tate, you'd better —" She yelped as the car hit a pothole and a deer bolted across the road and she swerved. And then there was nothing below the car and she felt weightless, floating up until her seatbelt caught her, and she stared out the windshield as trees rushed up and then —

Nothing.

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SIMON

Simon caught sight of the Range Rover's tail lights before Zoe disappeared around another corner, and his heart jumped. He could catch her, could bring her back to the lodge and explain everything. Once he got her warm and fed and safe in his den, she would understand. He clicked the radio to signal he'd found her and sped to catch up. Saw the truck bounce, then lurch.

Watched as she swerved to avoid a deer.

As the Range Rover sailed off the road and plummeted toward the earth.

As trees snapped and broke but didn't hide a crash.

Simon closed his eyes and prayed for the first time since he left the Foreign Legion. Begged whatever deity would listen not to take his mate away so soon after he'd found her.

Simon brought the radio up and struggled for calm as he called to his guys. "She crashed. Get here immediately. The fifth marker. It's — not good."

It fell out of his hand as he went to the edge of the road and steeled himself to look. The Range Rover rested in a heap of broken trees, one switchback down, and smoke rose from the engine. Nothing moved. She didn't cry out or beg for help. Just silence.

Silence and his heart pounding.

Simon ran the four wheeler around the switchback to get closer. He barely heard the grumble of the ancient farm trucks approaching from above and below, and all four of his guys stood around him. The color drained from Ethan's face as he looked at the wreck. "What the fuck happened?"

"Deer. She swerved." Simon started toward the car as numbness spread through his chest. Prepared to see her broken body.

Ethan caught his arm, said, "Let me go first, man," and Finn and Noah held him back as Ethan approached the truck. It wobbled in a strong breeze and he muttered under his breath, trying to open the dented driver's side door. He half-leaned through the window, reaching for something, then called to the others. "Bring my medic bag. She's alive. We'll need the backboard and the c-collar."

Simon exhaled a breath he hadn't known he held as Finn retrieved the giant bag of medical supplies from one of the trucks. Cooper carried over a backboard and neck brace. Simon shook himself back to life and concentrated on saving her. He shut off the part of his brain that just wanted to protect her and mourn what they'd lost. She couldn't wait. The golden hour ticked away and he wasted precious seconds.

He started securing the Range Rover so it wouldn't slide any farther down the mountain, and moved to help as Ethan wrenched the driver's door open. Simon held her legs as Ethan affixed the c-collar around her neck, and Zoe cried out. His bear raged, furious that she hurt, but there was nothing to fight. Nothing to kill or maim to make it better, to fix her. He silenced the bear and concentrated on her. Her glasses had disappeared in the wreck, and for a wild second, he wanted to look for them so she could see when she opened her eyes. She would be scared if she opened her eyes and couldn't see.

Ethan started working as soon as they lay her flat on the backboard. Finn pulled out the satellite phone, cool and calm under pressure. "We need the life flight?"

Ethan didn't answer.

Simon stared at her still form. A massive cut flayed her scalp and blood covered her face. At least one of her legs was broken, and several ribs caved in. From the whistle and gasp of her faint breath, one or more punctured her lungs. Eventually her chest cavity would fill with air and compress her heart until it stopped beating. That would kill her faster than the head wound, most likely. She had minutes, maybe seconds.

Ethan sat on his heels next to her, fingers anchored to her pulse, and looked at Simon with a neutral expression. "She won't last long enough for the life flight to arrive."

Simon's emotions drained away until a husk of a man remained. He hadn't felt so empty in six years. Could remember the exact moment, standing in front of a burning village in Africa as gunfire cracked through the air and rockets exploded all around, when he stopped giving a shit about anything. It took six years to get over that, to start caring again, and as he looked at Zoe, he knew he wouldn't recover if he lost her. If his mate died, he might as well walk off the cliff next to them.

"You got the IVs?" Simon started rolling his sleeves up.

Finn put the sat phone away. "Boss, are you —"

"I'm sure. I can't lose her." He didn't blink as Ethan tied a band around his bicep and inserted an IV in the crook of his elbow, the tube connected to the subclavian vein near her throat. Crimson filled the tubing and flooded into her. He watched her face, hoping the gray waxy cast to her skin would warm. "She's my mate. "

Ethan looked up sharply, taping the line in place on her clavicle. "What? When did

you decide this?"

"When the black bear almost ate her." Simon loosened the rubber from around his bicep and let the blood flow freely to her. She could take as much as she needed. She would wake up a bear — his bear, his mate — and he would have a lot of explaining to do, but she would wake up. "I didn't mean to shift. I meant to scare it away. And the bear came out instead."

Finn let out a low whistle. "What the hell did we miss this morning?"

Simon pinched the bridge of his nose. "Just wait until she's fine."

Noah went to the Range Rover and retrieved her backpack, and found her glasses and a phone on the floorboard. He shoved the glasses and phone into the backpack, then paused and peered into it. "Holy shit, man. This thing is full of cash."

"Yeah." Simon sat next to her, careful not to jostle her, and wished his blood would flow faster. "She's kind of a criminal."

"Kind of?" Noah held up several packs of cash. "Dude, this kind of scratch could —"

"Leave it," Ethan said. He shoved to his feet and looked at Cooper. "Take the four wheeler back up to the house and call the wrecker to get this truck out of the way. We don't want it falling. Noah, take her stuff and the truck back up to the house to set up the infirmary. If the transfusion works, she'll live but she won't be happy. We'll need some place to lock her up. Finn, I need you to drive the other truck after we load her in the back."

The others dispersed and engines roared to life, maneuvering carefully around the wreck and where the girl lay. Ethan glanced at Simon. "If you can stand, we need to get her into the bed of the truck."

He nodded, not trusting his voice, and rose as Ethan and Finn lifted the backboard with the girl on it. He climbed into the bed of the truck as they slid her in as well, careful of the IV that still connected them. The color in her face was a little better, and though it might have been his imagination, he thought the cut on her forehead looked smaller. His shifter blood would save her. It would change her, but it would also heal the grievous injuries that would otherwise steal her away.

Finn got in the driver's seat and began the long, slow trek back up the mountain, avoiding potholes and rough patches, though they bumped along too much for Simon's liking. They were maybe halfway back to the lodge when Ethan reached for the IV in Simon's arm. "That's enough blood. You'll drain yourself dry."

"Leave it."

"Simon —"

"She needs more. I'll be fine." He wouldn't admit that his vision grew spotty and his hands felt cold. She looked better. She needed it more. He could eat a couple of steaks and take a good nap and would be right as rain. Her chest rose and fell more evenly, deeper and without the wet squelch of a punctured lung. Relief made him almost as faint as the blood loss.

Ethan took a deep breath and continued trying to align her broken leg so it would heal correctly. "Have you considered what she might say when you tell her she's now a bear? She wasn't exactly a country girl to start with. I don't know many bears that live in the city."

"I'll cross that river when I come to it." Simon blinked, feeling clammy and sweaty, and finally cleared his throat. "I think that's enough."

"So you're about to pass out? Great." Ethan leaned over the girl to remove the needle

from Simon's arm, shoving gauze against the wound to stop the bleeding, but took more care with removing the IV from her chest. "Hopefully we got enough into her heart and brain to save her. Only time will tell."

Simon closed his eyes as he leaned back against the cab of the truck, wanting to float back to the lodge, but he kept his hand on her shoulder just so he could feel her skin, warm under his fingers. Something jostled him and he found Ethan glaring at him and holding out a bottle of sports drink and a granola bar.

"For fuck's sake, Simon. You know better than this. Get your blood sugar back up. We're almost to the lodge and we don't need the guests seeing you fall flat on your face."

Finn made a rude noise inside the truck and Simon shot him a dirty look over his shoulder. But he took the sports drink and granola bar, wolfing both down until he felt a little sick. Finn pulled the truck as close to the back of the lodge as he could manage. Cooper met them there, helping Ethan carry the backboard and the girl inside. "The guests are watching a documentary about the Cascades in the movie room. They'll be occupied for at least another hour. I tried to buy us some time to get her settled and looking less — dead."

Simon wanted to hug and punch the man at the same time. But he focused only on putting one foot in front of the other. They reserved the room nearest the back door for two things: uncontrolled shifts and sick bears. It locked from the outside, so a berserk bear could be contained within, and had enough equipment to treat almost anything that might kill someone in the woods. He collapsed into the comfortable chair near the door to watch them transfer Zoe to the hospital bed. Finn dropped a bag of food in his lap as he passed through, juggling bags of saline and an IV pole from the storeroom.

Simon didn't want any of them touching her. Only his blood loss settled the bear

enough to let Ethan treat her wounds, but when he dipped a washcloth into warm water to clean the blood and dirt off her, Simon shoved to his feet. "I'll do that."

"You can barely stand, Simon." Ethan glanced up and eyed the other men in the room. Cooper and Finn beat a hasty retreat, and Ethan faced Simon alone across the girl's bed. "Just chill out and let me finish this."

Simon growled deep in his chest, and reached for the washcloth. "I will clean her."

Ethan massaged his temples, then held his hands up in defeat. "Fine. Clean the blood off of her, cut off her clothes so we can see whether she's healing, and call me when you're done. I need to call in some prescriptions in town, otherwise we'll run out of morphine by tomorrow night. If she needs it."

He shut the door behind him, almost a slam, but Simon didn't care. Zoe was his mate and if anyone would groom her, it would be him. She lay still and quiet in the white hospital bed. He took a deep breath as he studied her face. The cut on her scalp was definitely smaller. Most of the small scratches on her face and chest had disappeared, and her heart beat steadily on the monitor next to the bed.

Simon used the giant shears Ethan left on a nearby tray to cut through her clothes until he could pull the tatters away. They were past saving anyway, covered in blood and mud and spilled fluids from the car. He would buy her new, enough to fill up the closet in his room. He left her underwear on, uncomfortable with her being unconscious when he saw her naked for the first time, and covered most of her with one of the clean white sheets as he wet the washcloth again. He started with her hand, cleaning off each finger, then her palm, then her wrist. He worked slowly, carefully, and changed the water out for warmer as soon as it grew cloudy with debris. He dried her, too, so she wouldn't get cold.

It took an eternity but he didn't care. His back and knees ached, and his chest ached,

and a sharp pain stabbed through his temple. The blood loss and stress and receding adrenaline did a number on him, but all that paled in comparison to the satisfaction of caring for his mate.

He made sure to cover her fully when Ethan knocked, though Simon still cleaned blood from her feet. The other man eased through the door and leaned against the wall, watching him more than their patient. Simon didn't bother to look at him though the irritation turned his voice deep and grumbly. "You got a question, friend?"

"You broke the code. Turning her without permission."

Simon paused, then forced his hands to continue manipulating her left ankle, still swollen and discolored despite his blood coursing through her veins. He didn't dare look at Ethan lest the rage inside him burst free. He and Ethan had been through far too much, in far too many places, for such a simple statement to ruin it. "Watch yourself."

Ethan eased into the chair near the door, picking at some of the shredded fabric and disgorged stuffing. "Even if you'd been the best brain surgeon and cardiologist and trauma doc in the entire world, you couldn't have saved her. There weren't any airbags in that truck, man. The steering wheel got her in the face and chest. So don't question your choice to turn her. It sucks and she might hate you, but she's still alive because you did that."

Simon didn't cease his work even though her feet were clean. He picked up some ointment and worked it into the knots around her ankle, then bound it up with gauze and sticky wrap bandages. Bruises always took longer to disappear. "There's not a doubt in my mind about that."

"I didn't think there would be." Ethan rubbed his face and rested his head on the back of the chair, staring up at the ceiling. "You sleeping down here for a while, I take it? "

"Yeah." He hadn't really thought about it, but Simon damn well knew he would sleep in that infirmary until she was better. Until he could convince her to sleep in his room, in his bed, so he would know she was protected and safe. He shuffled to the head of the bed and moved the sheet enough so he could bandage an ugly abrasion on her shoulder without exposing the rest of her.

"Finn is pulling one of the cots out of the storeroom for you. I'll send in food for both of you, and you eat every damn bite, do you hear me? Cooper is going to distract the guests until they check out tomorrow, but we have six new ones checking in day after. We need to come up with a plan for that. In the meantime, keep her quiet and warm. If we need the restraints, tell me. She could really hurt herself if we're not careful."

Simon nodded, tucking the sheets in around her, and retrieved a soft blanket from the cupboard to spread across her. The steady beep-beep-beep of the heart monitor was the sweetest music in the world. He watched her face as she slept, the morphine dripping into her arm from an IV in the back of her hand, and remained close to her as they brought a cot and bedding for him, as Ethan sent in an enormous tray full of food, as his legs went numb and he sat down only because he would have fallen otherwise. Through it all, for every moment, the bear chanted want want want in his head. He fell asleep in the cot, facing her, with the sound of it in his thoughts.

8

ZOE

Everything hurt. Zoe groaned as she forced her eyes open. A steady beeping filled her ears but nothing else made sense. The last thing she remembered was driving, trying to talk Tate into picking her up, and then a deer. Swerving. Pain and red flashes and pressure in her chest. Then nothing.

Her vision blurred and her eyes wouldn't focus. She was warm, at least, though it didn't help the deep ache in her bones and muscles. Zoe tried to move her legs and adjust how she lay in the bed, but cried out as sharp pain spiked in her side.

"What's wrong? What hurts?"

She froze as Simon, wild and wooly hair sticking out in all directions, appeared next to the bed. The beeping accelerated. Zoe stared at him, mouth full of cotton as she tried to come up with a response. He looked on the verge of panic, searching her face for a clue as he patted her arm and checked the IVs.

Zoe tried to force words out but her voice didn't work. She managed to whisper, "Water? "

"Water." Simon nodded, almost chanted the word as he moved around the dim room. He returned to her bedside and held a small cup to her lips, his hand cradling her cheek as he dribbled water on her lips. "There. Careful. Just a little."

She watched him as she swallowed, the water cold and crisp and tasting like it came straight from a mountain spring. Something had changed. Something felt very different, all of her senses sharper and more in-tune. Zoe closed her eyes and turned her face into his hand, wanting more contact. Comfort. Warmth. She wanted to curl up against his chest and sleep.

Simon made a sharp noise and then his other hand cupped her face, his thumbs stroking across her cheeks. "Are you okay? Does anything hurt? Are you hungry?"

Zoe wanted to laugh at him for the barrage of questions, but the desperation in his tone softened her heart. Poor Simon. He didn't sound so self-assured any more. She wondered what set him so off-balance. She took a deep breath and hoped her voice worked. It did, but sounded rusty and rough. "Where am I?"

"At the lodge." He exhaled in a gust, and eased to sit next to her hip on the wide hospital bed. He still held her face, still caressed her cheeks. His gaze warmed, sparked something deep in her chest. "We have an infirmary."

She moved uneasily. Infirmary. But it made sense, if she lay in a hospital bed with sensors attached to her chest. Her naked chest. A flush heated her cheeks and Simon smiled. Zoe cleared her throat, studying his rugged features to distract herself from the delicious friction of his skin on hers. "What happened?"

His beard almost hid his frown, but she caught enough of it to know she wouldn't like his answer. Simon eased a little closer, his heat and solid bulk comforting rather than threatening. "You swerved to avoid a deer and ran off the road. "

She laughed, but it came out all rusty. "That's impossible. If I ran off the road, I'd be dead."

"You almost were." He brushed her hair back, studying her hairline and tracing her

features with the tips of his fingers. She felt like he tried to memorize her, to learn everything about her face. "Luckily Ethan is a medic, so he was able to keep you stable."

Zoe frowned and reached to touch the same path his hands traveled, then froze. Her glasses. She wasn't wearing her glasses. But she could see everything in the room with perfect clarity. Razor-sharp precision. Better than the best glasses. Her chest tightened and she tried to sit up. "What else did you do to me?"

Simon caught her shoulders, kept her from dragging the wires and tubes out, and he talked faster, low and calm but still with a hint of unease. "We didn't have any other choice, Zoe. You were dying. So I gave you a blood transfusion."

"What does that mean?" Other memories came back, a bit spottier — the bears, him turning into a grizzly, the video on her phone. She remembered reading the rumors online, that shapeshifters were actually real, but everyone knew it was just a hoax. Some crazy conspiracy shit that rational people wouldn't buy. Like UFOs and Bigfoot. But at least one website insisted that humans could be turned into shifters via blood or bites or weird magic shit. A blood transfusion might do it. Her heart leapt and sank at the same time, and the monitor next to her bed started going crazy.

Simon took a deep breath. "I'm a bear shifter. You saw it in the meadow, when I changed. My kind — our kind — heals faster, better. We can survive things that kill humans. I needed to save you, Zoe. It was the only way I could save you."

She stared at her feet, hidden by clean white sheets, and tried to understand. It felt like her software was buggy and just wouldn't compile. A glitch in the system. A loud noise in her ears distracted her as she struggled, torn between wanting to get the hell away from him and needing to turn to him for comfort. He looked so desperate, touching her face and shoulders and hands, that it took a while before she realized the noise came from him — a rumble grumble bear sound. A worried sound.

Her eyes prickled. "I'm going to turn into a bear?"

The worried sound got louder and he moved closer, leaning to wrap his arms around her so he could hold her tightly and nuzzle in her hair. He whispered, "Please don't cry. Please."

She stared past his shoulder, wanting to hide her face against his neck and sob.

Simon kissed her cheek and eased back enough to check her expression, stroking her hair back. "Eventually, yes, you should be able to turn into a bear. And turn back human. We'll help you with that. We'll help you with everything."

She wanted to be grateful that he saved her life, but the pain medication dripping into her veins made everything fuzzy and disoriented. And the idea of being part animal, being a bear, being less than human... As if she wasn't enough of a freak already, as if blending in and figuring out how the hell to talk to people weren't hard enough just as herself...

Her hands trembled as she covered her face and her breath came faster, catching in her chest, and tears burned her sinuses. Zoe couldn't think, couldn't do anything but feel .

Simon made a strangled sound and pulled her close once more, rocking her back and forth as he rubbed her back. "I'm sorry. I'll fix it, I promise. I'll make it better."

He kept talking, soft nonsense that blurred into a soundtrack of reassurance, and some wild part of her stirred awake. Zoe didn't know what it was or what to call it, but something in her liked him. A lot. Wanted him closer. Wanted him forever and always.

But that wasn't a part of herself she'd ever met before. Which meant it had to be the

bear, or she was going completely crazy. And he'd said 'we.' 'We'll help you.' So everyone was a bear. A house full of bears. The hysterical giggle built in her chest again but she knew if she started, she'd never stop.

The tears kept falling and Simon kept talking and rocking her, but eventually her eyelids drooped and whatever kept her awake faded away. Darkness crept over her, and Zoe slept with the sound of Simon's voice still in her ears.

SIMON

When Zoe finally slept, Simon untangled himself from her and the wires and the sheets. He retreated to the door but watched her the entire time, holding his breath, to make sure she didn't wake and think she was alone. His chest hurt with the power of her confusion and pain and sadness. His bear wanted to stay, to sleep next to her, but Simon needed a moment to compose himself.

The clock in the kitchen said it was just past midnight. It felt like he'd slept forever and not at all. His muscles ached in weird places and a clawing hunger ignited in his stomach. Trying to regenerate all the blood he'd given her meant the bear needed to eat. He stood in front of the fridge, staring at the contents though all he saw was Zoe's face when he told her what he'd done.

Simon cursed under his breath and turned away from the fridge, then jumped as Ethan rose from the couch in front of the fireplace. Simon kept his voice low, in case the guests were still up. "What the hell are you doing out here?"

"Wanted to be close in case our patient woke up in trouble." Ethan yawned and rubbed sleep from his eyes. "How's she doing?"

"Confused." Simon braced his hands on the counter and stared at the floor. It hurt to admit. "Scared."

"Makes sense." Ethan shuffled to the fridge and got a couple of beers, handing one to

Simon. "She just needs to rest and heal and figure things out. And you need to eat. Steak?"

He rubbed his shoulder and glanced back at the infirmary. "Nah. I'd rather go hunt. The bear needs to work through some things. Can you keep an eye on her? Get me if she wakes up again."

Ethan nodded and took back the beer. "Of course. Enjoy your run."

Simon poked his head into the infirmary just to make sure her chest rose and fell evenly and the beeping machine still worked, then stripped off his clothes and walked out the back door. His bear roared to the surface as soon as the chill night air hit him, and he lumbered down the sloping ground to the drive and the trees beyond. He moved through the dark, silent forest. He only felt truly free in bear form. His human senses felt dull and limited. Limiting. He could protect Zoe better in bear form, particularly if any of those humans hunting her managed to find their way to the lodge.

He grumbled and growled as he made his way to the river and splashed into the icy water. It wasn't the right time for salmon, but any fish would do. Anything warm and salty with life, wriggling in his claws, would dull the bear's hunger. It took longer than normal to tease a fish to where he could hook it, since his paws were unsteady and a little weak. He tore into the fish, then a second, then a third, and when his hunger finally retreated, he caught a few more to take back to the house for breakfast.

Maybe Zoe would want to eat some. From what he'd heard, newly-turned shifters were ravenous for the first couple of weeks as their metabolisms revved and adjusted to the increased requirements of shifter hearts and lungs and healing abilities. He liked her curves, didn't want her to lose them. She would need to eat a lot to maintain her figure until the shifter and human systems equilibrated.

He went back to the river for another couple of fish, then shifted back to human so he could carry the half dozen fish back to the house. The long walk gave him time to practice what he would say to her. Telling her she was his mate might be a bridge too far right away, when she still wasn't on board with being a shifter. Giving her time to adjust before springing the whole 'destined to be together' thing on her was only fair.

Simon inhaled deeply and let the crisp air clear his lungs. A narrow deer-track led up to the lodge from the river and he hesitated as the lighted windows came into view. Going back indoors after a shift always felt wrong. He scrunched bare toes in the dirt and took one last look around the dark wilderness around him, then headed for the lodge.

He shut the backdoor quietly behind himself and checked on Zoe before he carried the fish into the kitchen and pulled on the clothes he'd taken off before he left. Ethan dozed in a recliner facing the kitchen, and Simon fought back irritation that his friend hadn't kept a better watch on Zoe. She still slept, fine, but maybe she'd woken up alone and worried.

He dropped the fish on Ethan, who woke with a snort and a curse at the flopping, dripping trout covered him. Ethan lurched upright, nose wrinkled as he collected the fish, and staggered past Simon into the kitchen. "Thanks, a-hole. Fish tacos for breakfast, I'm guessing?"

Simon took a beer from the fridge and rubbed a kitchen towel over his damp hair. "Will Zoe be able to eat fish tacos?"

"Maybe." Ethan got out a cutting board and trash can to start gutting and scaling the fish. "Go sit with her. Rest is the best medicine for her right now, but I don't want her freaking out and trying to get out of bed."

He didn't need to be told twice, and drained his beer before lumbering back towards

the infirmary. When he opened the door and slid inside, she stirred in the bed and her eyes shone in the light of the monitors and machines. "Simon?"

"I'm here." He went immediately to her side and sat on the bed, needing to touch her. She sounded afraid. "I'm here, Zoe. Are you okay?"

Her legs moved uneasily under the sheets and lines stacked across her forehead. "I'm cold."

He hesitated. She was naked under the sheets, after all, and confused. Maybe in pain and certainly drugged on morphine and whatever cocktail Ethan mixed in the IV bags. He needed to be careful. But she shivered and huddled under the sheet and blanket he'd spread over her. He turned on the space heater and touched her cheek. "Baby, it'll take a sec for the heater to kick in. I'll get you another blanket."

"Wait." Her face crumpled and her hand fumbled through the sheet to reach for him. "Don't leave. Don't leave again."

"Never," he breathed. Simon couldn't move, pressing her hand between his. He touched her hip through the sheet and knew he played with fire. "Slide over a bit and I'll lay here with you."

It took a moment for her to maneuver, wincing with the pain of sore muscles, but then there was enough space for him to ease onto the bed on his side. He left her covered in the sheets and pulled the soft blankets over them both. He pulled the wires off her and shut off the heart monitor so they wouldn't end up tangled. Simon held her to his chest, rubbing her back in slow circles, and kissed her forehead. "Tell me if you're cold or you want to move."

She mumbled something and her hand tightened on his t-shirt, but her eyes stayed closed. The wrinkles across her forehead faded as she relaxed, and something in

Simon's chest eased as well. Until she frowned again and pulled the sheet up to cover her nose. "You smell like fish."

The laugh that bounced out of him jostled her, and she smiled just a touch. Simon sat up enough to take off his t-shirt and lay back down, snuggling her closer to his bare chest. She patted his side, palm soft and smooth, and sighed. Simon's bear finally eased up on the constant worry about losing her and settled down to sleep. He had their mate protected, he would feed her in the morning when she felt better, and he would keep her warm all night. Perfect.

Zoe yawned and wiggled to get closer, draping her arm over his side, and she blinked up at him. "Do I still have to wake up early?"

He couldn't help it; he laughed again, and again she smiled. Simon bent to kiss her forehead and tucked the blanket more securely around her. "I'll make an exception. Two near-death experiences in a row before noon leads me to believe you're too dangerous in the morning."

"Good." Her eyes drifted shut and she yawned again. "I knew you'd see reason."

"Just sleep." Simon rested his chin on the top of her head and adjusted the pillow for them both. "I'll be right here if you need anything."

He barely slept a wink but it was the best night he'd had in months. Years, maybe.

10

ZOE

Hunger woke her. Hunger like she'd never known, even in the days when her parents forgot to leave food on the table before they went on a binge. Zoe sat up in the hospital bed, her mind on one thing: food.

Something smelled delicious. Those shiny new super senses said fish. Fresh fish. Probably eggs. Her mouth watered as she eased out of the bed. She barely noticed Simon, snoring in a gentle purr next to her, and hardly cared that she was naked except for her underwear. Zoe tugged one of the blankets from under Simon's massive leg and wrapped herself in it after pulling all the tubes and needles and shit out. All she cared about was food.

She limped to the door in a daze, even though her leg and hip ached, and a little blood dribbled down her arm from one of the needles. She eased into the hall and the smell of cooking fish and eggs and meat made her so faint she had to brace herself on the wall for an eternity. Zoe staggered past the office and turned the corner into the kitchen, trying to inhale everything in the entire freaking lodge. She blinked at the four startled men in the kitchen, but all of her attention landed on the stovetop and the fish filets that crackled and popped in the skillet. She used the blanket to wipe some drool from her chin and edged closer to the food. "Can I have some?"

None of them moved, almost comical in their panic, and Zoe tried to care why they would be so afraid. It wasn't like she was naked. She shuffled closer to the fish and her stomach rumbled.

Ethan, poking the filets with a fork, took a deep breath. "Good morning, Zoe. Is Simon coming out soon?"

"I don't know." She chewed her lip and unconsciously reached for one of the filets. So hungry. So unbelievably hungry. "I'm hungry. Can I have some of that?"

Her brain stalled out as everything else in the world faded. Even Ethan giving quick orders to the other guys sailed right over her head; even when the other three retreated, she couldn't look away from the food. Ethan didn't move, though, and he didn't give her any of the fish. "It's not ready. Sit down."

She didn't want to. And that wild part of herself that she didn't know very well, since it only showed up a day ago, wanted to shove him out of the way and eat all the fish in the entire river. Something else grumbled and it wasn't her stomach.

Ethan cleared his throat but kept his voice even and calm and didn't look away from her. "Simon, she's growling."

"I am not," Zoe said, just as Simon said, "I know," behind her.

Zoe blinked but didn't budge as Simon moved close behind her and his arms slid around her waist. He pulled her back against his chest and nuzzled behind her ear. "I thought you wanted to sleep in."

Zoe frowned. Why the hell wouldn't they let her eat? But she didn't want to lose the warmth of Simon at her back, so she didn't leap forward to knock the skillet out of Ethan's hand. "I'm so hungry."

"I know," he said again, and moved to rub his cheek against the other side of her neck. "I'll feed you. But first you need to put clothes on."

"I want to eat now ," she whispered, reaching once more for the fish in the pan and almost burning her fingers before Ethan pulled the skillet away.

Simon caught her hands so she couldn't do it again, and hugged her tighter. "This is your bear telling you what to do, Zoe. You need to tell her she has to wait. You'll get as much fish as you can eat, but you can't hurt yourself or come out here in just a sheet. What if there were guests, sweetheart?"

She barely registered the endearment, although it surprised the hell out of Ethan based on his expression. Zoe frowned and tried to fight through the fog of hunger to decipher what Simon said. The warm pressure of his hand around her wrists only distracted her. "All I had was a blanket. There weren't any clothes. What was I supposed to wear?"

After a moment, Simon chuckled. "You're right. I'm sorry. Tell you what — I'll take you upstairs so you can change, and Ethan will finish making breakfast. Then we can eat together."

"Can't I have a bite now?" She tore her gaze off the delicious, crispy fish and twisted around to look up at him. "Please? I'm so hungry."

The beard made him look stern, but he ducked to kiss her forehead. "Just a bite." He glanced at Ethan, who passed him part of a filet wrapped in a corn tortilla. Simon held it for a moment, watching her with a strange expression, then offered the food. "Here."

Zoe inhaled it, almost dropping the blanket, and licked her lips as she glanced back at the skillet. She wanted another one. The first bite only whetted her appetite to a roaring furnace, but before she could plead for another, Simon picked her up and carried her up the stairs.

A growl bubbled up in her chest and Zoe blinked. "Is that me? What the hell is that?"

"Your bear." Simon squeezed her close against his chest before he put her down outside the door to her room. "She'll be wild to start with. You'll probably find it difficult to control her and her reactions to things, particularly basic things like food and fear and anger. Everything will be bigger until you get used to her — you'll be hungrier, and you'll get madder, and you'll want more of things, compared to you before."

He sounded wary. Zoe limped over to the suitcase, open on the floor, and dug around for clothes. She kind of wanted a shower but that would have to wait until after breakfast. She would knock Simon down the stairs if he tried to keep her from eating again. The blanket toga slipped as she straightened with a new pair of jeans and t-shirt in hand, and Simon made a hungry noise behind her.

Zoe glanced back, holding the blanket enough to cover her front even though it dipped low enough on her back he could probably see the top of her butt. "What?"

His gaze remained on her lower back, and naked lust sharpened his features. Zoe flushed, heat crawling up her chest and throat to her face, but a spark ignited in her core as well. He wanted her. She knew it, could see it in his face and parted lips and the way his fingers dug into the door jamb, as if he had to hold himself back from grabbing her. She loved it. Not so long ago, she thought a man like that would never chase her — even if she weren't so scared of confident men and stopped fleeing the moment one expressed interest. The wild part of her fluttered and growled, excited at the thought. Maybe he would chase her.

His eyes flashed gold as he lifted his chin and scented the air, and an impressive bulge grew in his jeans. Zoe held her breath, not daring to take her eyes off him, and let the blanket fall the rest of the way to the floor. She wanted to feel his gaze as he saw her, as the desire flushed through him and his hands flexed and the doorjamb

came apart with the force of his lust. For the first time, she didn't care if someone saw her body, the ample hips and generous ass. She turned slowly to face him, almost wild with the desire to see him naked again when she was confident enough to touch him, and swallowed whatever remained of her nerves.

Simon groaned, then moved into the room and quickly shut the door behind him, but he didn't grab her. Didn't kiss her or touch her with those giant hands. She ached to feel his hands on her, to feel those long fingers moving over her sides. He looked wild, almost out of control, and his voice dropped. "Baby, I want you so bad it hurts, but this probably isn't a good idea."

"It's a great idea," she said, and the tenor of her voice surprised her. Deeper and husky, like a cabaret singer. She eased a step closer. Her breasts tightened with want and the cool air, her nipples peaked, and she touched her stomach. "Simon says it's a great idea. Simon says you should come over here and kiss me."

Simon grabbed double fistfuls of his hair, unable to look away from her breasts. "This is your bear. Your bear and my bear are — friends."

"I don't think she wants to be friends," Zoe said, soft and slow, and got close enough to drift her fingertips across his abs. She gazed up at him, a hint of uncertainty working its way through the fog of lust and a new kind of hunger. She couldn't live without his touch, without his hands on her. Zoe slowly undid his belt buckle.

Simon sucked in a breath and caught her hands, though his hips jerked forward. He growled, trying to hold her away. "We should wait, Zoe. There are a lot of things we need to talk about. Things are different now. I don't want to hurt you, but you smell so damn good I'm about to lose my mind. My bear might not be able to hold back."

The thought that she had that effect on someone as competent and capable and impervious as Simon made her smile. She swayed forward, pressed full-length

against him, and went up on her toes to kiss at the corner of his mouth. "I'm cold now, though. I need you to warm me up."

Another groan, a savage noise torn from his throat, then Simon seized her waist, lifted her until her legs locked around him, and carried her to the unmade bed. He growled and grumbled as he dropped her on the mattress, one hand pinning her shoulder to the bed, and his expression grew grim. "You tell me if it hurts, damn it. I don't want to hurt you."

Zoe tugged at the front of his jeans, the wild part of her practically singing in anticipation, and tried to drag him on top of her. "So don't hurt me."

Simon scooted her closer to the headboard and ran his palms down her sides. He sat back and surveyed her, taking in every inch of her, and Zoe squirmed a little under his attention. His eyes remained gold, like liquid heat, as he leaned down to kiss her. She drowned in the kiss, melting under his passion as Simon stroked her side and maneuvered his knee between her thighs. She linked her arms around his neck and sighed, murmuring into the kiss as he retreated. Simon kissed her throat and shoulder, down her chest, then her breasts. Zoe's breath caught as Simon squeezed her waist and continued a slow trail down her chest and stomach. She didn't want an inch of space between him, wanted to touch as much of him as she could.

His beard tickled against her thigh and she jumped, watching with parted lips as he eased her legs apart and breathed against her slit. Simon made that grumbly bear noise and ghosted his fingers along the back of her thigh, kissing just above where she really wanted him to. "You taste amazing."

She flushed, about to close her thighs on his head, but he didn't give her the chance to think. His mouth sealed to her sensitive flesh and he teased her entrance with one large finger. Zoe moaned and rolled her hips, grabbing handfuls of the sheets to try to anchor herself. Fire spread through her in a rush. She'd only had one boyfriend, and

he'd never done anything like that.

She melted and burned under Simon's expert mouth and hands, and as desire crested higher and higher, she wailed. Cried out. Froze as her muscles convulsed and seized but Simon kept up the delicious torment.

The wild part of her growled and grabbed his head to pull him closer and he chuckled as he grumbled in response. He kissed a slow trail back up her body and nuzzled behind her ear before taking her earlobe in his teeth. "Are you ready?"

She pushed her hips up at him, desperate to feel him, and locked her arms around his neck. "More than ready."

Simon squeezed the back of her thigh and eased her leg up and out, until his hips sank closer and the blunt head of his cock pressed against her slick channel. Zoe sighed and stroked his sides, gazing up at his intense expression. That wild part of her anticipated, waited.

He nudged into her and Zoe moaned, the sound echoed by Simon as he paused. Zoe's head fell back on the pillow as he stretched her, split her open, and all of her muscles seized up. Simon kissed her again, though he sounded tense. "Relax, baby."

She felt so full already. Felt like he'd invaded every inch of her. But she pulled her knees up until she could wrap her legs around him. Her fingers stroked the back of his neck and she kissed him back. "More."

Simon pressed forward, slow and inevitable, and she shattered. Every nerve ignited until she was lost. Zoe clung to him as Simon started to move, slow and steady, and wave after wave of ecstasy rolled through her. The wild part of her wanted to bite him, to mark him as hers, and for him to bite her. She cried out and moved to meet him, desperate for more. Hunger consumed her and she sank her teeth into his

shoulder.

SIMON

Simon lost control when she bit him. Whatever restraint he'd managed to hold onto disappeared as her bear growled and his bear growled and then lust consumed them both. The soft welcoming warmth of her drove him insane as her channel drew him in, tightened around him. Between her climax and the desperate noises she made and the bright spark of her bite, he was lost. Utterly addicted.

He couldn't stop. Not even if the roof came down around his head. He thrust, driving through the tremors of her orgasm, until his sweat dripped onto her and marked her. Until her scent curled through his brain. Until the feel of her under him, around him, branded onto his body that she was his. His . Always and forever.

As pressure built and he careened toward his own finish, Zoe arched underneath him and her breasts crushed against his chest and she cried out again. Her dark hair spread across his pillow in a tangled mess. Simon groaned and froze above her, filling her, and bit the soft point where her neck met her shoulder. He moved slowly, and collapsed on top of her. Her bear grumbled as Zoe lay still and quiet, eyes half-closed.

Simon loved her with a desperate intensity. His odd little criminal. He kept his weight off her chest as he tried to catch his breath, letting his forehead fall against her shoulder so he could kiss where he'd bitten her. She shivered, her fingers trailing down the small of his back, and she sighed.

He moved to the side, not wanting to lose contact with any of her body, but fearing he would crush her. The sheets rucked up at the foot of the bed, and Simon dragged them up to cover her. He kissed some of the sweat from her forehead, her lip, her cleavage. Loving that some of it was his sweat and she smelled like him. He traced shapes on her stomach, under the sheet, and studied her sated expression. "You're so damn beautiful."

It slipped out before he could think, and he almost regretted it. He should have come up with something poetic or at least not profane.

But a hint of a smile touched her lips. Her green eyes glinted at him in the dim room. "She likes you."

"Who?"

"The bear." A hint of unease drew her eyebrows together, and Simon smoothed his thumb over her forehead.

He wanted to hold his breath after asking his next question, but forced himself to concentrate on her only. She could cut him low with a single word, and that terrified him. "And what about Zoe?"

Her eyes drifted closed but the smile returned. "Zoe likes you too."

"I'm glad." Relief eased the band around his chest and Simon relaxed next to her after making sure she had enough pillows and another blanket to keep her warm. He pulled her close to his chest and pressed his nose in her hair, inhaling her .

Her nose wrinkled as she wiggled next to him, then she yawned and stretched. "But we're both still really, really hungry."

Simon laughed and squeezed her close before beginning to untangle himself. "Then I'll feed you."

He pulled on sweatpants after he tucked her in, and headed for the door. He braced for four sets of raised eyebrows in the kitchen, but only Ethan waited downstairs. And Ethan knew better, though he couldn't quite hide a smirk as he slid a pair of steaks into the skillet. "Just going upstairs to get clothes, huh?"

Simon frowned at the giant platter of fried fish, tortillas, avocado, scrambled eggs, and salsa on the island. "This for me?"

"Of course. When you didn't reappear after a couple of minutes, I sent the guys off to work. And then the moaning started, so I took a nice long walk." Ethan gave him a sideways look. "You might have to speed up the timeline for building the cabin out back, friend, or none of the guests will get any sleep."

Simon refused to be embarrassed, but a bit of heat gathered in his cheeks as he dug through a drawer for some utensils. "I'll get right on that. Maybe mind your business."

"Maybe gag the girl," Ethan said under his breath, then dodged as Simon aimed a kick at him. "Or at least invest in some soundproofing for the walls and door."

"Are the guests still scheduled to check in tomorrow?"

"Yes. Cooper will pick them up in town and drive them up." Ethan frowned at the steaks, flipping them before he leaned back on the counter to face Simon. "And the wrecker dragged the Land Rover back up here so we can try to fix it or chop it for parts. Luckily it was Mel, not his cousin, so he didn't blink when we told him the girl survived. He just assumed she's like us. "

Simon ran his hands through his hair. Great. Because Rosie met the girl at the bar and knew perfectly well Zoe wasn't a shifter. If Mel ended up back in town and mentioned it to the bartender, Simon would have a great deal of explaining to do. Shifters policed themselves, and the community wouldn't like someone being turned without giving permission first. But he only picked up the platter of food. "We'll be down later. Maybe."

Ethan snorted and returned to the steaks. "Don't worry about it. We're going to town for dinner. Coop'll stay the night so he doesn't have to drive back down tomorrow for the guests. So you and the girl can be as loud as you want."

"Great. Maybe you should all stay down there. Call when you're headed back, though. So we can clean up." Simon took the stairs two at a time, already thinking of laying blankets in front of the fireplace and spreading Zoe out in the flickering firelight. Lust surged at the mental picture of her smooth skin and soft curves on display on the soft sheepskin rugs.

He definitely needed to build that cabin.

Simon managed to shoulder the door to her room open and kick it closed without dropping the food, and eased through the dim room to sit on the bed next to Zoe. Her green eyes reflected the light at him as she stretched and sat up, the sheets falling away until her round breasts distracted him still more. Simon cleared his throat as he offered her the food. "Eat, Zoe. It's all for you. I'm going to take a quick shower."

All of her attention went to the food and she didn't even bother with the utensils, instead using her hands to start filling a tortilla, so Simon edged into the en suite to clean up. He didn't want to wash away any evidence of her, but at least if they used the same soap, they would smell alike without the hint of sweat and sex.

By the time he wrapped himself in a towel and returned to the bedroom, Zoe had

finished all of the fish and most of the eggs and avocado. Simon raised his eyebrows, impressed in spite of himself. Maybe they needed to take another trip to the river. "Do you want more?"

She groaned and sprawled across the bed, arms and legs akimbo, and patted her stomach. "I might burst if I eat another bite."

"We can't have that," he said. He finished off the rest of the breakfast, pleased she was well-fed, and left the tray outside the door to deal with later. He towed off his hair and slid into the bed next to her, pulling her close to spoon. She fit against him perfectly. His bear grumbled, content.

Her bear made an answering noise. Simon kissed the back of her neck, listening to the steady drumming of her heartbeat. "Will you stay here, Zoe?"

Her hand stroked his forearm where it draped over her side, and for a moment she stretched and wiggled and then settled back against him. She sounded half-asleep already. "There's nowhere else for me to go."

Simon stared at the wall past her shoulder, his own pulse racing. She was right, of course, but her feeling like a prisoner of her circumstances didn't make for a happy relationship. His arms tightened around her reflexively, wanting to keep her close. "That's not true. If you don't want to stay here, we can find a place you do want to go."

She pulled away enough to lay on her back and look up at him. "Do you want me to stay?"

"So much I almost can't breathe." He smiled and leaned down to kiss her.

Zoe made a contented sound and turned toward him, resting her head on his bicep as

her fingers drifted up and down his side. "One more stray for your little group?"

"You're not a stray." Simon pulled the blankets up higher and tucked them close around her before pulling her against his chest. "I've been waiting for you my whole life. I never thought Tate would bring the other half of my soul back to me."

She yawned and stretched again, then sighed. "I have to learn how to be a bear, right?"

"Yes. But you're off to a good start already." He chuckled without meaning to, and she looked up at him with a drowsy smile. Simon kissed her again. "You growled at Ethan when he wouldn't give you food. That's pretty bear-like."

Zoe snorted, patting his side. "No, that's more Zoe-like. Don't get between me and dinner."

"Good to know." Simon laughed and shook his head, playing with her hair. "I can't believe you used 'Simon says' against me. I haven't heard that in years."

"It seemed like a good way to tell you what to do." She smiled. "Simon says you should go to sleep so you can catch me more fish later."

Just the thought of her earlier words, telling him to kiss her, reignited his desire. His cock hardened and pressed against her stomach. Zoe glanced down between them and then looked up at him, eyebrow raised. "Simon didn't say anything about that ."

He laughed, hard enough to jostle her, and rolled to his back, bringing her with him until she straddled his hips and his cock stood up just in front of her neatly-groomed slit. "Well, Simon says this is the best idea he's had all week."

Zoe chewed her lip in that adorable uncertain way she had, and her soft hand

tentatively gripped his base. She stroked him once, then again, and Simon groaned, his hips lifting in response. She studied him and Simon wanted to immediately roll them back over so he could plunge into her welcoming warmth. But he waited, holding his breath.

Zoe lifted herself up and wobbled, almost fell off him entirely, and flushed. "I haven't done it this way before. "

And again he almost reversed their positions in a desperate need to have her. To take her. Waiting to feel her surrounding him, gripping him, drawing him in was pure torture. Pure agony. But he concentrated on her as he petted her stomach, teasing her center until her head fell back and she made indecent noises. They had plenty of time. He couldn't rush this. Couldn't rush her.

Simon gripped her thighs and helped guide her. "Just like this." He gritted his teeth as the head of his cock slid against her center and Zoe moaned, and Simon held back even though he wanted to impale her. She sank slowly down on his length and he couldn't take it, lifting his hips to meet her until she gasped and gripped his shoulders for balance.

She stared down at him in surprise, green eyes wide, and gave a tentative rock of her hips. Her eyes closed and her mouth opened, and she sighed. Did it again. And again. Simon was lost. Utterly lost. He lay back as her fingers dug into his shoulders and she moved faster, deeper, wilder.

If heaven existed, this was it.

12

ZOE

Zoe didn't know she could feel like that. Didn't believe anything she'd read that every part of her could vibrate with need, could ache to feel him moving inside her, until it felt like she would explode. Until she did explode — stars filled her vision as she ground down on him, using him to push herself past that edge of pure bliss until she seized up. Froze, completely helpless.

Her nails left bloody crescents in his skin but Simon didn't seem to mind. She collapsed on top of him, sweaty and shaking and at his mercy. He remained inside her, and it even felt like his cock grew as her muscles clutched him deeper. Simon made a grumbled hungry sound as he stroked her back and down to her butt, teasing the backs of her thighs and down to where their bodies met until she twitched. Aftershocks of her climax rolled through her and tried to drag him closer, and she started to sit back.

His arm looped around her back to keep her breasts crushed to his chest, and Simon nibbled on her shoulder. "Where are you going? "

"Don't you want to — you know? Finish up?" Heat flushed her cheeks and she felt like an idiot.

Simon chuckled and squeezed the soft area where her thigh and butt met, and Zoe rocked forward once more as she groaned. It felt so good her brain short-circuited and she couldn't think. Could barely breathe. He kneaded her butt to encourage her, so

Zoe remained sprawled across his chest as his hips moved and she moved, and in a matter of heartbeats she climaxed again. Cried out and drove herself down on him as he filled every inch of her. Simon thrust up at her in short little jerks, driving through her spasming channel, until his arms locked around her and he groaned. She barely noticed as he grunted and slowed to a gentle rocking, as his body softened and slipped from hers.

Her breathing slowed until she wasn't panting like a desperate fool, and Zoe closed her eyes. She knew she probably should slide off of him, but he was like sleeping on a furnace. And the steady drumming of his heart felt like home. She sighed and closed her eyes, pressed her forehead against his neck until the beard tickled her cheek. He smelled like her lavender body wash, an incongruity that made her giggle. He'd used her soap.

Simon kissed her shoulder and smiled, though his eyes remained closed. "What's so funny?"

"You smell like flowers."

"Good." He held her tight and made exaggerated snuffling noises against her skin and hair, until Zoe laughed and squirmed. "So do you."

"Silly bear," she said, drowsy and sated and warm. She felt — content. For the first time maybe ever. She didn't want to lose that. Didn't want to lose him. She pushed away worry over what would happen in a month, if the feds got her files and wanted to prosecute Castellano. There was always the chance they would send her into hiding to protect her. Maybe Simon could go with her. Or maybe she could hide with him. A grizzly bear would be more than a match for Castellano. She pushed the thought away and slid her hands under his shoulders until she could tangle her fingers in his hair.

Even his snoring sounded more like a purr, and she drifted off to sleep with the rattle of it in her ears.

She woke at least once in the afternoon or night, confused about where she was and why there was a snoring mountain next to her, but as soon as she moved, Simon woke up to sleepily interrogate her on whether she was cold or hungry or uncomfortable. When she managed to stutter she felt cold, he immediately pulled her close. Which meant, of course, that he squeezed her butt and just as immediately grew hard again. Zoe would have laughed at him — clearly an ass man — but he kissed her and rolled her under him and everything else in the world disappeared. After they'd both finished, he yawned, patted her butt, and muttered something about "Simon says go back to sleep." So she did, still smiling.

The next time she woke because Simon got up, extracting himself from the nest of blankets and sheets and her, and he paused to kiss her forehead. "It's seven. Time to get up."

Zoe pulled the blankets over her head but had to admit she was wide awake. Considering they'd slept almost two days straight, she could make an exception for getting up that early. She winced as she sat up and wiggled out of bed, all her muscles sore from the unfamiliar exertion. Zoe flushed as she wobbled into the bathroom to shower and get ready, particularly as she heard Simon practically whistling and singing in the bedroom. But she smiled as she lathered up with her lavender soap and knew that Simon smelled like her.

He'd dressed already in jeans and a sweater, but waited as she crept out of the bathroom in a towel. Simon grinned, kissing her quickly before tilting his head at the door. "I have to head down to greet the guests, Cooper just drove up. Breakfast is ready when you are."

Zoe wondered if she would always blush around him, if every time she watched him

smile she would think of his mouth against her skin. She cleared her throat before her imagination got too out of control, and flapped her hand at the pile of clothes spilling out of her suitcase. "I'll be down in a minute."

Simon winked, patted her butt one more time, and went whistling out the door. Zoe slapped her forehead and flopped back onto the bed. She still couldn't believe she'd slept with him. It felt so natural, so right, and yet... completely unlike her. Totally unlike her. She stared at the ceiling, trying to think. Simon mentioned her bear might influence her actions, her thoughts, for a while. Maybe the bear gave her the confidence to walk up to him and start unbuckling his belt.

Zoe groaned and lurched upright, toweling furiously at her hair. It had to be the bear. Just the thought of sauntering up to Simon and saying something about "Simon says kiss me" made her guts quake and her cheeks burn. She didn't think she could do it again if someone offered her a billion dollars. And to just pull off his clothes!

She shook her head and dug through her suitcase for something that might match and didn't make her look like a teenager. Zoe dawdled as she pulled her hair back in a ponytail and laced her tennis shoes, but eventually she eased the door open and peeked into the hall. Nothing. The great room in the lodge looked empty, so she braved the stairs and found Ethan in the kitchen.

He shook muffins out of a pan, offering her one as he raised an eyebrow. "You feeling better?"

Her cheeks ignited. Zoe took the muffin but couldn't meet his gaze. "Wh-what do you mean?"

He opened his mouth but then snapped it shut, a matching flush rising in his tanned face. He laughed, though, and turned away. "I meant because of the accident. Not because of anything — else. That may or may not have happened."

Zoe wanted to melt into a puddle on the floor. He knew. Of course he knew. Did Simon tell him? Or had Ethan heard them? She covered her face and thought she might explode from sheer embarrassment.

Ethan laughed more but it had a nervous quality to it, as if he couldn't stop. "It's okay. Don't be embarrassed about anything. Really. I'm just going to go now and hide in the office, if anyone's looking for me."

He retreated. When Zoe gathered her courage to look around, she was alone in the lodge. So she finished putting the fresh muffins in a nice basket, bracing herself for more scrutiny as the main door opened and a group of tourists piled into the lodge. Zoe stayed in the kitchen as the other guys hauled in luggage and started showing the guests around. She didn't know what to do other than smile at the guests, but then Simon appeared and caught her hand. Before she could ask or pull free, he dragged her outside to sit on the swing on the far end of the wrap-around porch.

Simon sprawled across the bench and hugged Zoe to his side, contentment rumbling through his chest. Even though Cooper and Finn kept unloading bags from the back of one of the trucks, Zoe relaxed against Simon and closed her eyes. She hated mornings. Simon played with her hair and started to rock the swing. "We're booked up for the next two weeks. All fishing trips. Things will be busy around here. Can you help out with some of the cooking?"

"Sure." Zoe drew her legs up on the swing and breathed him in, the lavender and musky male scent mixed with fresh pine and a hint of exhaust from the old farm trucks. Her head rested on his shoulder and she smiled. "I'm not very good at it, though."

"There's always weeding the garden."

"We both know that's not a good idea." The gentle sway of the swing and the warmth

of him next to her lulled Zoe into near-sleep, and the anxiety that gripped her faded away. "So you just run hunting and fishing trips?"

"Well," he said, fighting back a yawn. "Yes and no. We have plans for more. Some of our neighbors want to sell their land — dozens of acres of forest and rivers and mountain. Great land, some of it adjacent to the national parks. I'd like to buy as much of it as I can, otherwise a mining company might snap it up. They've been sniffing around here, trying to talk everyone into selling."

"So you want to buy more land? For what?"

"I'd like to build cabins for people to rent, to start. Maybe run a program for kids from the city to come out here and stay for a week or two, so they can learn about nature and animals and build up some confidence. Maybe in a year or two, we can run adventure camps or team-building retreats with ropes courses and survival training and things like that." He sighed and rocked the swing back with more energy. "But for now, we work with the game wardens and park rangers to track migrations and predator numbers, and we help out with tracking and tagging some species. Finn hires out as a tracker as well. The hunting and fishing trips are our bread and butter until we can get enough profit to re-invest in the rest of the business."

Zoe picked up his hand where it draped over her shoulder and studied his fingers. Strong, capable hands. If anyone could make all of that happen, he could. He looked like he could build dreams with his bare hands. "But what if I said —"

She cut off as an engine revved nearby and tires bit through gravel. Simon tensed next to her, and Zoe sat up. A dirty red sedan skidded to a halt in front of the lodge, a cloud of dust and exhaust billowing across the yard and onto the porch. Zoe covered her mouth and coughed as Simon lurched to his feet.

The door burst open and a giant levered out of the car. For a split second, Zoe thought

it was one of Castellano's guys and he meant to kill her. She sucked in a breath and braced herself for a knife or a gun or something awful, and tried to hide behind Simon as he seemed to get bigger and wider.

SIMON

Simon didn't generally like cars speeding up to his den, and he liked it even less when Zoe sat next to him. They finally had a real conversation, something that could lead to a discussion of their future together, and some asshole in a rental car ruined it. Simon clenched his jaw as he got up to punch whoever it was in the face, and then Tate jumped out of the car.

Simon blinked. "What the —"

"What the hell are you doing?" Tate didn't even slow down, marching up to Simon to shove him back. "Why did she call me in a panic? What did you do to her?"

Simon stood his ground and shoved him back, wanting to get space so he wouldn't trip over Zoe. He didn't know what pissed Tate off, but Simon's bear didn't feel like being pushed around in his own home. "Chill out, friend."

"Don't 'friend' me." Tate, breathing hard, looked around him at the porch. "Let's go, Zoe. Get your stuff. I'm getting you out of here."

"The hell you are." Simon bristled, advancing on his friend. He'd fight to the death to keep her. "She stays here. "

"You can go fuck yourself." Tate tried to elbow past him to where Zoe stood frozen next to the swing. "Zoe, I'm not kidding. We need to get moving. Castellano could

have traced your call or he might have tracked me. I need to get you somewhere safe, fast."

"Isn't it safer here?"

Simon's heart sank to hear the uncertainty in her voice. He backed up to keep her close and away from Tate, and he didn't look back as the front door opened and Ethan eased onto the porch. "Is there a problem, boss?"

"Of course not. Zoe, go inside with Ethan." Simon nudged her closer to his friend, praying Ethan got the message and dragged her to safety.

But Zoe stood her ground and poked his side, making Simon jump. She looked suddenly fierce, like when she'd tried to shove him out of her room that first morning. "Don't tell me what to do."

"Exactly," Tate said. "Get your stuff, Zoe, and we'll —"

"You either." She dodged Simon's grab and strode forward to plant a finger in Tate's chest. "Just because you're my brother doesn't mean you can order me around. I'm a damn adult and you're being a jerk."

"Brother?" Simon said, just as Tate scowled and added, "You're being difficult on purpose, and you seem to be forgetting there are people who want to kill you ."

"I don't know what I want to do." She clenched her hands at her sides and gave them both a dark look. "But I will let you know when I decide."

She turned on her heel and marched away, taking the path to the river. Simon started after her, hating that she was upset, but Tate got in his way. "Don't try anything, dude."

Simon scowled at him. "Did she just say you're her brother? "

"Yeah." Tate ran a hand over his short hair, staring after where Zoe disappeared into the trees. "Half-brother."

"You never mentioned having a sister."

"I didn't know." Tate looked at him and then away, shaking his head. "I found out about her about five years ago. My old man died and she was at the funeral. Apparently he'd been hooking up with her mother while he was married to mine. Her mom is a drunk and an addict, if she's even still alive. A total mess. So I took Zoe away and helped pay for her school, got her set up in an apartment, tried to keep her safe. She got mixed up in this crazy shit with Castellano, and I didn't know what else to do. I trusted you, Simon. What the hell happened?"

"It's hard to explain." Simon gritted his teeth, wishing he could tell Tate about being a shifter. It made it a lot easier to understand why Zoe ran, but that didn't mean it would make it easier for him to leave Zoe there. If Tate even believed him, that is. Most humans still refused to believe shifters walked among them, despite evidence all over the internet. Simon took a deep breath. "She got scared. There were some bears in the meadow and she surprised them. They surprised her. She ran. I tried to stop her and she flipped out, got in my truck and drove off. I'm guessing that's when she called you. That's it. Nothing major."

He left out the part where she wrecked his truck and would have died if he hadn't turned her into the bear. That part could wait. And the part where Simon took her to bed. A couple of times. No reason for Tate to know that, either. Simon held his hands out, glad that the door to the lodge opened again and two more pairs of boots clomped onto the porch behind him. "You know me, brother. You know I wouldn't hurt her, and I sure as hell wouldn't let anything happen to her. "

Tate frowned at him, arms folded, and for a moment Simon thought they might end up brawling in the front drive of the lodge. He braced for the confrontation. At least the guests were all inside and wouldn't witness the mess.

ZOE

Zoe stormed toward the river, hands clenched at her sides and muttering to herself with each step. Unbelievable. Not just one but two men trying to tell her what to do. Like she couldn't see what a problem some of this was. And imagine, Simon thinking he could just decide she would stay forever in the middle of a freaking forest because she'd slept with him and that crazy wild part of her liked him.

The stillness and quiet of the trees settled around her, though, and eventually her heart slowed and the storm of anger clouding her thoughts passed. Zoe took a deep breath and paused to take in her surroundings. The river trickled and ran over stones, a soothing soundtrack, and she turned in a slow circle. It really was peaceful, if a little weird. It was a strange feeling to be so alone, to feel as if there was no one in shouting distance. She couldn't remember the last time she'd been so disconnected from everything.

Zoe eased closer to the river but didn't touch the water. She preferred to study moss and fish and smelly things from afar. Her nose wrinkled but the wild part of her reveled in the tantalizing scent of things swimming in the water.

She retreated from the river before she jumped in and started chowing down on some trout, and perched on a fallen log to contemplate the running water. Stay or go. City or forest. Living in virtual reality or ... reality reality. She rubbed her forehead. She liked Simon, a lot. When she could relax around him and didn't say the wrong thing, she felt more at home with Simon than she had at any other time in her life. He felt

safe. Comforting and comfortable.

She groaned and pressed the heels of her hands against her eyes. Sure, he'd slept with her and talked like he wanted her to stick around, but she was still a criminal. It would be better to return to California with Tate and lay low until the stuff with Castellano blew over. She could find a legitimate job. Write code for banks, maybe. Do security testing on networks. Work nine to five in an office.

Zoe shoved to her feet and paced a few steps closer to the river. Nine to five in an office sounded like hell. Business casual instead of jeans and leggings. She made a face and turned on her heel, ready to head back to the lodge. There had to be a compromise. Maybe she could live in town, work for Rosie or someone, and then she could still see Simon. If he wanted to see her.

She lurched to a halt. What if he didn't really want her to stick around? What if he just wanted the bear part of her, and the real Zoe part of her ended up slowly suffocating? She gulped air as uneasiness grew in her chest. She didn't know much about bears, but there didn't seem to be a whole lot of women hanging around at the lodge or in town. Zoe chewed her lower lip as she stared up the path to where the lodge waited. Where Tate and Simon both waited — two different paths, two different futures.

The wild part of her, the bear, knew which decision to make. The bear grumbled and rumbled that Zoe even considered walking away from Simon. He was their match, their other half. Zoe rubbed her temples and turned back to the river. But how could she live in the woods, at the lodge, with five guys? And no Chinese takeout to call and no movie theaters. Was Simon enough to balance out everything she liked about the city?

She sank onto the log once more. Except she was alone in the city. In her apartment with her computers and nothing else. Even the stray cats she fed didn't show up every

night. Putting up with mosquitos the size of pigeons might be worth having human companionship, feeling like she was finally part of a family. A family. Her throat closed up a little and her vision blurred. Simon felt like family. More like family than people she'd known her entire life.

Zoe shoved to her feet and turned toward the lodge. Sure, Simon made her a little jumpy with how intensely he looked at her. But when she finally relaxed... It was worth it.

She got three steps before something sounded wrong in the trees to her left. The bear didn't like it. Something didn't belong. Zoe's heart jumped to her throat. For half a second, she thought about screaming for help or trying to call, but then four men dressed in black paramilitary gear rose out of the underbrush and surrounded her.

They had guns. Lots of gun.

Radios in their ears and paint covering their faces, some with branches and camouflage netting draped around them. The bear roared inside her head and Zoe twitched, hugging herself as she backed toward the river. "Uh, it's not hunting season yet, you probably shouldn't —"

"Mick sends his regards," one said, voice low and gruff. The leader, by his demeanor. He had blue eyes, piercing and cold, and they cut right through her. "And wants to have a word with you. "

"I'm h-happy to give him a call," Zoe said, swallowing hard as she turned. Two more woodland ghosts stood behind her, between her and the river. "But the reception out here is so bad, I'll just —"

"He's waiting." Blue Eyes leaned forward and grabbed her arm, hard enough it hurt and the bear part of her wanted to do something about it. Her chest felt tight and

intense, like the bear might burst out whether she wanted it to or not. Zoe gritted her teeth as he slid plastic loops around her wrists and cranked them down until they cut off her circulation and bit into her skin. He frowned at her and said, "Cooperate. Don't yell or try to get away, or we'll knock you out. Got it?"

"I have a lot of money," she said quietly, praying she sounded competent and sincere. "I can double whatever he's paying you."

"Nice try." Blue Eyes lifted up a black bag and tossed it over her head, and everything went dark.

Zoe held her breath at the rank smell in the cloth and dug in her heels as he tried to pull her forward. Her heart started to race. Simon. Simon would save her, but he thought she needed time to think. It could be an hour before he came to find her. And in an hour, Castellano could take her anywhere. Could kill her.

A strangled sound escaped and tears dripped to her cheeks, soaked up by the hood, and she tripped as they started marching. Alone again. Except for the bear. But if she let the bear out, if she could even figure out how to do it, would she be able to find herself again? Maybe Zoe would be lost forever if the bear came out too soon. She held her breath and tried to come up with a plan.

15

SIMON

Simon stared Tate down. "Don't yell."

He thought he could still hear Zoe crashing through the trees, making more noise than a bull in a china shop even on a well-travelled path. Simon wanted to go after her, wanted to chase her down and prove how much he wanted her to stay with him. Tate might think the city was safer, but Simon knew better. He was a bear in the woods, the biggest grizzly in the neighborhood and most of the entire state. He could protect her.

Cooper, Finn, and Ethan all remained outside with Simon, eyes on Tate as they assessed the threat he posed. Simon knew his guys were already riled up over Zoe being upset. She'd only been with them a couple of days, but she was already family. Already part of the group. They would defend her with their lives, particularly since she was Simon's mate.

Tate's eyes narrowed as he faced Simon. "Look, dude. I trusted you with her, to protect her, and I get a call from her a day after I drop her off that you're crazy and she needs help. What the hell is going on?"

"Look, man —" Simon took a breath to try and explain that he wanted Zoe to stay forever when a crack echoed through the air. Gun shot. He started to yell for them to get down, but Tate stared at him with a confused look on his face. Then he looked down at where red bloomed across his chest.

Shot.

Simon choked on denial as another shot rang out, and another red patch appeared on Tate's chest. His guys ran for cover and Simon tackled Tate to get him down, to make a smaller target, and dragged him over to crouch behind one of the axles of the old truck. Bullets, particularly ones from high-powered rifles, cut right through car bodies. Even the axles were a gamble. Only the engine block was safe, but Ethan claimed that real estate.

Ethan signaled to Finn and Cooper, and turned to look at Simon. "Where did the shot come from?"

"Didn't see." Simon pressed against the wounds in Tate's chest, but part of him knew his friend breathed his last. He tried to push away the grief; there would be time for regret later. "It's just a flesh wound, mate. Just hold on. We'll get these bastards and ___"

"Must be Castellano," Tate managed to say, but the breath whistled in his chest. When Simon looked at Ethan, the medic shook his head. Tate coughed and blood coated his teeth. "Tracked me. Or Zoe's phone. They've gotta be his. Be careful."

"We got it." But Simon's heart stopped. Zoe. Zoe, alone in the woods. He swallowed the panic and concentrated on the immediate task. Get the guys shooting at them, then find Zoe. Make sure she was safe. Then find Castellano and kill him.

Simon's world condensed down to series of simple tasks, and he started giving orders. Cooper and Finn pulled rifles from the truck they crouched behind, and Simon retrieved the rifle from the floorboard of his truck. The woods remained silent, the shooters no doubt waiting for one of them to poke their head out. Simon made eye contact with Finn and Cooper and nodded at the house. "Go through the lodge and out back. Circle around and try to flank them."

The guys nodded and braced to make a run for it. They waited until Simon and Ethan rose to crack off a few rounds into the trees, hopefully distracting the shooters enough so they didn't kill the others. Cooper and Finn would get to the back of the lodge and escape outside to transform, then hunt the bastards as bears.

Ethan scanned the trees and gestured. "Two o'clock, near the oak."

Simon leaned to take a shot across the bed of the truck, and was rewarded by a grunt and rustle of movement in the trees. One down. Another shot rang out and pinged off the truck next to him. He checked on Tate, but the man's chest barely moved. Simon gritted his teeth, about to charge into the trees by himself to kill the sons of bitches when a grizzly roar broke the silence.

Simon lurched up and around the truck, not caring about whether more shooters lurked in the trees, and ran to where Cooper, a massive brown bear with blazes of white on his chest, pinned a man in camouflage netting against the trunk of a giant oak. Simon grabbed the guy by his chest rig and slammed him back against the tree, feeling grim satisfaction as the guy's head bounced off the bark. "Where's Zoe?"

The guy gritted his teeth but kept his attention on the bear snarling over Simon's shoulder. Simon's bear wanted to burst out and show the idiot who he really needed to worry about, but Simon knew Zoe needed him to be human. So he punched the guy in the face, then the kidney, and again in the face. "Where's Zoe?"

Still nothing .

A radio, clipped to his belt, lit up, and Simon seized it. Held it up to his ear and heard through a static crackle something about taking the girl to 'rally point bravo.' The shooter looked grim, despite the broken nose. As if resigned to being eaten by a grizzly. Simon bared his teeth in fury, ready to choke him out. "I hope Castellano pays you well."

The man's cold, dead eyes flashed to Simon's face before returning to the brown bear behind him. "He does."

Simon threw him head-first into another tree and stormed back to the trucks. Rally point bravo. Finn, back to human and stark naked, made his way back to the front of the lodge and held out a small waterproof pouch. "Maps, boss. The other one had these on him."

"Dead?"

"Yep. Fell out of the tree and broke his neck. Sad."

"Except he was on the ground when Simon shot him," Ethan said under his breath as he loaded another rifle into the truck and jumped in the passenger seat. "Did you toss him back up the tree?"

"Don't ask me no questions," Finn said with an arched eyebrow. "And I'll tell you no lies."

Simon didn't have time for banter. Castellano's guys had Zoe. And they killed Tate. Took a shot at him and his guys, and endangered their guests. His bear wanted vengeance. Wanted to show the world that anyone who threatened his family would pay a terrible price. He started up the truck as he spoke to Finn. "Get Cooper and Noah. Distract the guests with something. Put Tate in the infirmary, and hide those other guys somewhere. I don't want the guests finding a bunch of dead bodies laying around. Then bring the other truck and meet us in town. They're taking Zoe to a place just south of Rosie's."

"Roger," Finn said and knocked his fist against the side of the truck. "Go get her. We'll radio when we're on our way. "

Ethan leaned around Simon enough to say, "Call some of the neighbors, see if they can help clear the woods. There's no telling how many of these guys are out there."

Finn nodded and headed into the lodge, just as Cooper lumbered across the drive, still in bear form. He gave a mournful grizzly groan and snuffled at Tate, still laying on the gravel. Simon refused to look back as he drove away from the lodge. He couldn't think about Tate yet. He had to find Zoe.

Ethan didn't speak as the truck careened through the switchbacks, but kept loading magazines for the rifles they both carried. He'd known Tate, too. They knew from experience that it wasn't the hot anger that proved dangerous. No, cold anger meant clarity and precision. Deliberate and calculating. Perfect for vengeance. Simon gripped the steering wheel until the leather creaked. If there was so much as a scratch on Zoe, everyone Castellano knew would pay the price.

16

ZOE

She fell at least three times before she heard an idling car. A door opened and then the guy with a vise grip on her shoulder shoved her forward. She tripped and fell forward, onto a bench seat, and struggled to get her feet under her once more. Zoe wormed around to sit up, wrists aching as the plastic ties cut into her skin, and as the door closed, someone pulled the hood off her head.

She blinked and sneezed, shaking her head to get hair out of her face, and stared around the inside of the car. It was one of the fancy town cars with a large back seat, almost a limo with a rear-facing bench seat as well. She faced Castellano and one of his right-hand guys, Joey. No one knew Joey's last name, and he always said it was better that way. Zoe gulped.

Castellano frowned, heavy eyebrows drawing down, and adjusted the fine suit coat he wore even in the middle of the woods. "Zoe. You haven't been answering your phone."

"Reception is terrible out here," she said, a little weakly.

"Indeed." Castellano didn't blink as the car started moving, but Zoe almost fell off the seat. Her former boss studied his nails as he went on. "Imagine my surprise when I discovered you'd disappeared. And when I checked my bank accounts."

She cleared her throat, unable to meet his cold gaze. She needed to buy a little time,

that was all. "A misunderstanding, Mick. Really."

"That's what I thought." The boss glanced at his henchman as he gestured at Zoe. "A misunderstanding, isn't that what I said?"

"Yeah," Joey said, expressionless. He watched Zoe with dead eyes, and she shivered.

Castellano folded his hands in his lap, unperturbed as the town car bumped and skidded along the unpaved road. "So now we have just a small mistake to resolve. Right?"

Zoe's heart raced and she tried to swallow, tried to smile winningly. "Easy fix, Mick. Promise. We just need to find some good wifi, and I can put everything back the way it was."

"Good. That's what I want, Zoe." Castellano's eyes narrowed as he sat forward, and Zoe recoiled on instinct. "Exactly the way things were. Is that going to be a problem?"

"N-no," she said. She looked out the window for half a second, praying she would see a giant bear running beside the car, but nothing. Just trees and a hint of sky. Her eyes burned and she cleared her throat to keep her voice steady as she looked back at her former boss. "Not a problem at all."

"Good." He glanced down at his phone, then handed it to Joey. "We'll make sure everything is back where it should be, then we can talk about the future. Your future."

"My future?" Zoe's voice went a little high at the end, particularly as Joey put the phone away and revealed the dull gleam of a pistol at his belt. She'd always known Castellano wasn't a good guy, but she'd overlooked some of the more questionable business practices because they didn't really affect her. Except now they did. Her

palms started to sweat as the car sped up.

Castellano let the silence stretch, his fingers drumming on his knee.

Zoe sank lower in the seat and fiddled with the plastic on her wrists. The bear didn't want to be there, wanted to transform and scare the bejesus out of these guys. But Zoe knew perfectly well that they would shoot her, and chances were, she wouldn't be a very good bear to start with. She'd never done it. What if she got stuck? What if she couldn't walk or think or anything? She shivered and swallowed a knot in her throat.

Plus, Castellano would see it as another thing to exploit. Imagine having a trick bear. She'd end up in a cage for real, trotted out to entertain his business partners. Or... Worse. It could be so much worse. So she had to stay human. Definitely human.

She could get out of this. She had to get away from Castellano and his guys. Then she could call Tate or Simon and figure out what to do next. But first she had to get free.

The car turned onto a paved road and she twisted, trying to figure out where they headed. Castellano ran a hand over his balding head and made a face. "This is the worst part of the country. Unbelievable. Not a decent restaurant anywhere."

"And terrible wifi," Zoe added, trying not to get her hopes up. "So far the only place with connectivity is that bar. The one in the town. That's it."

Castellano rubbed his jaw and watched her without expression. "Convenient, no?"

"Incredibly inconvenient." Zoe took a deep breath and steeled what remained of her courage. "If you want all your files back the way they were, as fast as possible, it's very inconvenient. But unless you want to wait until we're all back in Seattle or somewhere, that's the only option."

Joey grunted. He didn't look happy as Castellano directed the driver toward town, and the car accelerated. Zoe wiggled her fingers and wished the feeling would come back, otherwise she'd never be able to work fast enough to stay alive. She bought herself a little time, maybe, if they took her to Rosie's. And if Rosie were there, maybe she would call Simon.

She tried not to hope too much as the car pulled into the tiny, desolate town. Hard to believe she'd only been there two days. So much had changed since then. The town car pulled to a halt in front of the bar and the driver came around to open the door. Zoe held out her wrists. "I can't type like this."

Castellano gestured, and Joey leaned forward to slide a knife under the plastic ties. As Zoe leaned to get out of the car, Joey caught her arm and the knife prickled against her side. "Don't do anything stupid, kid."

She held her breath but tried for attitude as she raised her eyebrows. "Do I look stupid to you?"

"Don't answer that," Castellano said. He gestured and moved toward the door. "Let's go."

Zoe blinked as the sunlight blinded her but staggered out of the car. She looked around the empty street, wishing to see Simon or Ethan or Tate or anyone friendly. Instead, Joey and Castellano flanked her as they walked toward the bar. The gravel crunched under her feet. Inside the bar was as dim as she remembered, and a great deal emptier than the last time she'd been there. But Rosie still worked behind the bar, raising her eyebrows as they walked in.

She started to speak but something cut her off and her head tilted. She sniffed the air briefly, then pasted a mostly sincere smile on her face as she leaned on the bar. "Hey there, honey. What can I do for you?"

"I wanted to call in that favor." Zoe smiled but widened her eyes and hoped that Rosie would pick up on her distress. "Could we use your wifi for a second?"

"Sure, sug." Rosie gestured at one of the somewhat clean tables. "Set up shop wherever you need. Did Simon and the boys come as well?"

"No, they're back at the lodge." Zoe swallowed panic as she shuffled over to the table and eased into one of the chairs. Castellano sat next to her and handed her a laptop while Joey folded his arms over his chest near the door. No getting out that way. Rosie remained at the bar, cutting lemons, and watched with a jaundiced eye as Zoe opened the laptop and started typing.

The bartender set the knife aside and fussed with something under the bar. "You want anything for lunch, honey? I'm supposed to meet Sam next door, and —"

"We're fine," Castellano said, the muscle in his jaw jumping. Zoe had seen that look before. She prayed Rosie left it alone.

Rosie only arched an eyebrow and gave one of the most expressive sniffs Zoe had ever heard. The bartender said, "Suit yourself," and sashayed out the back door.

The moment the door clicked shut behind her, Castellano slid a crumpled piece of paper across the table. "This is the bank account number where I want all my money returned. And this is where you're going to drop all the files you stole."

Zoe held her breath and nodded, reaching for the laptop. "This might take a while. There was... a lot."

"I know," he said. His voice carried a hard edge, and Zoe's heart sank. Men like him didn't forgive much. Her fingers trembled as she touched the keys on the laptop, and she clicked slowly to work .

She tried not to think of Joey, standing by the door with his gun and complete lack of humanity, and focused instead on Simon. He loved her. He wanted her to stay. He would find her.

He had to find her. Fast.

17

SIMON

Simon's phone rang when they were only halfway to the rally point; he tossed it to Ethan, who answered with a laconic, "Talk to me."

Simon gripped the steering wheel harder as Ethan put it on speaker and Rosie's voice crackled and broke through the poor reception. The bartender sounded like she moved fast, breath coming hard as she ran. "Your little cookie is in my bar with two of the rudest sons of bitches I've had the pleasure to see in recent days. One ugly one by the door, packing at least a pistol and maybe something else, and a slimy bastard sitting right next to her. She's doing something on a laptop."

Ethan glanced over at him but Simon couldn't think through the rage that turned his vision red. So Ethan cleared his throat. "Thanks, Rosie. Did she look injured at all? Anything wrong with any of them?"

"She just looked scared, hon. But bless her heart, she smiled when she asked to call in her favor. Are you boys close?"

"We will be," Simon ground out, feeling his teeth crack.

"I'll get some of the boys together," Rosie called into the phone, the signal breaking up. "We saw some other odd fellows running around the trees, we might need to get the sheriff involved in roundin' 'em up."

"Not the sheriff," Ethan said, then cursed as he looked at the phone. "We lost signal." He picked up his radio instead and called back to the rest of their guys, warning them about the additional shooters in the woods.

Simon stepped on the gas, pushing the truck until it nearly rattled apart around them and Ethan gripped the handle of the door to keep from hitting the ceiling every time they hit a pothole in the road. It felt like an eternity until the town came into view, and Simon eased off the gas. No reason to raise the alarm, in case Castellano posted look-outs to give him warning if the cavalry arrived. Ethan hid the rifles so they rode lower in the truck as they turned onto a side street parallel to the main street. The radio crackled as Finn said they were closing in on the south side of town and had run across Rosie and several of the other shifters in town, with half a dozen guys in paramilitary equipment detained.

As their truck rolled to the back of Rosie's bar, Simon saw Zoe. A bruiser held her in a near head-lock while a greasy-looking guy in an expensive suit carried a laptop and got into the driver's side of a dark sedan parked across the street. The bruiser shoved Zoe into the backseat and climbed in after her, and Simon's bear growled to see the terrified look on her face. She looked like she'd been crying.

He accelerated until the truck bumped the sedan, about to leap out and drag the suited bastard out through the window, but the sedan took off. It skidded on the loose gravel but got enough traction to head out of town, clouds of dust choking Simon as he struggled to stay with the speedy car. He snarled as the sedan slid into a sharp corner, a steep angle, and sailed over the edge of the embankment. Rolled twice and landed upright, the interior filled with deployed airbags and cursing.

Simon leapt out of the truck before it even stopped and raced to the vehicle. He heard Zoe swearing and crying, saw her climbing out of the dented window. Trying to climb out — the ugly bruiser tried to grab her ankle, and the suited man pulled a gun from inside the car.

Simon couldn't breathe. Could barely see. And then — the bear roared out, beyond his control, entirely in charge. And an enraged grizzly collided with the sedan and crushed the door shut on the suited bastard. He roared and reared up on his back legs to get better leverage to crush his paws on the roof of the car, not caring at the tinny pop-pop of a pistol, and his claws ripped through the metal like tissue paper.

Ethan ran up behind him, still human, and retrieved the weapons before punching the henchman in the face. He got out of the way as Simon crushed the car around Castellano, as he created a cage to trap and maybe kill the bastard. Castellano screamed, high-pitched and desperate, as a grizzly bear landed in his lap.

Ethan went to help a wide-eyed Zoe limp from the other side of the car, easing her over to the truck so she could sit down, and the scent of her fear and a hint of relief brought Simon back to his senses. He shook off the rage and reasserted control of the bear, sliding back to human so he could reach through the window to grab the front of Castellano's shirt. He wrenched the pale man forward until their noses almost touched, and Simon's voice remained half-bear as he growled. "Listen to me, and remember every word I say. Zoe is off limits. If there is so much as a whisper of you getting near her, I will fucking end you. I will rip your face off and tear your heart from inside your chest. You got it?"

The mob boss's mouth worked soundlessly as he stared at Simon, eyes wide and uncomprehending. Simon shook him, didn't care about blood that splattered from a deep cut on Castellano's cheek or that Simon was stark naked after the shift. All he could hear was Zoe's panicked breathing, and the almost-hyperventilation of her whispers to Ethan. Simon bellowed an inhuman, enraged sound. He bared his teeth, on the verge of going back to bear form. "You call every single one of your little friends and tell them she's protected. If anyone looks at her sideways, you will be the one paying the price. You better use every means at your disposal to keep your fuckheads away from her. Got it?"

Castellano gurgled in his throat and managed to stop screaming long enough to say, "Fine. Fine. I'll call it off. She'll be fine. It's all fine. Just — call a goddamn ambulance. I think my legs are broken."

"Fucking suffer," Simon said and threw him back against the seat. He snarled again at the bruiser in the backseat, despite the man being unconscious, and turned to face where Zoe sat next to the truck. He struggled for calm as he walked up to her and Ethan retreated, muttering something about keeping the mob boss alive long enough to send the message not to kill her.

Zoe shook and shivered, eyes still glued to the sedan and the two men trapped inside. She whispered, "Is he still mad?"

"No," he said, and Simon cleared his throat as his voice came out all rough and rocky. Maybe making bear noises while in human form wasn't a great idea for the vocal cords. He crouched in front of her and held her shoulders, desperate to comfort her. "You're safe, Zoe. He's not going to bother you anymore."

"Are you sure?" She blinked tears away as she looked up at him, and Simon's heart broke.

He took a deep breath and started checking her over for any damage from the car wreck. "I had a little talk with him. He knows to stay away from you. "

Zoe took a shaky breath then flushed bright red and held her hands up in front of her. "You're naked."

Simon looked down at himself and sighed. He leaned forward to kiss her forehead, holding her face in his hands. "You'll get used to it eventually." But he pulled a set of coveralls from the bed of the truck and slid into them before he helped her to her feet.

Zoe leaned against his chest, hiding her face against him, and said, "I did something bad."

"Nothing you did could be —"

"I told him I gave the money back." She looked up at him, guilt making her adorable until Simon wanted to kiss every inch of her face. "But I didn't. I just put it somewhere else."

Simon bit back a laugh, squeezing her tight against his chest until he could rub his chin on her head. "Do you really need all that money, Zoe?"

"I only kept a little," she said. She leaned against him, as if too tired to stand on her own, and her arms linked around his back. Simon wanted to carry her away to some place warm and safe. Zoe sighed and nuzzled against him. "I put most of it in the charity fund for the people who were hurt. But I saved a little. I've been thinking of buying some land."

"Land?" Simon looked up with a frown at the sound of approaching vehicles. He picked out Finn and Cooper and Noah, but a couple of other SUVs and farm trucks rolled through the grass as well. He breathed easier when he saw Rosie in the lead, her eyes narrowed in fury. The cougar had claws and didn't take kindly to outsiders threatening her friends. Simon rubbed Zoe's back and looked in the truck for something that would keep her warmer. "What are you talking about?"

"Land," she said, gesturing back at where the lodge waited, far beyond the town. "You said there was a bunch for sale and you wanted to build cabins. I thought we could —"

She trailed off, uncertain, and he took a breath to reassure her. It was the best idea he'd heard in a long time. But Zoe's expression froze and Simon's heart sank —

something behind him scared her. Something he had zero chance of surviving, from the look on her face. He braced himself for the inevitable, and hoped he would at least save her before he died.

18

ZOE

As if almost being killed by Joey and then nearly dying in a car wreck — for the second time in as many days! — wasn't bad enough, just as she tried to tell Simon she wanted to stay with him, a freaking mountain lion jumped up from the bed of the truck and launched itself through the air at them.

A mountain lion.

She grabbed Simon and tried to wrench him out of the way, but succeeded only in hurting her back before the cat's paws collided with Simon's shoulders and threw them both to the ground. She squeaked as he knocked the air out of her, and Simon rolled, shouting at Ethan. Zoe gasped for air, waiting for the claws and teeth and blood.

Instead Tate stood up, totally naked but with two angry red weals on his chest, and scowled down at Simon. "You son of a bitch."

Zoe stared at him. Her thoughts didn't quite connect. She looked for the mountain lion, but there was only Tate. Simon lurched to his feet, standing over Zoe to prevent Tate from getting any closer. "What the hell, man? I thought you were dead."

"You never said you were a grizzly," Tate said, teeth bared.

Zoe looked between him and Simon, struggling to catch up. Dead?

Simon threw his arms out in exasperation. "Well, you never said you're a cat."

"A mountain lion, dick. Not a cat." Tate kept scowling as he shoved past Simon to help Zoe up, and she found herself once again faced with a naked man's business. Her brother's naked business.

She held her hands up to block everything from sight. "No, I'm cool. I'm cool. Find some pants, damn it."

"A precious little kitten," Simon said under his breath, throwing a pair of coveralls in Tate's face. "It explains a lot about you, man. All the bathing and tanning and sleeping."

Tate wasn't nearly as entertained as he shoved his legs into the coveralls and zipped them partially up. "You left me to bleed to death, asshole. You don't get to bitch at me about anything for at least six months."

"What the heck are you talking about?" Zoe looked between the two men as they squared off. She clutched handfuls of her hair, trying to think through the raging headache. It felt like she'd transported back in time a few hours and they were back at the lodge, both of them arguing over what to do with her. "What is going on? Why did you think Tate was dead?"

Simon shrugged, watching as a few of the other shifters helped Ethan extract Castellano and Joey from the car. "Some of Castellano's guys shot up the lodge. Tate was hit. I thought he was dead."

"So you left him?" Zoe's heart jumped to her throat. The red marks on Tate's chest were bullet holes .

"I had to find you," Simon said, like he was trying to be patient.

"That's it." Zoe stomped her foot and shoved him, knocking him back a step as Simon stared at her in surprise. "How could you leave him? What's wrong with you? I thought you were friends."

"We are." Simon blinked at he looked at her. "Zoe, he was —"

"He wasn't dead." She caught sight of Tate, smirking as he leaned against the truck, and turned her ire on him. "And you! You're my brother. Why the heck didn't you ever tell me you're a mountain lion?"

He straightened, a shadow of guilt crossing his expression, but he held out his hands to catch her. "Zoe, it was too dangerous for you to know. I didn't mean to keep it from you, but..."

Tears burned her eyes and Zoe held onto control with her fingernails. The bear inside her very much wanted to get loose so she could show those men how she felt about being left in the dark. She clenched her fists at her sides and fixed them with her fiercest look. "Don't you dare. I've had just about enough of the two of you. I need a break. I need to clear my head, and I don't want to see any more naked men."

She spun on her heel to march back to town, but ran into Rosie instead. The bartender caught her shoulders, took one look at her face, and said, "Honey, you look like you could use a drink. Come on with me and I'll get you settled." Rosie leaned around her to get an eyeful of Tate, then arched her eyebrow at him. "And you stick around, sugar. I've been looking for a hot little lion to warm my den at night. You'll do nicely."

Zoe hiccupped, somewhere between a laugh and a sob, and let Rosie lead her back to the bar and inside. She was so relieved but so mad. After the terror of Castellano showing up, and Joey pointing the gun at her, and knowing that they were going to drive her somewhere they could hide her body... To have it all just end so abruptly

knocked her off-balance. She was safe. The moment she saw Simon, she knew she was safe. But that didn't erase the terror of the last few hours, the uncertainty and fear. Zoe sank into a chair at one of the tables and rested her head on her arms. She wanted to cry but the tears seemed stuck in her throat.

Rosie dropped a basket of peanuts on the table along with two shot glasses and a bottle of whiskey, and took the chair next to her. "Okay, honey. Start talking."

Zoe looked up, miserable. "About what?"

Rosie snorted, leveling one long, bejeweled nail at her. "First, why you smell like a bear now when you didn't before. Second, who the guys in the car are to you. And third, who that tall drink of water is."

Zoe's hand shook as she poured whiskey into the shot glasses, taking one before she dared speak. She wasn't a big drinker, but the events of the last few days deserved a round or two. "That's my brother, Tate. Half-brother, I guess."

Rosie made a sound suspiciously close to a purr. Zoe wanted to giggle at the thought of Rosie chasing after Tate; her brother wouldn't know what hit him. But she sagged against the table again, wishing her heart would stop racing and her hands would stop trembling. "And I'm a bear now. I crashed the truck and would have died, so Simon gave me blood. So I'm a bear."

"Oh my." Rosie's expression grew serious as she reached for Zoe's hand on the table, pressing her fingers in a comforting show of support. "Honey, that's a lot to take in. How are you doing with it?"

"I don't know." Zoe tried to give her a wobbly smile. "It doesn't really matter, does it? I can't change it."

"Well, sure. That's true." Rosie sipped some whiskey, then started cracking open peanuts. "But that doesn't mean you can't be angry or scared or frustrated. Confused. Maybe excited. It's a lot to take in."

Zoe rubbed her face. "I was too worried about all of this other stuff."

"Seems like you got a lot of people chasing after you."

"Not as much now, I think." Zoe exhaled and felt some of the weight lift off her chest. At least Simon took care of Castellano. And she still had some of the money. Enough to buy the land Simon wanted and maybe even build a cabin or two. She reached for more whiskey. "But that doesn't help me figure out where to go next."

"What do you mean?"

"Simon wants me to stay here," Zoe said, frowning at the amber liquid in her tiny glass. "And Tate wants me to go back to California."

"But what does Zoe want?" Rosie glanced up as the door at the back of bar opened. "That seems to be the more important question, sug."

"It's easy to ask questions," Zoe said. She sighed and finished off the drink, wishing for a couple more as Simon eased into the bar, looking guilty. "But more difficult to answer them, don't you think?"

Rosie chuckled as she shoved to her feet, but she paused long enough to murmur, "Take some advice from someone who's been around a while — don't pass up true love because you're scared of it. At least give it a chance. You can always walk away later, but the very worst type of regrets are the 'what ifs,' honey. Believe me."

From the pain in her eyes, Zoe knew she spoke the truth. Zoe swallowed another knot

of emotion and nodded. "Thanks, Rosie."

"Sure." The bartender patted her on the back and headed for the exit, though she gave Simon a hard look as she passed him. "Be kind, young man."

He nodded and said, "Always, Rosie," but he looked miserable as he approached Zoe's table.

She downed another shot and took a deep breath as he sat. He didn't look like a man about to deliver good news. Maybe Castellano escaped. Maybe he died but more of his guys were on the loose and Zoe would spend the rest of her life running away. Maybe Tate died. Maybe Simon changed his mind and didn't want a criminal living with him. She gripped the edge of the table until her knuckles ached and tried to brace herself for the worst possible outcome. That seemed to be happening a lot lately.

SIMON

It took more courage for Simon to walk into the bar to face Zoe than most things in his past required, even when he'd run into buildings full of guys who wanted him dead. That was nothing compared to the sheer devastation she could wreak with just a few words.

He sat across the table from her, so he could see every inch of her and faced her head-on. And he thanked Rosie for leaving the whiskey on the table so he could get a little liquid courage before he talked to Zoe about staying. Simon folded his hands on the table after two or three shots and took a deep breath. "First of all, Tate is fine. Well, he was fine when I left him. Since Rosie headed that way, I can't be sure."

A hint of a smile crossed her expression and something in Simon's chest eased. He concentrated on the peanut shells on the table, though, and stirred the mess with his finger as he went on. "The game wardens showed up, along with the sheriff and a few other cops, to arrest Castellano and his guys for poaching."

"Poaching?" Zoe sat up, frowning.

"Yep." Simon smiled as he tipped a little more whiskey into both of the shot glasses and nudged one towards her. He always found it easier to speak from the heart with a little booze. "What else could they be doing, running around in the forest with a bunch of rifles and camouflage, but illegally hunting? We take that very seriously around here, particularly since Cooper swears up and down he saw them take a shot

at a couple of bear cubs."

Zoe shot him a sideways look. "Mick Castellano is an organized crime boss with friends all the way up through the Justice Department and into the Senate. I know that for a fact — I cooked books for all of them. Do you really think any of that will stick?"

Simon smiled. "You don't know our game wardens. Besides, didn't they get Al Capone on tax evasion?" That shadow of a smile reappeared, and her shoulders relaxed a little. Simon knocked his knuckles on the table. "So that's taken care of for now. I made it clear to Castellano that there will be hell to pay if we see a hint of him or his guys around here. He's all busted up anyway. From the car accident."

A giggle escaped and Zoe's green eyes grew wider. "The car accident, or the bear accident?"

His bear liked hearing her giggle, wanted to hear a full body laugh. Wanted to see her let loose with joy. Fling her head back and shout to the world, spin around like a dervish. He wanted to pick her up and spin with her until they were both so dizzy they fell down. He cleared his throat and tried to keep from beaming rainbows at her. "As far as the cops are concerned, it was a one in a million car accident. With some strange claw marks in the roof. That could have come from anywhere."

She rested her chin on her elbow and watched him, and some uncertainty crept back into her expression.

Simon went on before he lost the rest of his courage, or had to search for it in the bottom of the bottle. "And since Castellano is out of the way, or mostly out of the way, Tate said that means you can go back to California. If you want."

Zoe went still.

"Only if you want." Simon tried to quiet the bear and his grumbling at the thought of suggesting she leave. "I want you to stay. I want you to stay here with me, at the lodge. Forever. Stay with me."

She didn't speak. The silence stretched.

Simon's heart started to pound. He cleared his throat and spread his hands on the table. "I'll get better wifi. I'm sure there's a way to make sure everything connects. And better generators, so your computers will always work. I'll try that business software you wanted, and if you want to do all the books, I would love it. I would. And if you want nothing to do with the lodge or the business, I'd love that too. Whatever you want, Zoe. Whatever it takes for you to stay, I'll do."

Her forehead wrinkled, and he talked faster, the words tripping over each other until he didn't know if she could even understand him. "I'll show you how to be a bear. How wonderful and freeing it is. We can go fishing at dawn, and running through the meadow in fall when the leaves are turning and the air is crisp. And — and I'll build you a den. A cabin behind the lodge, I know the perfect location. So it'll be just us. No guests, no Ethan or Cooper or the rest of the guys. Just you and I. Just — stay, Zoe. Please stay."

She breathed a little faster, her chin wobbling as she looked at him. Her voice broke. "But what about Tate?"

"What about Tate?" Simon looked at her, struggling to understand. What the hell did he care where the mountain lion went? "Well, he can stay if he wants, or he can go back to California and do what Tate does. If you want him to stay, I'll chain him up in our basement."

A brief smile, despite the way she trembled, and Zoe fiddled with the basket of peanuts. "What did you mean when you said I'm your mate? What does that mean?"

He took a deep breath. A dive bar in the middle of the afternoon, shortly after a series of near-death experiences, was not his idea of a place to have a romantic conversation. "My bear recognized you, the first night we met. There's supposed to be one perfect person, in the entire world, for each of us. Sometimes people search their entire lives, looking for that person, and don't find them. So when you walked in with Tate, I almost didn't believe my luck." Simon desperately wanted to touch her, wanted to smooth the worry lines from her forehead.

"Is that why you turned me into a bear? So we would match?" She hesitated as she asked, and started peeling the label off the whiskey bottle.

He couldn't take it anymore and caught her hands in his, tangling their fingers together. "Yes and no. Whether you stayed human or not didn't matter — I loved you exactly as you were, and I love you exactly as you are. I turned you because that was the only way to save you. And I couldn't live without you. I can't live without you. Zoe, the thought of losing you..."

His voice broke and he cleared his throat, frowning fiercely as he leaned on the table and studied her hands. Her wrists were bird delicate under his fingers, all of her fragile in his hands. "I couldn't take it. And this morning, when Castellano's guys were shooting at us at the lodge, all I could think about was you. Where you were, if you were in trouble or afraid or in pain, how fast I could get to you, how many people I needed to kill to keep you safe. You're my air, Zoe. Without you, I can't breathe."

By the time he finished, she was crying. He felt even worse. He made her cry.

Zoe's hands shook in his and she tried to brush away the tears but he couldn't stand to let her go, to lose an inch of contact, so she ended up shrugging her shoulders and wiping her cheeks on her shirt. She snuffled and squeezed his hands. "I have one condition. Well, two."

"Anything," he said. He almost launched over the table to hug her. She would stay. She wanted to stay. "Anything you want, Zoe, it's yours."

"I want to buy that land you talked about." She set her shoulders and got that determined look on her face that was so adorable he almost couldn't stand it. Simon had to bite the inside of his cheek to keep from saying anything. Zoe frowned at him, even as more tears shimmered in her eyes. "So there's more room for your trips and cabins and the adventure camp. And for bear things."

"Bear things?" He struggled not to laugh.

"Right. Hunting and climbing trees and roaming around. Right? Isn't that what bears do?"

Simon couldn't wait and lurched up to drag her to her feet so he could kiss her. He wanted to breathe her in, to taste her, hold her close until she smelled like him and no one would ever doubt their connection. He held her close and chuckled, stroking her hair back so he could see her face. "I can't wait to show you what bears do, Zoe. I really can't."

She snuggled into his embrace and rested her cheek on the flat plane of his chest, her hand resting just over his heart. "And I want to build that cabin behind the lodge. So it's just ours. And you let me sleep in until at least nine. At least. Ten would be better."

He laughed, squeezing her so he could lift her off the ground and spin them both around. "You'll be my mate, Zoe? Stay with me and be my mate?"

"Maybe eleven," she said, voice muffled against his shoulder.

Simon put her back on her feet and held her at arm's length so he could see her green

eyes and that hint of a smile, the laughter he heard in her voice but desperately wanted to see on her face. "Zoe Stewart, will you be my mate?"

Her eyes searched his and her palms rested flat on his cheeks, maybe so she could feel his smile when the beard hid his joy. In that too serious voice she used, she said, "Yes."

And that was enough to set him spinning again, carrying her with him until they whirled through the bar and knocked over tables and chairs and almost broke the bottle of whiskey. He didn't care at all. He didn't want to stop dancing with her for even a moment.

20

ZOE

It took a month for the land purchase to go through. The neighbors were happy to sell to Simon, and even though they didn't understand who Zoe was, she didn't care. The land was in her name as well as Simon's, so it was even more of a commitment than the mating ceremony he insisted they have. Eventually, Zoe always added, because there was a part of her that knew it was too good to be true. She waited for the other shoe to drop, for Castellano or his guys or something bad to show up and ruin it.

But as she waited for the lawyers and realtors to do their thing, and for the long process of transferring the digital money into real money without getting caught at something illegal, Simon started building her cabin. Zoe didn't know how he did it while running the business, taking the guests on long fishing trips into the backwoods, and working with the game wardens to track predator levels throughout the newly acquired land. But Simon advertised needing some construction help down in town, and all the young men with extra time on their hands or a desire to show Simon Crawford they could work hard showed up to cut logs, split shingles, and mix mud.

Zoe still helped in the lodge but focused on getting Simon's books in order. It turned out her business degree was worth something after all. She spent most days in Simon's office, especially since he spent so much time out and about, and usually wore one of his sweatshirts just to remind herself what he smelled like. She frowned at the new computer she'd made him order, clicking through the accounting software

she installed to try to re-create his archaic ledger in a manageable, useful format. Zoe didn't look up as the door swung in and Simon appeared. "Hey."

He grumbled something that might have been a greeting, but she could tell he was tired. He walked around the desk and waited until she stood up, then took his place in the big chair. He pulled her onto his lap, just like he did every night, regardless of how much it distracted her from what she needed to get done. Zoe concentrated on the computer as he sighed and relaxed in the chair and drew shapes on her back. She flipped through the ledger and exhaled in irritation. "This is a ridiculous way to run a business, you know."

His hands settled at her waist and she jumped. Simon didn't comment on it, but she knew it bothered him that she still wasn't entirely relaxed around him. She couldn't help it. It still felt too good to be true, too much a dream. As if she would wake up any moment and it would wisp away like fog in the sun. Simon squeezed her sides and wrapped his arms around her to draw her back against his chest, nuzzling her neck. "Maybe it's a good time to pause. I have a small surprise I want to show you."

"A surprise?" She wiggled to face him in his lap, rewarded with a groan and immediate evidence of how much he liked having her there. "What kind of surprise?"

"A good surprise." Simon stood her up and closed the ledger, turning off the computer monitor before he led her out of the office.

Zoe's heart beat a little faster as she followed him out the back of the lodge and down the narrow deer track toward where their cabin would be. The guests and the guys, including Tate, congregated around the fire pit behind the lodge, so no noise disturbed the night as Simon meandered through the trees. She squeezed his hand. "Where are we going?"

"It's a surprise, girl. Be patient."

"Did I ever tell you I don't really like surprises?"

"You'll like this one," he said, and paused long enough to kiss her. "Now hush."

Zoe rolled her eyes but followed along, and when they turned a small bend in the trail, she saw the cabin. She hadn't seen it in a week or so, and stopped dead in her tracks. It looked nearly complete, the walls up and the roof shingled. She covered her mouth to keep from saying something ridiculous. Simon chuckled and picked her up, carrying her the rest of the way to the cabin and through the doorway. He kissed her and set her down, and for a long moment, Zoe could only stare at what waited inside the cabin.

A fire crackled in the stacked stone fireplace, and though the floors weren't finished, he'd spread a small mountain of blankets, sheepskins, and furs across the area in front of the fire. A few candles cast just enough light to see by, and a bottle of wine and two glasses waited as well. She turned to look at him, speechless, and Simon laughed.

He rubbed a hand through his hair until it stood up in spikes. "We're so booked up with guests, I wanted to stay with you here for the night. For a little privacy."

Zoe laughed; she knew what that meant. He didn't like being quiet when they made love.

He closed the door behind them, then caught her hand and laced their fingers together. Zoe almost couldn't see through a blur of tears as Simon led her to the big open space to the right of the door. "This is going to be the kitchen, and over there is the living room. I thought we could put the dinner table here, and in the back..."

He kept talking but the words rushed past Zoe until she didn't understand any of it. A house. He'd built her a house and wanted to show it off, leading her through the spacious floor-plan with only framed walls to the back of the cabin. Simon released

her hand long enough to stand in the middle of what he called the master suite, frowning as he gestured and turned. "I thought the bathroom should be here. We laid the plumbing for two sinks and a shower, but I think we need a tub, too. A big tub. Deep."

"Oh?" She wanted to laugh at him; sometimes he was too much a bear, even in human form. No doubt the extra large tub was just so he could submerge himself in hot water and bubble bath, not so they could share. Zoe pressed her fingers to her lips to keep a giggle in. Her knees weakened as she watched him. Imagine — he was hers. All hers.

Simon grinned and winked. "Bet your ass." But then he waved at another corner of the room. "And the walk-in closets should be here. I didn't know how big of a closet you wanted, so I asked Rosie and she said as big as possible. So here's your closet."

"I don't have that many clothes," Zoe said, still wanting to laugh. "Even with everything Tate boxed up and brought out here."

"I'll buy you more." Simon grumbled as he picked her up again and swung her around, pausing only long enough to kiss her hungrily before putting her down and taking her hand again. But he hesitated as he gestured at a small adjacent room, or at least the set of framed walls. "And this is supposed to be — a nursery. If you want. When you want. In case we — you know."

Her breath caught as she looked around at the empty space. A nursery. She hadn't even thought about kids. Hadn't ever thought about kids. She didn't know how to be a mother, but she knew he would be a damn good father. They could learn together, when it came time. So she gripped his hand and nodded, taking a deep breath. "Yeah. This would be a good nursery. But where will the first one go when number two and three come along?"

His smile almost blinded her, and he pulled her in for a rib-cracking hug. Zoe squeezed her eyes shut and wondered if it was possible to die of happiness. To literally just stop breathing from too much joy.

Simon cleared his throat a couple of times before launching toward a basic staircase. "Upstairs, of course. A guest room up there, too, and a couple of bathrooms. So no one fights over the sink. That happened a lot when I was a kid."

Zoe wasn't quite brave enough to test the two-by-four steps, and was glad when Simon didn't insist on showing her everything. Instead, he kissed her, walked her backwards toward the crackling fireplace, and tugged at the front of her jeans.

She laughed and backed up, eyeing him sideways as she played with the hem of her shirt. "What, you build me an amazing cabin and I'm supposed to put out?"

Simon's grin sparked heat all the way through her, until she was pretty sure she must have backed right into the fireplace. His voice got all deep and grumbly as he pulled off his flannel shirt and tossed it aside, large hands flexing as he studied her. "That nursery isn't going to fill itself, babe."

Zoe shivered in anticipation. His intensity still made her nervous, but he went out of his way to be careful with her. Like she was delicate china. Something precious. She swallowed another knot of emotion and his expression softened. Zoe kicked off her shoes and unbuttoned her jeans, let them slide low on her hips as she tried to pull her shirt off. She wanted him too, in a sudden desperate surge that flooded through her until every piece of clothing was too much. Sometimes it was the bear, demanding to stake a claim on him again, and sometimes it was her, needing to be touched. The gap between the two narrowed, until some days Zoe didn't know whether it was the bear's idea or her own, and that was just fine by her.

Zoe only got halfway out of her shirt before Simon started to help, tearing the fabric

in his determination, and Zoe laughed as clothing flew everywhere and then they lay on the soft pile of blankets in front of the fire, naked together.

He lay over her, running his fingers over her face, and breathed against her mouth for a long moment. "I love you, Zoe."

She lifted her head to kiss him, to taste the warm whiskey he'd been drinking earlier, to feel the heat of his tongue against hers. He gripped her sides and her breath caught. She managed to say, "I love you too," before Simon rose over her and filled her in one smooth thrust.

She sighed and moved under him, always ready to feel him inside her, pressing into her until they were so close she almost lost where she ended and he began. Simon groaned and pushed up on his elbows so he could see her face, and Zoe held on to his arms as their bodies collided. Rapture rolled through her as he kissed her again and Zoe wanted it to last forever. Wanted to be with him forever.

Simon grumbled and slid his hand under the small of her back, then rolled until Zoe lay on top. She pushed upright and shook her hair back, reveling in the way he stared at her, lusted after her, held her hips until bruises formed. He loved when she rode him, and not just because he was a lazy bear who wanted to share the hard work. He couldn't keep his hands off her hips and stomach and breasts, and would have kept her naked all the time if Zoe allowed it. He groaned and squeezed her thighs as she rocked her hips against him, rolling and thrusting as her pleasure grew in a tidal wave. Zoe's head fell back as it crested, as she fell over the edge of pure ecstasy, as her muscles seized and she froze, moaning as she tried to move through the aftershocks.

She sighed and leaned forward on his chest, dazed. He chuckled and squeezed her hip before sitting up to hold her closer. "We're not done yet," he said, all grumbly and rough and dark, and desire immediately lit her up.

Zoe worked her hands into his hair to drag his mouth to hers, though she murmured against his lips. "Simon didn't say."

He laughed and nibbled on her shoulder, and Zoe gasped. Simon kissed her deeply before he squeezed her hip, settling closer still. "Yes, I did."

Zoe held on as he started to move. Simon could say just about anything and she didn't mind at all. She could play his game for the rest of her life and not regret a moment of it. She held on to him tighter. She loved him, her bear loved him, and once again she felt content. At peace. At home.

LOADED FOR BEAR

Kira got lost three times before finally hitting the treacherous switchbacks up the mountain toward what her reference called 'the Lodge.' Getting disoriented shouldn't have been that easy, considering there were only four or five roads to choose from out of the city. But something about the terrain, the lack of signage, the fact there were few towns or rest-stops or gas stations... It got her all turned around. She was almost an hour behind schedule in reaching the hoity-toity tourism company up the mountain. She never found the so-called town, Bear Creek, despite her contact's directions.

The borrowed car chugged and struggled up the increasingly steep road, and she regretted not taking the Bear Country Tours owner's offer to meet her at the mysterious town, so he could drive out to the Lodge. She knew four-wheel drive would have been much better suited to the trek up the mountain, but she dreaded the need to make conversation with strangers. Especially with the kind of guys who'd start up a company offering boutique hunting and fishing trips to over-paid yuppies from big cities. She wrinkled her nose and prayed the battered sedan, the most she could afford with what remained of her security deposit from the crappy apartment she'd rented an hour outside Seattle, made it up another switchback.

Kira squinted through the windshield at the trees, hoping each switchback was the last as the sedan's engine revved lower and slower with each passing minute. She debated just parking on the almost-nonexistent shoulder and hiking the rest of the way up the mountain, but that was inviting disaster if anyone decided to drive down the road. Plus, her equipment was kind of heavy for an uphill hike.

She blew out a relieved breath as the car wobbled onto a flat patch of dirt road, and a wide gravel lot spread out in front of her. An enormous log-cabin style mansion loomed over the gravel lot, at least a couple of stories high, with multiple chimneys venting smoke, an enormous wrap-around porch with swings and rocking chairs, and all kinds of hunting and fishing gear spread out in the sun. Kira guided the sedan to the far side of the gravel lot, where her car looked totally out of place next to a pair of shiny new four-wheel drive SUVs, and sighed as the engine finally died.

She chewed the inside of her cheek as she checked the gauges, hoping there was at least enough life in the old beast for a trip down the mountain, and tried not to stare at the pair of lumberjacks standing next to the Lodge. It was the kind of wilderness-chic construction that would appeal to people who liked the idea of camping, but didn't like actually camping. Kira snorted and shook her head, checking the contents of the glove box before kicking open the dented door. She ignored the lumberjacks, engaged in what looked like a heated debate, and leaned down to retrieve the small gear bag that contained the important stuff. She muttered under her breath, "Just a grad student. I'm just a grad student. Just your average, normal, run-of-the-mill, ramen-noodle-eating, one hundred percent human grad student. Just looking for wildlife cameras, gotta reset them. That's it."

That was the story she always used. That was the story they'd told the owner of Bear Country Tours, and that was what Kira had used to get into the wildlife research program she attended. If word got out that she was actually a shifter, the university would boot her out and no one would hire her anywhere. No one trusted wildlife research conducted by actual wildlife, or they assumed her presence alone would disrupt everything. She needed to get her game face on. She couldn't afford any slips, or her degree, her research, her job... It would all disappear faster than the smoke drifting out of the Lodge's chimneys.

She straightened out of the car and blinked as the door to the Lodge opened to eject a bunch of tourists in expensive hiking gear, then she kicked the door shut. Showtime.

The tourists milled around, maps in hand, and tried to orient themselves to the paths leading away from the gravel lot and the massive log building. The lumberjacks watched her, though, and Kira pasted a smile on her face as she kept a tight grip on the gear bag she slung over her shoulder.

The dark-haired lumberjack, a muscle-strapped giant with a short beard and easy smile, strode up and offered a hand to shake. "You must be Kira."

"That's what they say," she said, and gulped a little as his massive paw swallowed her hand and most of her wrist. Holy hell.

"I'm Simon Crawford; we spoke on the phone." He tilted his head at the second lumberjack, who looked much less pleased to see her. He also still carried his axe, which was unsettling. "This is Ethan Roberts, our resident nature expert. He'll be helping you on the trek out to the backcountry."

"Great," Kira said, and shook his hand. Ethan's sandy blonde hair was longer on top and shaved close at the sides, about the same length as the three-day beard on his jaw. Kira managed to meet his steel-blue gaze for a brief moment, then looked away quickly. That guy was dangerous. "Nice to meet you."

The blonde lumberjack only nodded, looking a little like he'd bitten into something awful. She glanced between them, then adjusted her grip on the camera gear. "Thank you again for your help. Dr. Reston was pretty upset when the cameras stopped working. Hopefully we can get them sorted out." And she'd lose her grant funding if she couldn't.

Ethan snorted, rubbing his stubbly jaw, and his sharp gaze measured her from head-to-toe. Kira's mouth dried out. He looked like he didn't believe her. Or found her lacking. Maybe they spotted something in her eyes that gave away the jaguar part of her. Maybe they thought she was some helpless city girl who wouldn't be able to hack it in the woods. Or maybe they resented doing a favor for the researchers by putting

her up for free. Kira cleared her throat, trying to smile.

Simon nodded, and gave the other lumberjack a sideways look before glancing back at Kira. "Do you have any luggage? We can get you set up with a room for the night. Dinner's not for an hour, but —"

"Can't we leave now?" Kira swallowed a hint of panic. She didn't have much time. The sooner she got in and out, the less time they'd have to discover her secrets.

"It's too late," Ethan said, and his voice was deeper than she'd expected. He studied the axe, checking the blade for nicks or burrs, and didn't look at her. "We wouldn't make it to a campsite before sundown. We'll leave tomorrow morning."

"Oh," she said, glancing back down the mountain. "Guess that's my fault. I took a couple of wrong turns on the way here. "

Ethan eyed her, a hint of disbelief dragging his eyebrows up. "There's only two roads."

"Well, the map wasn't very clear." Heat flushed her cheeks, and Kira wanted to curse. Awesome. Now he thought she was completely helpless. Kira adjusted the gear bag and started to retreat. "Okay. No problem. I'll just pitch my tent out here; I didn't expect —"

"We have plenty of room," Simon said, and gave his buddy a dark look as he took the axe. He nodded at the Lodge, offering Kira a broad smile. "I couldn't sleep if I knew you spent your last night before heading into the backcountry in a tent. That's just not right. Ethan will help get you settled."

It looked like Ethan would argue for the briefest of moments, then he exhaled in a rush and stormed over to Kira's car as she struggled with the trunk.

She managed to say, "Thanks, that's kind of you, but —" as she smacked the top of the trunk, hoping it would open, and jiggled the key. Nothing. Her cheeks burned as she yanked at the damn thing, knowing the capable woodsman standing next to her was probably judging her for getting lost and not being able to operate a simple mechanism. She gritted her teeth as a yowl bubbled up in her chest, and she wanted to rip the damn thing to pieces with her claws. That would open the trunk.

Instead, Ethan said, "Hold on," and eased closer. She edged over a little to give him room. He took up too much space, even in the open air in the middle of the woods. Ethan gave her a sideways look as he studied the trunk, and she flushed more.

He smelled like wild flowers and clean cotton, and for a crazy second, she almost wanted to press her nose against his shirt to inhale him. But he grumbled something under his breath, flexed, and the muscles standing out in his arms made her eyebrows rise .

Ethan muttered, heaved, and the trunk flew open with a screech. Kira yelped as it smacked her chin in a bright flash of agony, and clapped her hands over her face as blood flooded her mouth and spilled through her fingers. She cursed around the searing pain and awful taste, eyes watering and head aching, and retreated as Ethan stared at her in abject panic.

She mumbled and leaned forward so the blood dribbled to the ground and not down her chest, irritated that her favorite shirt was probably ruined, and held up a hand to wave Ethan off as his face drained of color and he said something about a first aid kit. Kira steeled herself and tried what must have been a gruesome smile. "No, it's okay. I'm fine."

But it came out garbled and apparently pretty unclear, because he swore and caught her arm. "Jesus Christ, I'm sorry. Come on, we have an infirmary."

"It's fine," she repeated, leaning to spit a mouthful of blood onto the gravel. So

ladylike. Mama would have been proud. She poked at what might have been a broken tooth, hoping it healed quickly so she didn't need braces again. "I mean, it hurts, but I'll be fine."

Ethan gave her a disbelieving look. "You might have broken teeth or something wrong with your jaw, at least let me clean it up and —"

Kira drew breath to really protest, knowing it was just a matter of time until the cuts and split lip healed themselves up. If he got a good look at how bad things were right away, he'd know she wasn't human if she showed up to dinner with no more than a couple of bruises. "Really, I'm fine —"

But Simon appeared on the porch as Ethan dragged her toward the Lodge, and the dark-haired man stared at them both. "What the hell happened?"

Ethan shook his head, still hustling Kira faster than she thought possible into the Lodge and through a huge great- room complete with sheepskin rugs and Adirondack furniture, and jerked his head at the car. "I got a little overzealous with the trunk. I'll check her over in the infirmary, if you can grab her bag out of the back?"

Simon grumbled and muttered as he lumbered towards the car, and Kira held her breath as she blinked dark splotches from her vision. Maybe the trunk hit her harder than she thought. She managed to look at Ethan, puzzled as she tried to understand what the hell he was saying, before everything went hot and cold and loud and the floor reached up and grabbed her.